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Befriending the ears

The transformative power of listening

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In Greek and Roman antiquity, philosophical discourse was meant to form one's character according to the ideals of a certain school of thought. Oral teaching, and therefore, listening, was seen as the most appropriate vehicle for encouraging practitioners to transform themselves over time. Philosophy was meant to pass through the hearing into the soul.

With the primacy of writing and speaking over listening we have forgotten the value of listening *spiritually*. Above all, what we fail to recognise is that philosophy still has the potential to guide us in our daily lives, regardless of the radical differences between the ancients and us. This is why the subject of listening deserves more attention: if we want to draw on the wisdom of the ancients today, we will have to rediscover the art of letting their ideas speak to us again.

In this dissertation, **Pablo Muruzabal Lamberti** seeks to contribute to the creation of an overview of the history of philosophy on listening in Western thought, a subject which to this day has received scant attention. In addition, his aim is to revitalise some of the existential dimensions of spiritual listening for us today and provide orientation for present-day Philosophy as a Way of Life (PWL) practices.

Pablo Muruzabal Lamberti • Befriending the Ears

Befriending the Ears

The Transformative Power
of Listening

Pablo Muruzabal Lamberti

BEFRIENDING THE EARS
THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF LISTENING

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Befriending the Ears

The Transformative Power of Listening

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To Pieter Mostert

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Preface

What drives someone to dedicate a dissertation to something as mundane as listening? When I told a friend that I used to play squash with about my research subject, he asked what could possibly be said about listening that is not already known. Uncertain about how to answer, and somewhat impervious to his non-philosophical background, I told him that there is still some debate about what listening actually is. “Have scientists not figured that out by now?!” he asked, slightly bewildered. It was a fine example of how detached and alien philosophers can come across to the non-initiated.

Clearly, this study is not simply about registering soundwaves, as my sports friend first thought. There are many diverse aspects of listening that are worth studying. After all, listening and being listened to are deep and primary human needs. Listening enables us to forge meaningful relationships, experience music and other artforms, appreciate humour, recognize deception and falsehood, cooperate effectively, and better understand ourselves and the world in the process.

Yet today, despite the fact that we have more means of communication than ever before, listening is in peril. We live in a loud world, full of distraction and noise, in which it has become increasingly difficult to hear each other, in both the literal and figurative sense. Perhaps we are so oversaturated with information, that we have lost our interest in listening. We assume that we already know everything that we can reasonably expect to know, and prefer to outsource our thinking rather than going through the trouble of carefully listening and reflecting on all sorts of (complex) issues.

Many people today retreat to their online social bastions where they no longer need to listen, at least not to those who hold different opinions. As far as people listen within such bubbles or “echo chambers”, they listen to the confirmation of their biases. These biases are

constantly rephrased, recontextualized and re-enforced, but rarely reconsidered to the point where one could be inclined to change one's perspective, let alone one's way of living and being.

Influencers, trolls, activists, extremists, and algorithms that “feed” users pre-filtered, inaccurate and fake information via all sorts of online media, further stimulate a listening-unfriendly attitude. Moderate people are being pushed to the extremes on both ends of the political spectrum as a result (see, for instance, Applebaum 2020). The journalist Kate Murphy expressed this conspicuously in her book *You're Not Listening*:

Social media has given everyone a virtual megaphone to broadcast every thought, along with the means to filter out any contrary view. (Murphy 2020, p. 8)

At the same time, and as a likely consequence of a lack of listening, psychological and sociological research has shown that people experience increasing amounts of loneliness and feelings of isolation across all social, cultural, and economic layers of society (Murphy 2020, p. 13).

Related to this development, social scientist Jill Staufer has introduced the concept of “ethical loneliness”, which is ‘the experience of having been abandoned by humanity compounded by the experience of not being heard’ (2015, p. 1). Unfortunately, this form of “social abandonment” or isolation is widespread and one of the causes is a lack of listening.

Given the lack of listening, one would be right to wonder how we are going to solve some of the most pressing issues we are faced with today. Climate change, war, pandemics, hunger, mass-migration, weapons of mass destruction and the future of artificial general intelligence (AGI) are unlikely to be adequately addressed as long as we fail to *really* listen to each other and to our planet, and transform ourselves on the basis of that listening.

These general issues aside, I also had some personal motivations for taking an interest in this subject. With almost ten years of experience as a philosophy teacher in elementary and high school education, I noticed that students are offered many opportunities to learn how to express themselves, but there is hardly any attention paid to the practice of listening. We seem to assume that students already know how to listen, and therefore, listening does not need to be taught. What is more, we seem to assume that we ourselves know how to listen.

As a probable result of the neglect of listening education in general, it came to my attention that students commonly find it very hard to listen to each other during philosophical dialogues. Consequently, I began to suspect that a dialogue – a widespread approach for philosophising in educational contexts – had a good chance of failing to become philosophical, because of a lack of listening. After all, the idea of a philosophical dialogue is that participants build on each other's contributions in both the meaning-making process, and the pursuit of truth (Muruzabal Lamberti 2019, pp. 257 & 262). Based on my own professional experience, I would even go so far as to suggest that although listening is no guarantee of success for a philosophical dialogue, a dialogue is guaranteed to fail when there is no listening. What it becomes instead is an event where opinions are voiced, but not engaged with.

In my quest to obtain a more profound understanding of the meaning of listening in relation to philosophical practice, I found that listening was a transformative and “spiritual exercise” in antiquity. I found that listening is at the very basis of a life lived philosophically, an exercise to which this whole dissertation ended up being dedicated, despite the fact that scientists by now have a pretty good idea of how the ears work.

Introduction

“Well,” said Thrasymachus, “do you suppose this company has come here to prospect for gold and not to listen to discussions?” “Yes,” I said, “in measure.” “Nay, Socrates,” said Glaucon, “the measure of listening to such discussions is the whole of life for reasonable men.” (Plato, *Republic*, 450b)¹

Zeno said, “The right way to seize a philosopher, Crates, is by the ears: persuade me then and drag me off by them (...).” (Zeno of Citium in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* VII, 23)²

No one can live happily, or even tolerably, without the study of wisdom. (Seneca 2010, p. 31)

In the beginning there was listening

Etymologically, listening (from Proto-Germanic *blusinson*) is related to “obedience”. The Latin word for listening is *audire*, which is related to *obaudire*, literally meaning “listening from below”. Traditionally, obedience is seen as a civil virtue needed to convert people into good citizens; citizens that abide by the law because they have listened well. Later, with the rule of Saint Benedict, this conception of listening was continued in religion:

Listen, O my son, to the precepts of thy master, and incline the ear of thy heart, and cheerfully receive and faithfully execute the admonitions of thy loving Father, that by the toil of obedience thou mayest return to Him from whom by the sloth of disobedience thou hast

¹ All Plato translations are from PDL (2022). For facilitating cross-referencing of ancient sources, I rely on commonly used citation systems. In referencing Plato I used the Stephanus pagination.

² Unless otherwise specified, all Diogenes Laertius translations are from PDL (2022). See also Laertius (1925, and 1959).

gone away. (Holy Rule 2018)³

Long before Saint Benedict, however, listening was considered integral to a philosophical way of living. In Greek, listening, *το ἀκούειν*, comes from the verb *ἀκούω*, and has multiple meanings. It can be translated as “to hear”, “hearken”, or “give ear to”. It also relates to obeying, for instance, a teacher (LSJ 2022). Another Greek word for listening is *ἀκρόασις* which is derived from *ἄκρος*, meaning “topmost”, and *οὐς* “ear”, in the sense of ‘pricking the ears’. This relates to the meaning of the verb *ἀκροάομαι*, “I listen”, used especially in the context of listening to (philosophical) lectures (LSJ 2022; Lexico 2022).

In antiquity, philosophical discourse, often delivered in the form of a (public) lecture, had a different meaning than it has today. According to the French historian and philosopher Pierre Hadot, it was meant to form one’s character according to the ideals of a certain school of thought, and oral teaching and living speech were seen as the most adequate vehicles for exhorting listeners to transformation, or “conversion” in the soul over time.

As such, listening was a “spiritual exercise”; a ‘voluntary, personal [practice] meant to bring about a transformation of the self’ (Hadot 2011, p. 87). As a spiritual exercise, it formed part of an ancient and rich cultural-philosophical living practice and pedagogical effort of “self-(trans)formation”, commonly referred to as *paideia* (from the Greek word *país*, which means “child”).⁴

The adjective “spiritual” refers precisely to this idea: the idea that philosophy was considered by the ancients as a choice that commits

³ Cf. Matthew 11:15.

⁴ Although there is no consensus about the exact meaning of the term (see Elsner 2013, pp. 136-137), I follow Hadot in interpreting it as the goal of spiritual exercises (1995, p. 102). Hadot himself was clearly influenced by Werner Jaeger in relating *paideia* to “formation”. In an interview he says: ‘I believe that Werner Jaeger had an excellent intuition when he titled his book *Paideia*, which signifies “formation” – a book in which he gives an exposition of the entire universe of archaic and classical thought. For the Greeks, what counts is the formation of the body and the spirit’ (2011, p. 91). See also Jaeger (1933-1947), Marrou (1956), and De Rijk (1965).

a person's entire life and soul (Hadot 2020, pp. 34 & 59; 1995, p. 82; 2009, p. 87). Hadot derives the term from several authors, among them German philologist Paul Rabbow,⁵ who showed that Ignatius of Loyola's *Exercitia Spiritualia* had a pre-Christian origin in ancient Greece and Rome (Chase 2013, p. 22).⁶

Hadot admits the term "spiritual" is not very fashionable (Fr. *de bon ton*) in philosophy, but the alternatives (such as psychic, intellectual, moral, ethical) would not cover all aspects of what he is trying to describe. "Spiritual" is meant to aid in understanding that the exercises were not simply cognitive, formal, or theoretical. Instead it refers to all human faculties including emotion and imagination, and to other corporeal techniques that have psychic effects (Hadot 1995, p. 81-82; 2009, p. 93).

Although the prehistory of spiritual exercises can be sought in Pythagoreanism and perhaps even shamanistic traditions, the spiritual exercises of interest here came to full bloom with the figure of Socrates. At the heart of spiritual exercise is the Socratic maxim "know thyself" (γνῶθι σεαυτόν), which expresses itself in dialogue (Hadot 1995, pp. 20 & 82-84).

Socrates' practice of dialogue was exemplary for those who in ancient times strove to live philosophically, because it was always a part of, and in the service of, his way of living (and ultimately, dying). Socrates enacted dialogue with himself in the form of self-care practices, and with others by guiding his interlocutors to look after

⁵ He mentions having read about the term in Louis Gernet's *Anthropologie de la Grèce antique* (1945), in Jean-Pierre Vernant's *Myth and Thought in the Greeks* (1964), in a book called *La Poésie comme exercice spirituel*, and in Elisabeth Brisson's book *Le Sacré du musicien: La référence à l'Antiquité chez Beethoven* (2000). See Hadot (2009, pp. 92-93). According to Sharpe and Ure, the term *spiritual exercise* first appears in a piece Hadot wrote about Marcus Aurelius and his conception of physics. However, according to Sharpe *et al.*, his 1962 text "Jeu de langage et philosophie" was already decisive in the evolution of his thinking (2021, p. 3).

⁶ This very fact is what Hadot has been criticised for by philosopher John M. Cooper: he allegedly projects a more religious understanding of spiritual exercises backwards onto earlier periods. However, according to Sellars, 'the notion of an "exercise of the soul" (*askēsis tēs psukhēs*) was already well established in antiquity' (2020, p. 39); see also (2003, pp. 110-115); and Sharpe (2014) for a convincing challenge to Cooper's critique of Hadot.

themselves. Plato's dialogues are idealised renditions of these dialogues, meant to serve as a pedagogical and psychagogical⁷ model for practice and therefore, a certain way of life. What emerges from Plato's works is an approach to dialogue commonly referred to as "dialectic".

According to Hadot, there are two reasons why the Platonic dialogue as an exercise in dialectic corresponds to the notion of spiritual exercise. First, the practice of dialogue guides the interlocutor to alter himself, such that he or she desires the Good and embraces the *logos* as the highest authority. Second, because dialectic is an exercise in thought, the soul, in an act of conversion, is turned away from the sensible world and becomes 'the spirit's itinerary towards the divine' (1995, p. 93).

Spiritual exercises are an effort to modify, improve and transform the self (*paideia*). In the ancient philosophical sense, they entail a complete transformation of one's point of view, attitudes, convictions, and consequently, one's actions. As Sharpe and Ure put it,

what is at issue is a cognitive, mnemonic, imaginative, rhetorical or physical exercise *consciously chosen and undertaken by an agent with a view to the transformative effects the undertaking of this exercise will have upon the practitioner's way of experiencing, desiring, eating, or thinking.* (2021, p. 5)

The idea was to first change the way one looks at the world, before changing one's being in the world (Chase 2013, p. 297). The intended transformation is not just cognitive, but instead has an effect on one's entire self and being, which is why the exercises primarily unfold in and through inner discourse (Hadot 2011, p. 88). In this sense, it bears some similarities to spiritual and religious practices such as Buddhism, and, arguably, art.

Notably, spiritual exercises are not *complementary* to, but *constitutive* of the practice of philosophy. Hadot:

⁷ "The art of seducing souls." See Davidson (1995, p. 22) and Hadot (1995, p. 92).

Despite my attempts to avoid it, some of what I have written about spiritual exercises in general may suggest that spiritual exercises are added to philosophical theory, to philosophical discourse, that they are a practice that merely complements theory and abstract discourse. In fact, all of philosophy is an exercise—instructional discourse no less than the inner discourse that orients our actions. (Hadot 2011, p. 22)

Spiritual exercises were practical in so far as they required exertion and routine: they needed to be done in order to have an effect. This is what makes them form part of a *lived philosophy*. They were integrated into all aspects of everyday life and became manifest in such character traits as self-mastery (ἐγκράτεια), courage (ἀνδρεία), a sense of justice (δικαιοσύνη) and, particularly to the Roman Stoics, indifference to indifferent things (*indifferentia*).⁸ Philosophical discourse supported this way of life in the form of the justification of an attitude and a certain pattern of behaviour (Hadot 2020, pp. 35-36).⁹

Examples of these type of exercises include inner detachment regarding anything external, inner preparation for future unfavourable scenarios, the examination of consciousness, and the disciplining of judgement, desires, and inclinations (Hadot 2020, p. 62; Davidson 1995, p. 26). At the basis of these exercises is a choice to live according to a certain principle, often associated with a certain school of thought such as Platonism, Aristotelianism, Epicureanism, or Stoicism.

As I will elaborate on in the next chapter, exercises in antiquity were also meant to dilate or liberate oneself *from* oneself, in an attempt to physically transcend individuality and approximate a certain “universality”. Hadot characterises the fundamental philosophical choice in antiquity as

⁸ As Hadot remarks, this is simultaneously the paradox of ancient philosophical life: the philosopher is a philosopher in all aspects of his life, and thereby ceases to live an ordinary, everyday life (2020, pp. 49-50).

⁹ As I will show later, Foucault attributed a wholly different meaning to discourse (see Chapter I).

An overcoming of the partial, biased, egocentric, egoist self in order to attain the level of a higher self. This self sees all things from a perspective of universality and totality, and becomes aware of itself as part of the cosmos that encompasses, then, the totality of things. (2009, p. 86)

In the case of the Stoics, for instance, the exercise in wisdom involved an attempt at practising objectivity of judgement, a striving towards justice and engagement with the community, connecting to the universal Reason (Λόγος) in everything one does, and becoming aware of oneself in relation to the greater whole.

According to Hadot, this ancient universalist, cosmic dimension, which allows one to see the world as something more than simply a means to satisfy desires, is easily overlooked because exercises seem to suggest an *exclusive* move inward. Therefore, Hadot refers to the universal perspective as ‘the view from above’ (*le regard d'en haut*), directed from a mountaintop to the earth. In other words, apart from an inner dialogue, spiritual exercises always presuppose a move outward and an attempt at relating to the universe, and “seeing” it with new eyes as well (1995, pp. 210-212; 2009, pp. 137 & 167).

This perspective was important to philosophers such as Plato, Epicurus, Philo of Alexandria, and Marcus Aurelius because they were interested in seeking greater awareness and contemplating the totality of human reality. This contemplation inevitably elevates the individual level by including other living beings as well, acting in a non-egoistical manner, and enables the discovery of certain “eternal” values such as respect for our planet, and life in general.¹⁰ As Hadot puts it, in exercise form, one

¹⁰ One could argue this is, to some extent, still the aim of some philosophers in “modern” times. One of Kant’s greatest achievements was to offer a moral philosophy that can connect the modern, Cartesian subjectivism with ancient notions of universalism. In a certain sense, Rawls and Habermas try to do the same under sharpened modern conditions. For post-modern thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida, this is not the case as they were explicitly rejecting such goals (see Chapter I).

situates events in the perspective of what they bring to the universe, of the collaboration that we give to the balance and harmony of the universe. (2009, pp. 137 & 139)

I will return to this notion of a “view from above” in the next chapter and relate it to listening in my discussion of Oosterling’s work in Chapter VI.

Types of spiritual exercises

Unfortunately, we possess little detail of the technical aspects of spiritual exercises in antiquity. As I will explain in Chapter II and III, one reason for this is that Greco-Roman civilization was an oral civilization and ancient writing was often meant to be delivered orally to a group of disciples.¹¹

However, in “Who is the Heir of Divine Things” (253), Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE – 50 CE) notes:

For all the elements of practice are food fit for eating, inquiry, examination, reading, listening to instruction [ἀκρόασις], concentration, perseverance, self-mastery, and power to treat things indifferent as indeed indifferent. (Philo 1985a, p. 413)

In “Allegorical Interpretation” III (18) we read that

Jacob,¹² therefore, the mind in training, when he sees passion groveling low before him, awaits its onset calculating that he will master

¹¹ Interestingly, in the time when Erasmus went to school (late 15th century), learning still revolved around memorising and reciting texts more than reading. Texts were not read individually and in silence, but out loud and collectively. According to Erasmus’ most recent biographer, Sandra Langereis, a text at a school of the Middle Ages was ‘more sound than writing’, which matched the oral custom of everyday religious practice. Erasmus did not admire this style of teaching at all by the way. Not only because the Parisian theologians seemed wholly unprepared to engage in self-criticism, but also because their alleged wisdom was merely a kind of wisdom from books, which bore little relation to any kind of lived philosophy. See Langereis (2021, pp. 89 & 250 ff).

¹² Philo is referring to Jacob from the Old Testament, also known as Israel.

it by force, but when it is seen to be lofty, stately, weighty, the first to run away is the mind in training, followed by all his belongings, being portions of his discipline, readings, ponderings, acts of worship, and of remembrance of noble souls, self-control, discharge of daily duties; he crosses the river of objects of sense, that swamps and drowns the soul under the flood of the passions, and, when he has crossed it, sets his face for the lofty high-land, the principle of perfect virtue. (Philo 1981, p. 313)

Based on these two excerpts, which both contain Stoico-Platonic inspired views,¹³ Hadot distinguishes four categories of spiritual exercise:¹⁴

- (1) attention (προσοχή);
- (2) meditation (μελέτη) and memorization (μνήμη);
- (3) active exercises (γυμναστική); and
- (4) intellectual exercises.

What these exercises all share is that they are, in one way or another, a means towards an ethical end: happiness (εὐδαιμονία).¹⁵ According to Hadot, listening is part of the intellectual exercises – but let us first briefly look at the other categories.

(1) Attention is the spiritual attitude that allows one to decide what depends on oneself, and what does not. This makes it possible to free oneself from the passions and attain an imperturbable state.¹⁶ Examples of this category of exercise are found in abundance

¹³ For Epicurean spiritual exercises, see Hadot (1995, pp. 87-89)

¹⁴ See Sharpe and Ure (2021, pp. 5-7) for a list of twelve 'species' of exercises.

¹⁵ Thijssen defines *eudaimonia* – commonly translated as “happiness” – as a quality or property of human life that accompanies one in activities that a person considers to be valuable for intrinsic reasons. It is a good life at the same time. However, it is not something that happens to us, but the result of our own efforts (Thijssen 2016, pp. 49 & 55). As will become clear in the discussion in the next chapter, there is a more objective element to happiness as well. This is found in the universal dimension of spiritual exercises.

¹⁶ Nussbaum has written at length about the subject of passions, and without entirely rejecting the Stoic views. She argues that not all passions are irrational. What is more, philosophy would be powerless without the passions; see *Upheavals of Thought* (2001). However, see also Sharpe and

among the Roman Stoics (e.g. Ἐγγχειρίδιον Ἐπικτήτου).

(2) Meditation prepares the practitioner for the unexpected, so that one can accept whatever needs to be accepted, and act accordingly. Examples are the *praemeditatio malorum* and the *praemeditatio mortis*, which are both exercises that include memorising certain maxims to free oneself in the present from self-created worries about possible misfortunes, and the inevitability of death in the future. This was a typical Stoic exercise; the Epicureans rejected it because they did not want to suffer an ill that had not yet occurred, and that may not even occur at all. Instead, they advised recalling memories of pleasure when faced with ills in the present (Foucault 1997, p. 102).

Meditation is not so much an exercise to empty the mind, but is rather used to control the inner discourse and steer memory in a way that brings about calmness. In the words of Hadot:

We can perhaps get a better idea of this spiritual exercise if we understand it as an attempt to liberate ourselves from a partial, passionate point of view – linked to the sense and the body – so as to rise to the universal, normative viewpoint of thought, submitting ourselves to the demands of the Logos and the norm of the Good. Training for death is training to die to one's individuality and passions, in order to look at things from the perspective of universality and objectivity. (Hadot 1995, pp. 94–95)

(3) Active exercises were meant to instil habits in the soul that followed from certain fundamental maxims, such as indifference to indifferent things, self-mastery, fulfilling the duties of social life, and other forms of practical behaviour. They were often related to abstinence and physical hardship, and served to test and strengthen an individual's independence of external matters (Hadot 1995, pp. 84–86).

Ure (2021, pp. 331–334), in which they demonstrate that Stoic indifference is much more nuanced than one might think based on some of the claims about not letting oneself be disturbed by the death of a loved one.

Michel Foucault mentions a Plutarchian exercise that I believe fits into this category. One first engages in physical exercise, until becoming hungry. One then places oneself in front of a table full of delicious dishes, before electing to give them away to servants and settling for something simple. The idea is to train the soul to resist pleasures (Plutarch, *De Genio Socratis*, 585a; Foucault 1997, p. 103).¹⁷

Finally, (4) the intellectual exercises serve to “nourish” the exercises of meditation and the act of memorization. These exercises include interrelated activities such as reading (ἀνάγνωσις), listening (ἀκούσις), research (ζήτησις), and thorough investigation (σκέψις). While the exercises in this category were all intellectual exercises, they served a purpose outside of the intellectual realm as well.

Research and investigation generally followed instruction on a certain subject. Students were encouraged to thoroughly study objects and events they had read or heard about, and put into practice what they had learned from instruction. With respect to reading in ancient Greece, we would do well to once again realise that the concept does not have the same meaning it has today; listening and reading were both performative acts (Kivy 2009, pp. 4-5). Consider Seneca’s closing paragraph in *Letter 108* to Lucilius:

Since I have now said what I wanted to convey to you, I will soon satisfy your desire, transferring what you demanded complete into another letter, so that you are not weary when you come to read this thorny matter, which should be heard with keen and inquisitive ears. Keep well. (Seneca 2010, p. 237)

Given the oral context in both ancient Greece and Rome, reading by oneself in silence was not a common practice. Reading always implied listening, even when the audience consisted of only the reader. Not surprisingly, then, the verb ἀκούειν has also been used to mean “to read” (Schenkeveld 1992). In addition, reading meant pausing,

¹⁷ All Plutarch translations are from PDL (2022).

and letting a text speak to the reader in a way that would inspire a change in one's way of life. As I show in Chapter VI, the interrelatedness of reading and listening in the ancient world offers opportunities for re-evaluating our way of reading in today's universities.

Having described the four categories of spiritual exercises, let us now briefly look into the meaning of listening as an "intellectual" spiritual exercise, before moving on to the approach and research questions that drive this study.

A brief introduction to listening as an ancient spiritual exercise

According to Hadot, the conversion spiritual exercises tried to inculcate is 'an event provoked in the listener's soul by the speech of a philosopher' (2020, p. 95). Conversion amounts to a radical change in one's everyday life, including one's appearance and diet, so that the soul can return to the self after a period of alienation. The conversion manifested in an inner state of tranquillity and freedom, not found in "common mortals" who had not been exposed to philosophical teachings (Hadot 2020, p. 96). In other words, listening seems to form the very foundation of philosophical practice and conversion.

One of the first philosophers and educators to write about listening in the "spiritual", and thus, transformative sense, was Plutarch of Chaeronea. There are no exact dates that have been established regarding his birth and death, but he was probably born in a well-off family in the year 45 CE and died close to 120 CE. A devoted follower of Plato's philosophical-educational ideals, Plutarch was one of the greatest educators of the ancient world and beyond.

In his capacity as an educator, Plutarch's work significantly contributed to the cultivation of what Foucault refers to as "the art of listening" (1997, p. 236).¹⁸ For Plutarch, listening was the vehicle

¹⁸ Since listening as a spiritual exercise is always intertwined with the attempt to internalise and appropriate discourse, Foucault also refers to listening in the context of self-cultivation as a method of appropriation, or an 'asceticism in truth', as it serves to memorise a certain discourse (Foucault 1997, p. 101).

through which students learned to become virtuous. What becomes clear from his essays on listening (“On Listening,” *De Audiendo*” and “On reading the poets,” *De Audiendis Poetis*”), is that attending and carefully listening during philosophy lectures, and the development of one’s own faculty of judgement and understanding, are requirements in the moulding process towards excellence of character (ἀρετή, “excellence”).¹⁹ These qualities are not innate, and need to be developed to support a good life based on reason (λόγος).

Following Plutarch, a life in the image of *aretè* and guided by reason presupposes proper listening abilities. Virtue reaches the soul through the ears, ultimately making “right listening” the beginning of “right living” (Plutarch, *De aud.*, 48d; see also Foucault 1997, pp. 101 & 236). In the absence of listening, one would not only miss the way to a virtuous life; one would likely deviate towards vice (κακία) given (wo)mankind’s natural tendency that needs to be constrained and corrected by philosophical education.

The Roman pedagogical system, wherein Plutarch operated, adopted Greek ideas and incorporated them into the ideal of the Roman statesman as a model for educating humans and thus achieving their “true form”. Plutarch’s main source of inspiration was Plato. Agreement between Plato and Plutarch is found in the protreptic²⁰ and paraenetic²¹ elements of education. For them, education is not mere technical and vocational training intended to teach skills. In this sense, the kind of listening Plutarch describes is about much more than a skill; it is rather an exercise that forms part of a virtuous way of life that addresses human beings in their entirety.

A slightly earlier philosopher who took an interest in the subject of listening in the spiritual sense, was the aforementioned Philo of Alexandria. In “On the Contemplative Life” (30-31 and 75-79), Philo

¹⁹ Excellence of character also implies an element of competition or ἀγών; see Beaton (2021, p. 124); Poliakoff (1987, pp. 104-108); and Meeuwse (2020, pp. 181-185).

²⁰ From προτρέπω, “to encourage” or “to urge”. In this context it is the encouragement to continue philosophising and to live a philosophical life.

²¹ From παραινέσεις, an advice-type of communication, urging someone to do something.

offers two accounts of the lecturing and listening practices of his contemplative Jewish community of men and women – the *Therapeutae* – on Lake Mareotis, near Alexandria. In the first account, Philo describes a general assembly organised on every seventh day of the week, where a senior gives a ‘well-reasoned and wise’ lecture. The audience listens carefully, and behaves accordingly:

He [the senior] does not make an exhibition of clever rhetoric like the orators or sophists of today but follows careful examination by careful expression of the exact meaning of the thoughts, and this does not lodge just outside the ears of the audience but passes through the hearing into the soul and there stays securely. All the others sit still and listen showing their approval merely by their looks or nods. (Philo 1985b, p. 131)

Further on, Philo describes another gathering, this time one where the president of the company takes the stage to lecture about the sacred scriptures. Again, the speaker addresses the audience in a careful manner, so as to ‘permanently imprint thoughts in the souls of the hearers’. The audience, in turn, behaves in a certain manner to ‘discern the inward and hidden through the outward and visible’ (Philo 1985b, p. 161).

Based on both excerpts, it becomes clear that simply hearing what someone is saying is not enough to consider listening as a spiritual exercise; listening had to be internalised in the soul. For this to unfold, both the speaker and the audience had an active role to play,²² which is why Plutarch, for example, compared attending philosophical lectures to playing a game of throwing and catching a ball. Accordingly, after the lecture, a discussion (*διατριβή*) with the audience and individuals would follow, which was aimed at putting insights into practice, and to ultimately show that one had changed

²² Cf. the rhetoric technique of *captatio benevolentiae*.

for the better as a result of the lecture (Reydams-Schils 2015, p. 128).²³

Plutarch specifies some general and common recommendations – for example, sitting in an upright position without leaning, looking directly at the speaker, and maintaining a pose of active attention. He also mentions things to avoid during lectures: whispering, (malicious) smiling between members of the audience, and sleepy behaviour such as yawning (Hillyard 1981, p. 201).

Seneca also describes proper listening behaviour to Lucilius (*Ep.* 108).²⁴ Coming to see a philosopher, or attending a philosophical lecture, meant taking something good from it. To take something good, one must listen *and* learn; listening without learning is something one might do when visiting the theatre for pleasure (cf. Plato's similar attitude in Chapter III). However, a philosophy school is not a place one visits for entertainment or leisure purposes. Nor is it a place one comes only to write down thoughts and make notes. One comes to *listen* and *benefit* from what is heard.

Accordingly, speakers who teach how to argue and make an effort to impress the audience with rhetorical techniques and passionate emotions are not to be taken too seriously. Good teachers, according to Seneca, can be recognized when their lessons are focused on how to live. It is up to listeners to listen to what is right. In all cases, one should not be interested in learning to argue, and thus avoid a “philologic” approach to texts – by which Seneca means a “love of argument”.

But to avoid slipping into the role of student of text or literary critic, I want to remind you that listening to philosophers and reading their work is for the purpose of attaining a blessed life, not so as to hunt archaic or artificial language and extravagant images and figures of speech, but to learn beneficial instructions and glorious and spirited sayings which will presently be turned into action (...)

²³ I return to Plutarch and the relation between speaker and listener in more detail in Chapter IV.

²⁴ The full Latin title of Seneca's letters to Lucilius is: *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*.

We must not talk but steer. Everything these men say, everything they throw out as the crowd listens to them, is borrowed property: Plato said that, or Zeno said it, or Chrysippus and Posidonius and an immense squadron of so many names of this kind. (Seneca 2010, pp. 236-37)

As an example of something “true” and worth listening to, Seneca discusses the contempt of money. True wealth is found in virtue, and thus in the mind; not in one’s possessions. A sage is independent of material desires, and only wishes for what is honourable and good. Such insights should encourage one to act (‘to steer’) accordingly, which, in Seneca’s case, meant restricting ‘the greed of my throat and stomach’, abstaining from the consumption of meat (something Seneca did only temporarily for fear of false accusations of superstition), the use of perfume, and the somewhat peculiar requirement of sleeping on a pillow that offers resistance to the body and shows no imprint of a head that was laid to rest (Seneca 2010, p. 234).

Let us conclude that listening as a spiritual exercise is not the same as simply hearing and taking note of a certain message. The kind of listening that interests us here, is much more than (passively) registering sounds. In fact, it is more than merely communicating. It is not a mere intellectual skill or proficiency in the instrumental sense that it can be learned without provoking any profound effects on one’s character. The sort of listening I focus on does not fit into the categories of so-called motor skills, nor into the category of cognitive skills, since it is not a kind of procedural knowledge. It is rather something more akin to virtue. After all, for the ancients, listening in philosophical contexts had not so much an informative,²⁵ as a (trans)formative element. It was part of a way of being and living that was constantly exercised.

²⁵ In this sense, one could argue that we have lost the meaning of the Latin *in-formare*, which means “to shape” or “to give form”, which figuratively means “to train” and “to educate” (Etym Online 2020).

Approach and Research Questions

Notwithstanding the examples above, which attest to an ancient interest in the subject of listening in relation to “self-formation”, it is safe to say that listening as an acknowledged practice in ancient philosophy today has not received the attention it deserves. This is the first problem I want to address in this study: the lack of attention paid to listening as an ancient philosophical practice.

In addressing this problem, I seek to contribute to the creation of an (admittedly, sometimes scattered and conjectured) – overview of the history of philosophy of listening in Western thought, which currently does not exist (Haroutunian-Gordon & Laverly 2011, p. 119 n6). The first aim of the present study is to partly fill this gap by addressing the following research question:

How are we to understand listening as a spiritual exercise in ancient cultural-philosophical contexts?

I approach this question by trying to discern what we may consider the earliest philosophies of listening in the ancient world (more specifically, Archaic and Classical Greece, and Republican and early Imperial Rome),²⁶ and identifying the different aspects of listening and any continuities that may exist among these philosophies.

I start my investigation with the pre-Socratic Heraclitus. Long before Philo, Plutarch and Seneca, Heraclitus was one of the earliest – if not the earliest – philosophers in Greek history who dedicated special attention to listening in relation to self-formation. Despite the considerable uncertainty surrounding Heraclitus and the fragments of writings that he left to history, there is no doubt that he attributed great importance to listening. To Heraclitus, the *logos* was something to be heard – in the deepest sense of the word.

²⁶ For important scholarly work on the late Imperial Roman and Byzantine Empire, and promising approaches for studying these periods (including numismatics), see Slootjes (2006), *The Governor and His Subjects in the Later Roman Empire* and more recently, Slootjes & Kaal (2019), *New Perspectives on Power and Political Representation from Ancient History to the Present Day*.

Next, I will dedicate a discussion to Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*. After all, in ancient Greece, it was not only philosophers that contributed to the shaping of human beings. In addition to parents and slaves, poets and writers of tragedies made important contributions as well. It is hard to overlook one of the key messages the playwright was trying to convey in *Antigone*: not listening can lead to disastrous consequences for oneself and one's community.

Judging by the importance of dialectics for the practice of philosophy in his Academy, Plato and his contemporaries also appreciated the pedagogical and philosophical significance of listening. After all, the dialectic as a question-and-answer method in dialogue allowed the practitioner to arrive at his or her own views, instead of having to rely on ready-made truths in written documents. As I will elaborate later, the related adjective *philekoos* (φιλήκοος, compounded from the verbs φιλέω, "to love" or "to befriend"; and ἀκούω, "to hear"; "listen" or "heed") appears in several of Plato's works, making the subject of listening more explicitly present.

After Plato, I trace the development of the relation between *logos* and listening to Plutarch. The rationale behind the choice for these authors will become more evident later, but suffice it to say that they are amongst the earliest thinkers in the ancient Greek and Roman canon, and they all share a deep interest in the subject of listening in relation to the formation of character.

As I will proceed to elaborate on in Chapter I, my method for addressing this question is based on Hadot's work, which can be characterised as a historiographic-hermeneutical analysis of ancient texts. Hadot's approach is hermeneutical because it seeks to understand and reinterpret ancient texts of different genres, despite their sometimes peculiar and inconsistent characters, and the varied characters of their authors – i.e. the philosophers themselves. The approach is historiographic because it allows us to view the manifold forms in which philosophy has been conceived of through the ages, while at the same time allowing us to read philosophical texts anew (Sharpe & Ure 2021, p. 12).

By following in the footsteps of Hadot, I situate this study in an emerging research movement that has recently been outlined by Sharpe and Ure (2021, pp. 2 & 9) as Philosophy as a Way of Life (PWL). According to Sharpe and Ure, the increasing attention this field is receiving in academia can be partly explained by a certain “hunger” among students, scholars, and intellectually inclined people for a more humanistic vision of philosophy. That is, a vision of philosophy that can be practised and lived, a practice that continuously encourages us to exercise in an attempt to find wisdom. The overarching goal in this project is born from this hunger as well. Perhaps it is best characterised as an attempt to contribute to the protreptic function of Socratic maieutics: the encouragement (Greek: *protrepein*) to listen in service of the search of wisdom and the good life.

The second problem that I will consider is the challenge of revitalising some of the existential dimensions of spiritual listening. This problem follows from the first, but is oriented in the present.

I suggested in the Preface that listening is in peril today. This may also be true for the field of philosophy. Since Greek culture was an oral culture, and reading was not conducted in the same way it is now, we seem to have come to think that listening is less important. As far as philosophers do listen, Hadot notes, they are inclined to listen to themselves talk (2009, p. 130). I believe this is reflected in the fact that not much attention is being paid to the subject at all.

However, there are still a few instances of listening that are worth mentioning here. In relatively recent times, the subject of listening has appeared in, for example, the hermeneutic tradition (Heidegger, Gadamer),²⁷ in Buber’s “philosophy of dialogue”, in

²⁷ However, as Haroutunian-Gordon and Laverly argue (2011, p. 119): ‘Martin Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Gadamer all ground their philosophies in language use and thereby reconceive the role of listening and the definition of it as the passive reception of information.’ This overlooks the active – i.e. transformative - reception of information. Cf. Fiumara (2006, p. 23).

Bakhtin's work,²⁸ and in Derrida.²⁹

Works dedicated exclusively to the subject of listening include Don Ihde's phenomenological *Listening and Voice*, originally published in 1976; Roland Barthes' essay "Listening" in *The Responsibility of Forms* (1985); and also Jean-Luc Nancy's book *Listening* (2002). Of the few scholars in the continental tradition that have dedicated an entire philosophical study to listening, Gemma Corradi Fiumara's *The Other Side of Language*, first published in 1990, is arguably the most comprehensive.³⁰

According to Fiumara, the fact that our system of knowledge tends to ignore listening processes can be attributed to the absence of references to listening in the different meanings of *logos*. In so far as philosophical thinking is grounded in language and discourse (*logos*), Fiumara argues, it is only half a language that is deployed: the half that consists in all scientific and cognitive discourse which is concerned with speaking, informing, permeating, ordering, and moulding our reality. This half of *logos* is at the heart of the epistemological universe from where most of today's thinking sprouts (Fiumara 2006, p. 23).

The other half of *logos*, listening, is mostly overlooked, ignored, and possibly even negated as a form of rationality by the dominance of the spoken and written word. As a consequence of this philosophical focus on expressive activity and the reduced-by-half *logos* that follows from it, Fiumara fears we may be losing the "eros" of true philosophising, which in the Platonic sense refers to the deep desire for truth and the Good (see Fiumara 2006, pp. 82-94).

Despite these works, however, we still find ourselves today without a dedicated field of interest or acknowledged practice of listening in the history of Western philosophy. A major cause for this may

²⁸ See, for example, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981), in which "the voice" stands against the authority and immobility of the written.

²⁹ E.g. in *Of Grammatology* (1967) Derrida discusses "phonocentrism" and the idea that speaking means listening to oneself which, in turn, produces the illusion of "self-presence".

³⁰ Surprisingly, none of these authors mention Plutarch in their work.

be found in the goal of modern philosophy. Whereas science and philosophy today aim to explain the world and its inhabitants, the primary goal of ancient philosophy was to transform the listener in an attempt to become virtuous (Davidson 2009, p. 91).

Indeed, the meaning of philosophy has changed drastically through the centuries that separate us from Plutarch and his predecessors. Modern philosophy in university contexts is largely disseminated as a theoretical and abstract kind of knowledge. This is particularly true for the analytic school of thought, which is strongly conditioned in scientific thinking.³¹

As an academic with a tenured position, a philosopher develops a certain expertise in a field, while also dedicating a portion of his appointment to teaching duties. A philosopher is almost always a writer, producing own material and commenting on that of others. Philosophical texts, often in the form of systematic expositions, attempt to offer new and original arguments, discover new knowledge, or create new epistemological and conceptual frameworks to address a particular philosophical problem.

By contrast, philosophy in ancient times was born out of a living context, that is to say, out of concrete life encompassing all human activity. Ancient writers were not trying to offer new and original arguments; more often, they recalled well-known things to ‘reactivate them in the soul’ (Hadot 1995, p. 22). While philosophy was often curated in the form of a text or a discourse, this was only one aspect of philosophy. Which does not mean that it was not important. The Stoics, for example, thought it essential for a good philosopher to familiarise him/herself with the philosophical tradition (Nussbaum 2009, p. 336).

The point is that philosophical life should find justification in a rationally motivated discourse, which cannot be separated from

³¹ Having said that, some of today’s philosophers (e.g. Jürgen Habermas, Martha Nussbaum, and Peter Singer) still offer a kind of knowledge which fuses abstraction with moral-practical relevance.

how one lives. Discourse and reflection provide the function of finding reasons for acting in a certain way, and for thinking about one's own experiences and those of others. What should never be forgotten is that ancient philosophical life was always linked to the care for others (Hadot 2004, p. 280), which becomes clear when one considers its pedagogical intention.

It is not difficult to reconstruct the theoretical framework underlying the ancient conception of philosophy and its discourse, particularly in the case of the Stoics and Epicureans.³² But the relevant point is that their insights did not depend on purely intellectual constructions. Instead, ancient discourses were meant to be applicable in the sense that they offered orientation in the world, as well as spiritual exercises to instil tranquillity and happiness in the soul.

Outside academia, there is an ever-increasing interest in ancient practical philosophy. This is especially evident from the great number of self-help books, podcasts, and events on Stoicism.³³ Such attempts to reanimate ancient philosophy, often plagued with anachronistic clichés and bold claims, have been met with scepticism by scholars (e.g. Thijssen 2020). This is at the very least due to the commercial interest behind them, and the sometimes esoteric and misguided interpretations that would have us believe that we should “throw away our books”, and instead of talking about what a good person should be like, we should simply be one.

Stoic expressions may seem to suggest such attitudes. Take, for instance, Epictetus:

A builder doesn't come forward and say, 'Listen to me as I deliver a discourse about the builder's art,' but he acquires a contract to build a house and shows through actually building it that he has mastered the art. (Epictetus, *Discourses*, 3.21, 4)

³² While the distinction between philosophical discourse and philosophy is explicitly found in Hellenistic philosophy, Hadot shows this distinction is already implicit in Plato and Aristotle as well, since their philosophies were never an end in themselves either (2020, p. 70).

³³ Consider, for example, the books and website of marketer Ryan Holiday.

However, just before this, Epictetus also says:

Those who have taken in the principles raw and without any dressing immediately want to vomit them up again, just as people with weak stomachs bring up their food. Digest them first, and then you won't vomit them up in this way. (Epictetus, *Discourses*, 3.21, 1-2)³⁴

In other words, one cannot just dismiss the discourse, as it is always part of the “digestion process” of philosophy.

Entirely negating the crucial role discourse plays in philosophy, is a danger to philosophy (Hadot 2020, pp. 36-37).³⁵ What is more (according to Hadot), to think that philosophical reflection is superfluous altogether in the sense that some popular authors would like to have us believe, is the worst danger of all. The fact that writing and reading were clearly not the only didactic activities within the different philosophical schools, and the fact that ancient philosophy cannot be reduced to a theoretical discourse, does not mean that the theoretical discourse was wholly unimportant.

To avoid being at the sole mercy of popular writers, we need academia to guarantee a certain threshold of quality via historical, philological, and philosophical research. It will always remain challenging to bridge the gap between philosophy as a lived practice – often the domain of “popular philosophy” – and “detached” academic philosophy. In a certain sense, there still is the old, ancient philosophical demand for a good life, but the “paradigm” of philosophy has changed fundamentally through the centuries that separate us from the ancients. With the gradual emergence of modernity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the focus changed from ontology to subject-philosophy. This paradigm has also been

³⁴ Montaigne uses similar analogies in his explanation of how children should not be educated: It is a sign of rawness and indigestion to disgorge our meat the moment we have swallowed it. The stomach has not performed its function if it has not changed the condition and character of what it was given to digest (Montaigne 1993, p. 55).

³⁵ Consider the advice to ‘throw away your books’ from the *Daily Stoic*, run by Ryan Holiday.

referred to as ‘the paradigm of subjectivity’ (Früchtel 2007, p. 11).

Today there is no such thing as a particular philosophical school where people work and live together according to certain “generalised ethical practices”. Despite other models for philosophy – such as the *Frankfurter Schule*, revived by Habermas’s Discourse School, or the modern Stoic movement which consists of psychologists, counsellors, and academics led by figures such as Massimo Pigliucci and Donald Robertson – philosophers remain mostly solitary creatures, just as Erasmus, Montaigne, Spinoza, Kant, Nietzsche and Heidegger were (Hadot 2004, p. 277). And yet, they were (metaphorically) in the presence of the ancients whom they saw as examples, and who guided them in their spiritual practice.

However, according to Hadot, as a result of the many changes in the meaning of “doing philosophy” throughout history (see Chapter V and VI), we have forgotten how to read and let a text speak to us in a way that motivates us to transform ourselves.³⁶ Implicit in this observation is a critique of the way philosophy has forgotten its ancient calling, which was primarily interested in cultivating a way of life (Sharpe & Ure 2021, p. 8). Today’s humanities students and (perhaps) scholars in general are more inclined to see a text as something “external”, akin to a museum object, instead of something that may contribute to their personal formation – something that may be internalised in a way that prompts for one’s character to change.

In the words of Hadot, the problem is that we have forgotten

how to pause, liberate ourselves from our worries, return into ourselves, and leave aside our search for subtlety and originality, in order to meditate calmly, ruminate, and let the texts speak to us. (1995, p. 109)

Above all, what we have forgotten is that PWL has the potential to

³⁶ Hadot is referring to ancient philosophical texts, but there is no reason why we would not arrive at the same conclusions in relation to non-ancient, and even non-philosophical texts.

guide us in our daily lives and teach us how to live. This is precisely why the subject of listening deserves more attention: if we want to surround ourselves with the wisdom of the ancients today, we will have to rediscover the art of letting their texts speak to us, so that we can listen to them once again.

The question is whether the philosophical listening that moves us to transform ourselves and our surroundings can be revitalised in a credible way, so that it becomes relevant again in present-day contexts. Although it would be hard to assess any spiritual progress or transformation that results from “doing” philosophy, I believe there is still reason to assume that listening could be exercised spiritually today. As Sharpe and Ure put it:

At a minimum, (...) any contemporary reinventions of Philosophy as a Way of Life must find ways to navigate the tension between the ancient ideal of rational self-completion and its extirpation of the passions and the modern ideal of artistic self-creation³⁷ and its affirmation of grand passions. (2021, p. 334)

When it comes to the perpetual quest for wisdom, Hadot acknowledges that there have been ‘universal and fundamental attitudes’ throughout the history of philosophy (2020, p. 42).³⁸ In fact, many philosophers after the ancients considered philosophy as practice and exercise (*ἄσκησις*) in addition to a discourse, rendering Greek thought still “actual”. In this spirit, Hadot poses the question:

Isn't there an urgent need to rediscover the ancient notion of the “philosopher” – that living, choosing philosopher without whom the notion of philosophy has no meaning? Why not define the philosopher not as a professor or a writer who develops a philosophical

³⁷ I will return to the idea of ‘artistic self-creation’ or what we may simply refer to as “dandyism” in the next chapter.

³⁸ See, for example, Hadot’s four features of the universal Stoic attitude (Davidson 1995, pp. 34–35).

discourse, but, in accordance with the concept which was constant in antiquity, as a person who leads a philosophical life? Shouldn't we revise the habitual use of the word "philosopher" (which usually refers only to the theoretician) so that it applies to the person who practices philosophy, just as Christians can practice Christianity without being theorists or theologians? Do we ourselves have to construct a philosophical system before we can live philosophically? (Hadot 2004, p. 275)

Clearly, Hadot does not deny the potential of revitalising ancient philosophies and their exercises to support today's individual person. In addition, we can assume he described his goal 'to make people love a few old truths' by encouraging them to live and constantly re-experience these truths for a reason. After all, for the meaning of PWL to be fully understood, it must be lived (see Hadot 1995, p. 108).

Nonetheless, we must guard ourselves against adopting the ancient attitudes unmodified and without testing the sustainability of certain dogmas in the present. That is clearly *not* what we can learn from the ancients. It is important to not forget that the Greek ideal assumed a certain wholeness of the "self" or the subject, something which, as I will show, Foucault and others have problematised deeply by pointing at the different structural influences that constitute the subject (see Chapters I and V). Due to several philosophical ruptures in the history of philosophy, of which post-modernism – starting with Nietzsche³⁹ – is probably the most drastic, our times no longer assume unity: a society is often conceptualised as a collection of conflicting political and economic dimensions, in which humans are understood as fragmented beings lacking any kind of universal essence.

Indeed, instead of an uncritical return to the past, the ancients call upon us to discover is 'the transformation that could be brought

³⁹ The difference between the diverse, even oppositional, concepts of subjectivity was elaborated on already by Schiller, Goethe, the Schlegel brothers, and finally Hegel, all at the end of the 18th century. For all of them the leading question was whether, and if so, how it could be possible to connect the "totality" of the old Greek character with modern "alienation" and "fragmentarity".

about in our life' (Hadot 1995, pp. 272-273). Based on three contemporary instances of philosophical, and thus, paideutic activities (namely, listening to (1) texts, (2) interlocutors, and (3) nature) I will argue that listening as a spiritual activity can and perhaps should be revitalised today. Accordingly, the second aim of this study is to revitalise some of the existential dimensions of spiritual listening for us today and provide some orientation for present-day PWL practices based on listening. After all, as a result of the lack of research into the philosophical concept of listening, and the gaps in our understanding of listening as a spiritual exercise, a reflection on the meaning of listening for us is lacking.

As I will show in the next chapter, PWL cannot simply go back to the old, ancient ideas, and then project these ideas onto the present. The old ideas can be continued only by way of a transformation:

What needs to be shown is how a fuller understanding of (...) ancient aspects of ourselves enables us to respond to our present moral problematizations with any serious normative claim such that we could begin to recognize any given response as better or worse than others (Koopman 2013, p. 206).

Given the continuity in the need to listen to others and ourselves in both dialogue and reading, the focus on listening might very well be a promising start to arriving at such a normative claim. In the final chapter, I therefore attempt to address this issue by posing the question:

How can the ancient philosophical ideals provide orientation for listening as a contemporary spiritual exercise?

In addressing this question, I attempt to show how some of the ancient themes have repeatedly returned, and been modified and transformed throughout history. As the French historian and friend of Foucault, Paul Veyne put it:

From one age to another, problems are not similar, any more than is nature or reason; the eternal return is also an eternal departure (...); only successive valorizations exist. (Veyne 1997, p. 226)

Due to constantly changing contingencies, and the differences between cultures and individuals, it would be difficult to speak of eternal or essential problems. Therefore, by posing this second question, I do not intend to ask what the ancient protagonists featured in this study would have thought about our current practices of philosophy, and what they would advise us to do. Such an endeavour would be wholly impossible given our radically different “value spheres” or “systems” such as modern science, morality, art, politics, and economics. Instead, I seek to “revalorise” those aspects of ancient philosophy in relation to modern practices, to ultimately inspire a revitalisation of the ancient spiritual exercise of listening.

Having arrived at this point, one could well wonder why it is necessary to summon the ancients in a philosophical study about listening. Let me briefly address this question to close this introduction, before moving on to my theoretical reflections and methodological commitments in the next chapter.

Why we need the ancients

The idea of a practical and compassionate philosophy—a philosophy that exists for the sake of human beings, in order to address their deepest needs, confront their most urgent perplexities, and bring them from misery to some greater measure of flourishing—this idea makes the study of Hellenistic ethics riveting for a philosopher who wonders what philosophy has to do with the world. (Nussbaum 2009, p. 3)

We are the witnesses today of a growing interest in ancient philoso-

phy. Hadot's work sparked the emergence of a particular field within metaphilosophy – PWL – that serves to reconsider the meaning of doing philosophy in the past, the present, and the future.

But what could we possibly learn from the ancients that we cannot get from modern science or common sense today? As Hadot suggests, following Kierkegaard, a detour via ancient philosophy allows one to communicate indirectly. The benefit of doing so is that one can more easily avoid writing in the imperative form, dictating to others what they should do or refrain from doing. Instead, through the description of ancient modes of living and exercising, free suggestions for contemporary attitudes can be made (2009, p. 147).

The power of ancient thought is that it raises issues that can still be made relevant today. After all, Greek philosophy suggests different ways to navigate human reality. Perhaps Nussbaum put it most urgently when she wrote:

Even when what we discover in the Hellenistic texts seems incomplete, or wrong-headed, there are profound insights at their core, and we need to ponder them. (Nussbaum 2009, p. xvii)

As it turns out, listening played a significant role in their approach to self-examination, self-understanding, and ultimately, self-transformation.

Social-cultural differences offer further motivation to study the ancients. For them, the importance of listening was greatly determined by their oral culture, which goes at least as far back as Homeric times (c. eighth century BCE). According to Hadot 'the ancient book was, nearly always, the echo of a speech intended to become speech once again' (2020, p. 84).⁴⁰

Books were meant to be read out loud, even if someone was reading alone.⁴¹ In this sense, literature, mindful of oral phrasing,

⁴⁰ Hadot mentions *Philebus* as a particular example of such a text (2020, p. 86).

⁴¹ Cf. Augustine's bewilderment at Ambrose's silent reading, *Confessions* 6.3.

rhythm, and sonority, was not addressing the eyes, but the ears. The fact that texts were taught orally, indicates that their meaning is ultimately not only found in the texts itself, but in the effect they were expected to set in motion in the addressee. This effect was both protreptic and paraenetic. As I explain in Chapter II, the oral and pedagogical tradition called *paideia* started with the great poets, who were masters of the spoken word, but continued in the oral transmission of Platonic philosophy all through to the time of the Roman Empire.

According to Hadot, ancient philosophy ‘has always striven to be more a living speech than a written work, and more a life than a speech’ (2020, p. 48). Consequently, ideas had to be presented in the temporality of speech, not in the somewhat timeless style of a modern book. This contrast helps explain why Plato often presented his work in the form of dialogue; as an event unfolding in time that embodied the living relationship between people as opposed to abstract ideas (Hadot 2020, pp. 83-84; 2011, p. 54). In addition, and given the intention of a text to influence and form the listener, philosophers often applied different literary, rhetorical and psychagogic methods.

In short, since there seems to be relatively little attention paid to listening as a philosophical or theoretical issue in our times, it is instructive to consult philosophical representatives of a culture that relied more on listening. This allows us to determine what they believed listening was, how listening is to be done, and why it is important in philosophical, living contexts. After understanding and uncovering some of the most important insights in relation to listening, we can determine their potential as signposts for contemporary philosophical practices.

A further motivation to study ancient culture and PWL is that answers to the philosophical questions raised in this study are typically not found in one place, or in one book. Answers are more likely to be found in the entire oeuvres of several philosophers that

have built on each other's ideas over the course of centuries. Since philosophical oeuvres are always embedded in a social-cultural and historical context (as Hadot and Gadamer have shown),⁴² it is crucial for our understanding of ideas to include an elaborate discussion of the history and development of relevant concepts and the traditional elements employed by the author as well.

Finally, ancient models of philosophy never cease to be revitalised in various capacities. According to Hadot, the explanation for this is that ancient schools were kinds of experimental laboratories that offered insight into the consequences of different kinds of spiritual experiences (2004, p. 278). These are some of the motivations for traversing to more distant worlds for insights on the subject of philosophical listening.

⁴² Oosterling refers to this as “networks”; see Chapter VI and Oosterling (2020a, pp. 99-100).

CHAPTER I

Theoretical reflections and methodological commitments

Philosophy cannot give up its search for a fundamental unity in this ideal world. But it does not confound this unity with simplicity. It does not overlook the tensions and frictions, the strong contrasts and deep conflicts between the various powers of man. These cannot be reduced to a common denominator. They tend in different directions and obey different principles. But this multiplicity and disparateness do not denote discord or disharmony. All these functions complete and complement one another. Each one opens a new horizon and shows us a new aspect of humanity. The dissonant is in harmony with itself; the contraries are not mutually exclusive, but interdependent: “harmony in contrariety, as in the case of the bow and lyre.” (Cassirer 1944, p. 286)

Introduction

As should be clear from the Introduction, the work of French historian Pierre Hadot is exemplary for this study. However, in seeking inspiration for a contemporary way of life, Hadot was evidently not the only one who was interested in the ancients. In his later works, Foucault also took an interest in the ancients. This chapter offers a reflection on the very different epistemologies and approaches employed by Hadot and Foucault in studying the history of philosophy, before arguing that Hadot’s approach best serves my objectives. I will then articulate my own methodological commitments in the concluding section of this chapter.

Of the French thinkers of difference (including Lyotard, Deleuze, Baudrillard, and Derrida), the work of Michel Foucault is arguably

the most read. One can rightly claim that Foucault, in contrast to his colleagues, is not only a historian, but also a social theorist (*Gesellschaftstheoretiker*) who excels in patiently carrying out ‘microscopic analyses’ (Früchtl 1996, p. 130). However, despite the fact that he makes plenty of use of historical facts, Foucault is not a historian in the traditional sense. What Foucault attempts to do is understand how fundamental terms such as “subject”; “identity”; “freedom” and “morality” have changed through the ages.

Foucault suggests it is necessary to become mindful of these changes in order to not only understand the ancients, but ourselves as well. One of Foucault’s intentions, as part of the overarching aim of self-care, was to develop an alternative for modern morality such as utilitarianism or deontology. Unfortunately, however, Foucault left us with a very limited impression of what a so-called modern “aesthetics of existence” is supposed to look like. This is in part because, as I will discuss in detail later, he did not think so-called Greco-Roman “techniques of the self” (e.g. thought, action, self-invention, see further) could be credibly revived in the present.

What Foucault *did* do, however, is suggest that these techniques can serve as a source of inspiration for creating something new and adapted to the present-day context (Sellars 2018, pp. 25-26). He seemed particularly interested in applying techniques of the self in the service of a “practice of freedom” that continuously seeks to liberate one from external “coercion-technologies” and power relations in general.

Foucault was well acquainted with Hadot’s work, and he referred to it on numerous occasions.⁴³ He also encouraged Hadot to submit his candidature to the Collège de France at the end of 1980. Despite this, they never had the opportunity to discuss their commonalities and differences in detail (Sellars 2020, p. 40).

Although Foucault never publicly distanced himself from Hadot,

⁴³ For example, in the *History of Sexuality* parts II and III, and in his 1981-1982 lecture course entitled “The Hermeneutics of the Subject”.

the latter raised some concerns in relation to Foucault's later work. Hadot's critique concerns two points in particular: (1) Foucault's emphasis on aesthetics in relation to self-cultivation in both the ancient and contemporary world, and the alleged reduction to dandyism; and (2) Foucault's *lack of* emphasis on the universal, cosmological dimension of spiritual exercises aimed at self-transformation.⁴⁴ I will address both critiques in more detail below.

I will then argue why and how "philosophical choice" is decisive in my methodological preference for Hadot. The objective I assign to philosophy will prove to be the main consideration in this choice, but this choice is also based on the ontological value I attribute to the concept of truth, which is necessary in pointing out differences and continuities between modern and Greek ethics.

I also draw from Nussbaum to strengthen and supplement Hadot's emphasis on the universal character of spiritual exercises. My main purpose in including Nussbaum in this chapter is to make the universal aspect of Hadot's work more plausible by providing an example of a contemporary universalist-inspired ethics. To this end, I discuss Nussbaum's 1992 article "Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defence of Aristotelian Essentialism". I then proceed to a discussion of her *Therapy of Desire* (1994), in which she explicitly connects her universalist orientation to ancient practices of philosophy, and argues that philosophy as an art of life depends on valid and sound arguments, which can and should be tested for their rational validity. I close this chapter with an outline and explanation of my four methodological imperatives, which are based on both Hadot and the preceding discussion.

The discussion between Hadot and Foucault that never took place: A reconstruction and commentary

Foucault's method for historical critical inquiry is "genealogy", which he also refers to as a "history of ontologies" (Foucault, 2010).

⁴⁴ For more (minor) divergences between Foucault and Hadot, see Sellars (2020, p. 48 n10).

Although so-called genealogists such as Nietzsche and Foucault share with philosophers and historians a great deal of interest for the past, they do not fall into the category of either. What then does Foucauldian genealogy mean? This is by no means easy to answer, as Foucault has given different accounts in both his late writings (e.g. *History of Sexuality*), and in several interviews he gave towards the end of his untimely death. Fortunately, with the help of scholarly contributions in the field, we can get a decent understanding of Foucault's approach to historical inquiry. Let us thus begin with a brief exploration of the meaning of genealogy.

In his polemic essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1977), Foucault argues against the (Hegelian) idea of objective linearity in the history of morality. Neither words, nor ideas and desires, have kept their meaning or logic throughout history. Contrary to a linear approach, Foucault explains, genealogy rejects any form of "meta-history", in the sense that a bird's-eye view and a certain teleology is presupposed. Consequently, genealogy also rejects the "origin" of history as an idea.

In exploring what the meaning of a genealogical method entails, Foucault seeks to connect to Nietzsche. Foucault claims he follows Nietzsche in the sense that he is not looking *for* origins (*Ursprung*), but instead finds himself to be in search *of* origins (*Herkunft* or *Entstehung*). Ideas do not have origins, he claims, but rather contrasts. Accordingly, Foucault is not interested in finding absolute beginnings; rather, he is interested in "excavating"⁴⁵ how mankind wrote about all sorts of issues, and how the meanings surrounding these issues have changed. In this sense, there is continuity between the past and the present; this is primarily found in the fact that things change over time.

Nietzsche's problem with origins is that they assume 'the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident

⁴⁵ Foucault never fully abandoned his "archaeological" language and approach of earlier works such as *The Order of Things* (1966) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969).

and succession,² as if there are “primordial truths” that can be readily accessed (Foucault 1984, p. 78). In other words, when we look back at history, we will find nothing but changing ideas; there is no immovable truth on which ideas are based.

Wherever there seem to be origins, they have been fabricated. Foucault endeavours to prove this by focusing on physical practices, such as diet (e.g. *Use of Pleasure*, 1978) and health (e.g. *Discipline and Punish*, 1975). At the historical beginning of things, we find “dissension” and “disparity” of things. As a consequence, a genealogy of morality is not a quest for origins but rather a quest for the deviations in history:

History is the concrete body of a development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells; and only a metaphysician would seek its soul in the distant ideality of the origin. (Foucault 1984, p. 80)

Genealogy as an “analysis of descent” does not aim to prove that the past still continues in the present. It follows instead the “deviations” that continue to exist, of which the most important is arguably the insight that truth is shaped by humans, not discovered. This marks the end of truth as an objective possibility, and the beginning of a whole new body of postmodern writings that assume there are not only multiple perspectives on reality, but multiple versions of reality itself.⁴⁶ And in the case of pragmatist writings, truth as objectivity is replaced by truth as an intersubjective consensus of “experts” (Rorty 1991, p. 23).

As I will elaborate on in the next section, genealogy seeks to ‘re-establish the various systems of subjugation’ (Foucault 1984, p. 83). From this analysis, it follows that we have different values (liberty, logic, rationality) because there have been different plays of domination. Here too, there is no linear and gradual progress in the

⁴⁶ See Hofhuis (forthcoming, 2022) for a critical discussion of the writings of Bruno Latour.

history of humanity. We go from domination to domination.

Put simply, the role of genealogy is to record history, meaning:

the history of morals, ideals, and metaphysical concepts, the history of the concept of liberty or of the ascetic life; as they stand for the emergence of different interpretations, they must be made to appear as events on the stage of historical process. (Foucault 1984, p. 86)

By contrast, history in the traditional sense always assumes a so-called “suprahistorical” perspective – ‘an apocalyptic objectivity’ – which implies a completed development. Foucault’s “effective history”, however, shows the constitutive role of the past in the present, and sees a historic event as a reversal of power dynamics. As a consequence, historic events, which are always entangled and plural in identity, cannot be understood by reducing them to final meanings and values.

What *can* be done, according to Foucault, is shortening the vision. Where traditional historians find themselves on a mountain top, Foucault prefers to consider such things as ‘the body, the nervous system, nutrition, digestion, and energies,’ in short: the body itself (1984, p. 89). The knowledge that arises from such “microscopic analyses” is not universal truth, but rather a perspective, grounded in a particular time and place, which necessarily includes – as hermeneutic philosophers such as Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Gadamer have already taught us – the historian’s history.

As such, Foucault’s genealogy of history is meant to criticise the ‘roots of our identity’. The most conspicuous example of genealogy in practice is found in his last writings: the *History of Sexuality*.

Genealogy in the *History of Sexuality*

In the first part of the *History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault sees as his object the definition of what he refers to as the ‘regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexu-

ality' in the West (1998, p. 11). Foucault's genealogical focus is on so-called "discursive facts" that demonstrate how sex has been put into a certain narrative that is constitutive for how we relate to the subject and to ourselves.

Discourse is conceived by Foucault as 'discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable' (1998, p. 100).⁴⁷ Indeed, according to historian Paul Veyne (1997, p. 157), discourse always contains a "hidden" or "submerged grammar" that has power relations at its base. The discursive grammar, the power structures – techniques of power – that determine everyday individual behaviour, is precisely what Foucault aims to uncover with his genealogy (Foucault 1998, p. 11).

For instance, from his studies on modern punishment and sexuality, Foucault shows that there are no simple and singular explanations that tell us who we are and how we have arrived at being who we are. This also explains why Foucault did not like to be characterised as a theorist. After all, Foucault, in the classical and idealist sense, problematises the very idea of a theory. This is because, to him, a theory pretends to exist in an autonomous transcendent reality outside of the power-knowledge mechanisms, under which everything human falls.

Foucault explains in one of his lectures at the Collège de France (1977-1978), that instead of operating from within a theory, he wants to 'investigate where and how, between whom, between what points, according to what processes, and with what effects, power is applied' (2007, pp. 1-2).⁴⁸ Consequently, in the *History of Sexuality*,

⁴⁷ Despite this qualification, however, in "What is Enlightenment?", Foucault does allow for a certain continuity in history when it comes to the permanent reactivation of an attitude, which he refers to as the 'philosophical ethos' (1997, p. 312; see, pp. 312-318 for a characterisation). As we will see later, this is not the only instance where Foucault allows for continuity. Therefore, on closer inspection, his approach cannot be reduced to merely exposing discontinuities.

⁴⁸ Foucault may have attempted to avoid operating from within a theory himself, but it will always remain a somewhat problematic claim and endeavour. After all, we could well wonder whether it is possible to analyse anything without having some kind of a theory, albeit in the background.

Foucault is not interested in the metaphysics or truth about sex, but rather in discursive productions that served to empower and transform certain narratives, regardless of their truth. After all, for Foucault – again showing himself to be indebted to Nietzsche – truth will always be “polymorphous” and appear in different forms. Accordingly, Foucault claims that the outcome of his genealogical endeavour is therefore not a theory, but rather an analysis of the power in the domain of sexuality (1998, p. 82).

Although Foucault wanted to be called ‘simply Nietzschean’ (Foucault 1988, p. 251), the fact that he understands power as omnipresent is what may qualify his approach as “structuralist”. Mechanisms of power determine and simultaneously reinforce discourse, and therefore, knowledge. Consequently, Foucault does not refer to the common ‘juridico-discursive representation of power’ (1998, p. 93), but rather speaks of “normalising techniques” found on all levels and in different forms.⁴⁹ In other words, Foucault understands power as omnipresent and coming from everywhere, not just from above or below.

Perhaps genealogy’s main concern can best be summarised as that of “submerged problems”: ‘problems found below the surfaces of our lives’ (Koopman 2013, p. 1). Such problems are constitutive of how we are, how we think, and how we act; without us always being fully aware of them. As genealogists, both Foucault and Nietzsche attempt to bring these problems of contingency and complexity to the fore, in order to transform them one way or another.

Where Nietzsche seemed more interested in problematising the degree to which we are stuck in a certain morality, in particular the master-slave morality, Foucault is more involved in historically problematising the present (Koopman 2013, p. 2). Accordingly, in an interview from 1984 entitled “The Concern for Truth”, Foucault characterised his work since the *History of Madness* (1961) to be that

⁴⁹ For the principal features of this sort of power, see Foucault (1998, pp. 83-85).

of problematisation, the main aim of which is to uncover the various practices and intertwined mechanisms of knowledge and power in the past that have produced certain phenomena in the present (Koopman 2013, p. 17). This characterization can be understood as a form of critique in the Kantian tradition, in the sense that Foucault is seeking the (critical) limits of what can be problematised.

Let us now address the implications of “doing genealogy” for the possibilities of revitalising ancient philosophy today. After all, the claim has been that through a historical problematization of our time, Foucault opens new ways of relating to the past and being in the present, which is where we also find Hadot’s first principal disagreement with Foucault.

Aesthetics of existence

Foucault acknowledges that there is a similarity between Greek ethics and modern ethics in the sense that we do not seek for an answer to the good life in religion, in legal systems or in scientific knowledge. However, the Greeks do not offer an alternative for us, because we ‘can’t find the solution of problems in the solution of another problem raised at another moment by other people,’ Foucault said in an interview (Foucault, 1997, p. 256).

Problems in ancient times might be similar, but they are not the same, nor is the cultural-historical context. As we have seen in the previous section, this is why Foucault is not interested in looking for an alternative, but instead chooses to focus his attention on presenting a genealogy of problems with a special focus on power mechanisms. To Foucault, there simply is no “exemplary value” in different historical periods.

Yet, according to Foucault, there are examples of ethical experience, and while the “techniques of the self” cannot be reactivated, they can at least encourage the adoption of a perspective for analysing our current lives and facilitating change. Although Foucault sees

history as an oscillating and disrupted continuity, there appears to be a certain continuity between our world and the Greek world, not only in the fact that things change over time, but also in the observation that ‘the main principles of our ethics have been related at a certain moment to an aesthetics of existence’ (Foucault 1997, p. 261). This aesthetic conceptualisation of the past, and the implications for our own time, has received criticism from different authors, including Hadot.

Although Foucault later developed his own terminology, his “techniques of the self” are partly derived from Hadot’s spiritual exercises (Sellars 2020, pp. 36, 39). Behind the variance in terminology, however, there are important epistemological differences in their respective accounts of ancient practical philosophy. In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault introduces “arts of existence” or “techniques of the self” (*techniques de soi*), in order to rethink morality. He defines arts of existence as follows:

What I mean by the phrase are those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre. (Foucault 1990, pp. 10-11)

Foucault’s notion of techniques of the self refers to ancient practices, exercises, ideas, procedures, and techniques of self-transformation. According to Foucault, the word “technique” refers to the idea that ethics in ancient Greece primarily indicated an art or craft (τέχνη του βίου), related to how one should live well.

At first, living well was determined by the societal context of (ruling) the *polis*, but Foucault notes that this changed during the first two centuries CE, where ethics turned to taking care of the “self”; which was not given. In the absence of a given self, it had to be “crafted” according to Foucault, similar to a work of art (1997, pp. 260-262).

In ancient times, these life arts or crafts had no aesthetic connotation in the modern sense, and simply referred to practical skills such as rhetoric, medicine, and shoemaking (Sellars 2020, p. 43). Hadot's first principal disagreement therefore stems from this anachronistic account of ancient philosophical practices. Hadot rightly points out that the modern notion of beauty is very different from the Greek idea of beauty (*καλόν*), which held moral qualities as well.

Foucault seems to have been quite aware of this, however. When he was asked in an interview how the Greeks would deal with someone who had an unhealthy amount of sex, he answered that it would be recognized as hubris and excess, and people would be considered "ugly" as a result (1997, p. 260). This remark attests to Foucault's awareness of the interconnections between the good and the beautiful: one was considered ugly, because of one's moral behaviour.

It is safe to conclude that the disagreement between Foucault and Hadot on this part of the objection rests on a misunderstanding. We will thus leave it aside, and briefly turn our attention to the second part of the objection: Foucault's idea of an aesthetic ethical model for modern (wo)man.

Dandyism and etho-poetics

Given its excessive attention to the self and the lack of a social dimension, Hadot worries that an aesthetic ethical model will result in a new form of aestheticism or "dandyism" (Hadot 2011, p. 136; Flynn 2005, p. 615). Apart from the implicit anachronism, the problem with an aestheticized lifestyle is that it is likely to lead to the development of a self-obsessed and detached persona.

As several commentators have pointed out, however, Foucault's aim was not a vain self-stylization, but rather 'a personal transformation, a becoming, finding ways of thinking, living and relating to other people that were currently unimaginable' (Oksala 2005, p. 169; see also Wimberly 2009, pp. 196-197). To address this critique of dandyism more thoroughly, it is worth briefly pondering Foucault's

article “Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth” (1997), where he writes about *dandysme* (Fr.) in relation to Baudelaire, who, like Foucault, characterised modernity in terms of awareness of the various discontinuities (p. 310).

According to Foucault, Baudelaire saw modern man as someone who tries to invent and “produce” himself (1997, p. 311). Indeed, Foucault’s understanding of nineteenth century “dandyism” – which he also compares to modes of existence in the Renaissance, whose models were inspired by the ancients – seems to correspond with his idea of aesthetics of existence as an effort to escape forms of domination and normalisation. Although it never really becomes clear how exactly Foucault imagines freedom practices to unfold, he sees aesthetics of existence as that which allows one to adopt freely a particular form of living, and transform oneself and one’s relation to power and knowledge relations on the basis thereof.

Contrary to Foucault’s aims, Hadot seems to criticise a form of shallow dandyism where one’s actions become like an aesthetic and stylized spectacle for the sole aim of pleasure and attractiveness without bearing a relation to some form of ethics (Sharpe & Stettler 2021, p. 5). However, this form of dandyism is not what Foucault is advocating for. Apart from a misguided remark in an interview, where Foucault suggests the ancient ethics was primarily a matter of personal choice (1997, p. 254), there is no evidence in his works or interviews to substantiate the fear of Foucault advocating for a shallow kind of aestheticism.

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who attempts to build on Foucault’s notion of the self, supports the conclusion that Hadot’s critique was unwarranted with further evidence from Foucault’s *Hermeneutics of the Subject* (1982). In this lecture course, Foucault even explicitly warns against equating self-care to “moral dandyism” (Agamben 2016, pp. 97-98).

In defence of Hadot, however, Foucault’s lectures were only published in 2001, and Hadot had articulated his critique of Foucault

in two short essays from 1987 and 1989 respectively.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, as Agamben accurately points out, Foucault had already suggested defining the aesthetics of existence as “etho-poetic”⁵¹ in the *Use of Pleasure*, a work which Hadot could and perhaps should have been familiar with before he articulated his critique.

Based on the above, it seems reasonable to conclude that Hadot’s critique regarding Foucault’s aesthetics of existence was not entirely accurate. Let us now look at the second objection raised by Hadot, which, as it turns out, is more consequential and accurate, and as a result, of more consequence to this project.

Semantics and epistemology

In “Reflections on the Idea of the ‘Cultivation of the Self’” (1995), Hadot criticises Foucault for focusing too much on a specific conception of the self. Both authors were very fond of Seneca, but they arrived at different conclusions regarding the practices he appeared to be promoting.

Hadot identifies their differences based on Foucault’s understanding of the notion of “pleasure”, in relation to the Stoic experience of “joy” (Irrera 2010, p. 996). According to Hadot, Seneca insisted on keeping pleasure (*voluptas*) out of the moral domain. Foucault qualifies joy (*gaudium*) as ‘another form of pleasure’ (Hadot 1995, p. 207). To understand Hadot’s objection towards Foucault’s characterization, it is instructive to consider the following passage from Seneca’s “On the Happy Life” (*De Vita Beata*):

We may also offer the following definition that of calling that man

⁵⁰ The first is “Un dialogue interrompu avec Michel Foucault. Convergences et divergence”, recently translated by Sharpe and Testa as “An Interrupted Dialogue with Michel Foucault: Convergences and Divergences” (2020). The second essay is “Réflexions sur la notion de ‘culture de soi’”, which has been translated as “Reflections on the Idea of the ‘Cultivation of the Self’”, and is found in Hadot’s *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995).

⁵¹ According to Foucault, “etho” refers to ‘rules of conduct’ (1990, p. 13), which falls back on his techniques of the self (Agamben 2016, pp. 98-99; Sellars 2020, p. 43). He attributes the term as a transposition of a word used by Plutarch; see Foucault (1990, p. 13).

happy who recognizes no good and evil apart from a good and an evil mind, who holds honour dear and is content with virtue, who is not the sort of person to let the workings of chance go to his head or crush his spirit, who does not recognize any good greater than the one he alone can confer upon himself, and who will find true pleasure in despising pleasures [*vera voluptas erit voluptatum contemptio*]. (Seneca 2009, p. 88)

Seneca uses the expression *vera voluptas* to speak of “true pleasure”; and *voluptas* for “pleasure”; including “bad forms” of pleasure. True pleasure here is the joy that results from despising pleasures (*voluptatum contemptio*), which is not another form, but the true form of pleasure.⁵²

However, the underlying point here is not so much about semantics; it is about epistemology. After all, articulating judgments about historical accuracy already presupposes a certain theoretical and methodological framework. Hadot was aware of some of the issues raised by Foucault. For example, the aforementioned hermeneutical idea that meanings of terms and philosophical problems change throughout the different epochs, or the idea that ancient authors can be seen to call on us to change the way we view our lives, in an attempt to find new ways of being.

Sharpe and Stettler have qualified these differences as follows: Hadot maintains an ‘objectivist-exercisant’ view, focusing on the practice of spiritual exercises and transcending individuality, whereas Foucault operates from within an idiosyncratic singularity-focused modern aesthetic model (2021, pp. 14-15). Although the “singularity-focused” aspect of Foucault may not be completely accurate – as I discuss below – I believe that, based on my earlier description of genealogy, Foucault would not object to the other variables such as “idiosyncratic”, “modern”, or “aesthetic”.

Moreover, Hadot’s approach is also philological, which makes

⁵² For other examples in relation to joy and pleasure in Stoic literature, see Irrera (2010, pp. 999-1005). Also see Nussbaum (2009, pp. 398-400).

the differences with Foucault even more evident. Hadot does not problematise metaphysical understandings of such notions as wisdom, freedom, beauty, universal reason and nature in ancient philosophy, because he tries to understand these ideas in their own contexts, where they were not problematic. Hadot argues they are key for understanding ancient practices and philosophical teachings.

The fact that Foucault and Hadot have different philosophical and historiographical approaches has been acknowledged by others as well. Irrera (2010) notes that Foucault does not adopt, but rather problematises historical-doctrinal considerations and the emergence of the self. Foucault is after ‘the experience that the self has of itself and on itself’ in ancient texts, regardless of the intentions and the question of whether it corresponds to a certain code of conduct or ideal from a particular school of thought (2010, p. 999).

Conversely, Hadot, as a historian of philosophy, relies on a specific theoretical paradigm of historical-doctrinal reconstruction, which is supported by careful philological efforts. In contrast to Foucault, Hadot presupposes that there is an accurate (i.e. objective) way to understand history. Foucault, however, chooses a wholly different approach by conducting a history of ethics, ‘understood as a history of the forms of moral subjectivation and of the practices of the self that are meant to ensure it’ (Foucault 1990, p. 29). In doing so Foucault moves away from Hadot’s historical-doctrinal analysis – which, incidentally, he never explicitly criticised – and turns his attention to “forms of subjectivation” and the differences between modern and ancient ways of thinking, *despite* their interrelatedness.

The problem here is that Foucault, on the one hand, cannot avoid presupposing an appeal to accurateness and objectivity. After all, it remains uncertain on which basis Foucault can point out differences between modern and Greek ethics without claiming that his view on history, on the Greek epoch and the modern one, is true. If one does not allow a possibility of (partial) truth whatsoever, then one could well wonder why we would discuss these differences at

all. All that is left in such a case are utterances of opinion. So, if one wishes to claim, as Foucault assumes, that once one's own genealogical propositions are true, a self-contradicting paradox is inevitably lurking.

Foucault's novelty is that he made us aware of the differences already inherent in the categories we use to describe the past. From the genealogical point of view, the difference between joy and pleasure is less relevant to him, as they both depend on an approach to reading texts which he does not endorse. Foucault rejects 'both the perspective that makes the notion of transcendence absolute, and (...) the anchoring of practices to a universalizing perspective' (Irrera 2010, p. 1013).

To Foucault, the subject cannot transcend its own subjectivity. And like the subject, the universe is not a pre-conceptual given either, but rather a historically constituted appearance. This view also explains why things cannot be studied in "single terms", but have to be understood in (power) relationships, which is why I have trouble qualifying Foucault's approach as "singularity-focused".

Based on his preference for genealogy, Foucault would disagree with the concrete interpretation of what accurate representation of history entails, because Hadot's method does not consider practices of subjectivation to be constitutive for understanding ancient philosophy. Conversely, Koopman argues that

[u]nlike much of modern moral thought, Foucault's late work does not revive a stable moralizing subject whose inner reality can be hermeneutically deciphered. (...) [T]he subject of ethics was for Foucault neither a substance nor a transcendental ego but rather a reflexive practice of transformation simultaneously working on its own exercises of power and freedom. (Koopman 2013, pp. 192-193)

Since he does not consider the subject as something with a stable substance or "transcendental ego", but rather as a process in transfor-

mation, Foucault distances himself from Hadot and his predecessors all the way back to Descartes.⁵³ For the concept of thinking, this implies, among other things, that there is no transcendent point of reference for a subject outside history and the world itself, of which the subject always forms part. Foucault's ideas of the subject also explain why freedom is not an end-state one reaches after a given amount of time and effort (cf. Hegel's "Absolute Spirit"). There is no such thing as an end-state; the subject will always remain intertwined with contingency, which makes it *de facto* unstable.

However, precisely because the genealogical approach claims to not permit any objective reading – which causes it to fall into a self-contradicting paradox – Hadot argues Foucault fails to take seriously the transcendent level of universal reason, and consequently, presents a 'too narrow and insufficient' philosophical model of existence (Hadot 2010, p. 996). Indeed, in his attempt to derive present-day ethical inspiration from Greco-Roman sources, Sharpe and Stettler argue, Foucault did not 'sufficiently honour the specific features of the ancient texts' (2021, p. 11), and carefully appropriated the ancients to hold in place his own contemporary scepticism about any form of universality or objectivity in relation to the care of the self.

Although the "self" and "universality" have become problematic in our times, the ancients had no troubles speaking – and listening – in these terms. What is more, these ideas served a normative function in relation to philosophical conceptions of wisdom (see further) and self-transformation. This is why they cannot be "bracketed" in a contemporary philosophy that seeks inspiration from the ancients, because the ideas would then be taken out of the context that co-determined their meaning (Sharpe & Stettler 2021, p. 13-14). Seneca, for instance, was not so much inventing himself, as he

⁵³ Despite his indebtedness, Foucault also distances himself from Kant, both in the sense that he does not depart from a transcendental ego, and in the sense that he undertakes a historical critique of the various deployments of our thought instead of a transcendental critique of reason (Koopman 2013, pp. 15 & 193).

was trying to overcome, or go beyond the self (*dépasser le soi/moi*).

In Hadot's view, Foucault had to bracket this transcendent aspect, in order to be able to present a more or less coherent model of life for contemporary human beings (Hadot 1995, pp. 207-208).

Let us take a closer look at the role of transcendence and universality – also referred to as the “cosmic” – in Hadot's work, and why he attributed so much importance to it, before proposing a way forward.

Seeing things from above

On the idea that there is an “ascetic moment” in ancient practices, directed at freeing oneself from personal attachment of objects and bodily pleasures to be able to turn inward, Foucault and Hadot agree. In contrast with Foucault, however, Hadot emphasises as part of this move inward, the feeling of belonging to a “whole” (both a human community and the greater totality of the world, or “cosmic whole”) as a fundamental element of spiritual exercises (see also Hadot 2011, p. 117).⁵⁴

It is not that Foucault's techniques of the self do not correspond to ancient exercises of interiorization one would find in Plato or the Stoics. What causes divergence is that spiritual exercises in the Hadotian sense are also always linked to a movement of exteriorisation, or an altered relationship with the world. Here we can begin to recognize the more pronounced epistemological differences between both thinkers. From his genealogy focused on discourse and power mechanisms, Foucault problematises the existence of the universal, which is why he cannot take much interest in discussing it. However, from his

⁵⁴ Surprisingly, both Agamben and Sellars have attributed Hadot's interest and concern for the “cosmic dimension” to his personal background in Catholicism and his early work in ancient Christian thought and Neoplatonism (Sharpe & Stettler 2021, p. 9; Sellars 2020, p. 44). I believe Sharpe and Stettler are right to question what a thinker's early religious commitments tell us about someone's entire career and academic work (2021, pp. 17-18). Most importantly, to bring a cosmological-physical perspective on the cosmic whole into view, Hadot bases himself not on religious perspectives, but on ancient authors such as Marcus Aurelius.

historical-philological-hermeneutical approach, Hadot criticises Foucault's lack of attention for the universal.

The cosmic or universal perspective of seeing things “from above” which – given its metaphysical and transcendent character – to Foucault is not an interesting aspect, also has implications for transforming the self:

It is a question not of purely aesthetic contemplation, but of an exercise meant to bring us beyond, once again, our biased and partial point of view, to bring us to see things and our personal existence in a cosmic and universal perspective, to situate us in the immense event of the universe (...). (Hadot 2011, p. 96)

According to Hadot, such a view may make us realise that our passions and worries are quite insignificant in the greater scheme of things, which is why he thinks this aspect of spiritual exercise cannot be left out of a discussion of philosophy as a way of life (1995, pp. 208, 211 & 284).⁵⁵

Hadot's related concern was that Foucault neglected to carefully analyse the term “wisdom” (φρόνησις and σοφία) in *The Hermeneutics of the Self*. After all, the wise sage who lives according to universal nature, served as a transcendent ideal to strive toward; to incite transformation and overcome the present state (Hadot 2020, p. 230). This state involved a “cosmic conscience” because it radically transforms the ego in the image of universal nature and the “cosmic whole” (Sharpe & Stettler 2021, p. 13; Hadot 1995, pp. 206-213). Thus, Hadot sees Foucault's lack of attention to the universal and the term “wisdom” as a historical inaccuracy – which, as we established, results from different epistemological frameworks (Sellars 2020, pp. 42-43).

⁵⁵ I return to the question how we might legitimate a universal perspective in times of cultural, societal, and political diversity in the final chapter by assuming an ecological perspective based on Oosterling.

We have found that Hadot's concerns regarding undesirable contemporary practices and dandyism are not entirely justified. In relation to the focus on the self, Sellars further notes that Foucault more than once placed emphasis on the idea of taking care of others, in addition to oneself. What is more, at the same time taking care of oneself implies knowing what and what not to do as a member of the human community. Koopman supports this assessment by arguing that Foucault's ethics need not be constructed individualistically, but could also be deployed in communities (Koopman 2013, pp. 198-199).

In addition, Sellars shows how Foucault, despite his reservations, was aware of the cosmic in relation to a discussion of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius – which is undeniably difficult to miss when studying primary sources. Thus, according to Sellars, Foucault proves to have not neglected the social dimension in self-care, nor the cosmic, rendering Hadot's criticism 'potentially unfair' (Sellars 2020, pp. 45-47). I will come back to this issue later.

Sellars also suggests that Hadot's own focus on the cosmic may obscure the interpersonal aspect of self-care. This suspicion on Hadot's own account seems quite unfounded. As Sharpe and Stettler convincingly show, Hadot's objective, universal dimension of selfhood and spiritual exercises is often misunderstood (2021, pp. 4, 13-15). Hadot repeatedly stressed the importance of the community, particularly in relation to Stoic philosophy (see also Nussbaum 2009, pp. xiv-xv). Take the following example:

In my view, the feeling of belonging to a whole is an essential element [of the philosophical practice of the Stoics and Platonists]: belonging, that is, both to the whole constituted by the human community, and to that constituted by the cosmic whole. Seneca sums it up in four words: *Toti se inserens mundo*, "Plunging oneself into the totality of the world." (Hadot 1995, p. 208)

Furthermore, one only needs to consider the fact that Hadot quali-

fies all spiritual exercises as fundamentally dialogical to understand the participatory nature of his conception of Greek philosophy. For Hadot, dialogue is an inner spiritual exercise or even a struggle with oneself, because it requires participants to bring order into one's chaotic thoughts, reunify oneself, allow for a change of mind, attitude or conviction, and a transformation of other aspects of one's being (e.g. intellect, imagination, emotional response) after careful examination of oneself. This is what Hadot refers to as the establishment of 'a relationship of the self to the self', which also explains why most ancient Greek monologues are implicitly dialogues (1995, pp. 90 & 105).

As Sellars is right to conclude, the differences between Foucault and Hadot ultimately stem from a variance in emphasis: Foucault was attempting to write a history of the subject, and Hadot wanted to highlight a dimension in ancient philosophy that is often neglected: the cosmic. In that sense, Sellars (2020, pp. 47-48) suggests that Hadot's criticism can be seen as supplementary to Foucault and both can be read as reciprocally complementary.

Unfortunately, Sellars does not explain how he imagines this is done. But in contrast to Sellars, I think the differences are not just based on emphasis but also on epistemologies, which is why I have difficulty seeing how both frameworks can be made commensurable on the issues raised above: they seem to mutually exclude each other due to their different epistemologies. Instead, I would like to propose that perhaps it is not a question of combining or supplementing both, but ultimately, a question of philosophical choice.

Philosophical choice

Despite their differences, Hadot acknowledged that there was common ground between himself and Foucault, particularly in terms of Foucault's description of the cultivation of the self. Both Hadot and Foucault were interested in ancient philosophy and considered it to be a valuable source of inspiration for the present. In this sense,

the opening quote in this chapter remains intact. But in his final analysis, Hadot thinks “philosophical choice” is what separates them ‘above and beyond their points of agreement’ (Hadot 1995, p. 206).

Wimberly (2009, p. 192) summarises this difference as follows: Hadot ‘seeks unity and conformity to the universal’, whereas Foucault ‘seeks to fracture universalizing powers in order to seek freedom from their tyranny’. Based on Hadot, who qualified his differences with Foucault as both a difference of interpretation, and of philosophical choice (1995, p. 206), Wimberly argues that “philosophical choice” is indeed what it ultimately comes down to. What is noteworthy about this qualification is that it does not necessarily mean that Hadot thinks Foucault is fundamentally wrong or that his position is untenable. After all, the fact that Hadot discusses the possibility of a choice for another approach indicates that there are legitimate and rational grounds for choosing otherwise, although he would not.

Hadot chooses to define philosophy in ancient terms, as a “practice of wisdom”, because he believes that such a practice can still be valuable to mankind (1995, pp. 272-273). He repeatedly emphasises, based on historical sources, that the different schools in ancient Greece have a “universal” and “perennial” character in common, which can be recognized cross-culturally, and cross-historically.⁵⁶ This makes Hadot’s position fundamentally different from that of Foucault, and all other historical and culturalist thinkers.

According to Wimberly, Foucault suggests that the universal may very well be the problem that causes normalisation processes. After all, it presupposes a certain standardisation, a norm, which many people would not see themselves as fitting. What Hadot acknowledged in relation to the lack of logical proof or justification

⁵⁶ An example of the universality of certain phenomena is mentioned by Slootjes in a recent podcast episode about her work on crowd behaviour (see Slootjes, 2015). Throughout history, crowds are found everywhere, which offers interesting opportunities for a historian of the ancient world, such as herself, to exchange insights with people who study crowds in different periods of time or contexts (Medievalists Podcast 2021, 14:20-14:50).

for a certain way of living, is also true for Foucault's aesthetics.⁵⁷ This may account for the fact that Foucault never offered a detailed description of what an aesthetic of existence might normatively look like (Wimberly 2009, pp. 199-200).

According to Wimberly, philosophy is a tool or signpost for Hadot, not an end in itself, the end being harmony with the universal. To Foucault, philosophical reason ultimately serves to liberate one from normalisation and domination, so that one can create one's own truth and find other ways of being. Since truth cannot be the referee in a battle between the universal and the aesthetic, Wimberly argues it must be decided by "philosophical choice", which he thinks necessarily resorts to taste. The criterion for choosing between either might be the effects of the choice on oneself, and the external world around us (Wimberly 2009, pp. 200-201).

Perhaps it would be appropriate to use "taste" in a broad sense in this case. That is, as an aesthetic conviction that in the end cannot be legitimated with arguments. This kind of taste could be compared to religion: as with aesthetic taste, one cannot convince someone to give up his/her faith.

However, I have trouble accepting this conclusion. If truth is replaced with taste as a criterion, we still run the risk of being faced with a kind of relativism that is not any better than the relativism that results from Foucault's claim that more or less everything is subject to power relations. I therefore propose looking a bit further, and basing my philosophical choice on the objective I assign to philosophy. Underlying this stance is the ontological assumption that we can approach the truth of a philosophical text in the effort of interpretation, and that it is indeed necessary to allow for the possibility of some statements to be more plausible than others, because

⁵⁷ This is the reason why Früchtl (2021) recently suggested a Foucauldian approach needs to be supplemented by Kant's third Critique, or Dewey's or Adorno's theory of aesthetic experience. According to Früchtl, aesthetics is not simply the realm beyond logic and argumentation. It is its own realm of argumentation, and it has its own logics.

it is simply *not true* that we are completely confined in our own discourse. Indeed, to meaningfully point out differences and continuities between modern and Greek ethics, we must, as will become more evident in the next section, presuppose a view on history that is at least partly true.

We have discussed Foucault's approach to studying the history of philosophy, and analysed Hadot's subsequent critiques of Foucault. Let us proceed with a final reflection, in which I articulate my motivation for basing my methodological commitments on Hadot (as is discussed in the next section).

The transformative power of philosophy

Based on Foucault's lectures entitled "Hermeneutics of the Subject", Koopman proposes a distinction between "practices of spirituality" as found in antiquity, and the practices of contemporary philosophy. While spirituality is concerned with the necessary transformative practices that enable one to access truth, modern philosophy in the Foucauldian sense no longer unproblematically relates to truth and focuses on deciphering what causes things to be true and false (Koopman 2013, p. 196).

It is worth noting that practices of spirituality, as the term suggests, imply an *actual practice*, meaning that access to truth and/or "certainty" is always the result of an effort to transform. Philosophy in the modern sense problematises truth and questions how it is possible to have access in the first place, regardless of the practice one engages in (Koopman 2013, p. 197). In other words, practice has become less relevant to modern philosophy, which is why today, spiritual exercises are primarily associated with psychological therapy and what are commonly referred to as "Eastern" practices (like meditation and yoga), and secondarily with religion and sometimes art.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ See, for example, Rilke's poem on Apollo: *Du mußt dein Leben ändern!* which is also the title of Sloterdijk's book published in 2009.

Hadot notes that philosophy as a lived, existential practice should not be reduced to a morality in the modern sense, as it cannot exist without lived practice. As Foucault has explained, the ‘art of living’ – which he considered to be a “technique” – cannot be learned without exercises or training of oneself, by oneself (1997, p. 273).

As I have demonstrated, most of the differences between Hadot and Foucault are epistemologically tainted, which is why they cannot be “solved” in the traditional sense. Hadot’s general aim is ‘to nourish the spiritual life of men and women of our times’, as well as his own (Hadot 1995, p. 280). His focus on spiritual exercises served to highlight the fact that philosophy was practised in ancient schools as a way of life. As Davidson states, this focus is what makes Hadot relevant to us today as well, as it forces us to relate to ancient discourse in new ways and reconsider modern assumptions along the way (1997, pp. 195-196 & 199).

The meaning and role of discourse is crucial in understanding the difference between Hadot and Foucault. In Hadot’s concept of ancient philosophy as a way of life, which he borrows from the Stoics and becomes manifest in the philosopher’s everyday behaviour, is one of ‘reciprocal causality’: the existential choice to live in a certain way determines the discourse. Discourse in its turn, which does *not* precede the existential choice as is often assumed, founds, justifies, and specifies the choice and actual conduct of life (Hadot 2004, p. 175). Both are inseparably related, continuously reinforce each other, and cannot be detached in the same manner that one would be inclined to separate theory and practice.

It cannot be emphasised enough that philosophical discourse was an integral part of a mode of life, which in its turn, could not be reduced to the discourse itself. Indeed, reading, interpreting, and writing texts – the contemporary philosopher’s main activities – would not have been enough to speak of an act of philosophising. To think that such acts constituted the main practice of philosophy is what Hadot identifies as the permanent danger for anyone who

considers himself to be a philosopher: not engaging in self-transformation as part of an attempt to live philosophically, and limiting oneself to discourse exclusively, stands far from the original meaning of philosophy.⁵⁹

Contrary to Hadot, Foucault problematises discourse, and is more interested in showing how discourse functions performatively and produces different forms of subjectivation. We can begin to shape ourselves as soon as we see how we are shaped by all sorts of contingencies – articulated and enforced through discourse – that determine who we are, and that limit our possibilities for acting and choosing freely. The idea of the American Dream, for instance, which promises us we can be and become whatever we would like to, is an illusion that is inaccurate on many levels (historical, sociological, psychological, etc.).

Foucault, following Nietzsche, focuses on the elements of power that impede our freedom, but the drawback is that it remains unclear what needs to happen after one has become aware of the different mechanisms of power. Put differently, Foucault sheds valuable light on how we think and what other alternatives of thinking exist, but in terms of philosophical life guidance, he has little to offer.

In line with this observation, Foucault's aim has been described as placing emphasis on 'how intractable many of our problems are, such that we might relieve ourselves of the pretence of possessing any straightforward solution' (Koopman 2013, p. 22). While I also do not believe there to be straightforward solutions and easy fixes for complex problems, I worry that Foucault's efforts are viewed as particularly valuable on a theoretical level.⁶⁰ While it might be true that Foucault's intention of problematising the present served the purpose of ultimately transforming problems, 'remedying for the

⁵⁹ I discuss the question whether it can still, or again, be part of philosophy which is highly specialised and differentiated in the final chapter.

⁶⁰ Having said that, Foucault has inspired a lot of political and social justice activism (feminism, anti-racism, LGBTQ+ rights, etc.), but it remains questionable how well Foucault is understood by the people who appropriate him to pursue their goals.

future what has been diagnosed historically' is precisely where genealogy may fall short (Koopman 2013, p. 12).

I am convinced that there is more to gain from philosophy than critical analyses and inventive thought experiments. To advance this idea, I connect my thinking to that of Hadot. This is not a matter of personal taste or preference, but a result of the objective I assign to philosophy, conceptualised, exercised, and practised in a spiritual way. In this conceptualisation, and indeed, practice, the existential choice to live in a certain way reciprocally relates to the discourse, and vice versa.

My ambition in this study is not to excavate how the present is the result of a certain discourse, which might very well be the most significant advantage of genealogy. Although the subjects Foucault wrote about (freedom, power, etc.) are undoubtedly problematic, my purpose is not to further problematise the historical present.

In addition, and despite the fact that some parts of this dissertation are informed by Foucault's work (particularly Chapter V), I am concerned that the Foucauldian emphasis on power causes people to see more and more differences among each other, while becoming increasingly blind to the commonalities that connect us all. For instance, while it is not Foucault's "fault" that identity-politics has become so popular today on both ends of the political spectrum, a focus on power and difference has directly or indirectly inspired many popular theories that cause further division between people (e.g. conspiracy theories, wokeness, etc.).

I see potential for reconciliation in Hadot's emphasis on the universal: on our shared home and planet that provides us with the air, water and food we all need to live, and to some extent, our shared *condition humaine*, that despite its many differences, binds us in other aspects such as the experience of love, anger, sadness, pain, frustration, joy, hope and happiness, or by universal values, such as peace, equal rights, freedom and justice.

What has become clear from the above, is that Foucault did not

think this possible any longer. The so-called break in philosophy after Hegel cannot be undone, since no single meaning can be attached to history any longer. The question that remains is: how is it possible to argue for universal goods and universal values?

Since Hadot does not go into the philosophical arguments for a universalist ethics very deeply, I draw from Nussbaum to supplement and strengthen Hadot's emphasis on the universal as a fundamental aspect of spiritual exercises. More specifically, and by means of orientation and clarification, I will attempt to show how a universalist position on goods and values could still be credibly argued for, without pretending to transcend all subjectivity.

Nussbaum's philosophy of universal ethics:

Human unctioining and internalist essentialism

Although it is generally seen as a source of great contention in present-day philosophical discussions, there remain several philosophers who still see valuable opportunities for a universal orientation on ethics. Recently, German philosopher Markus Gabriel published a book titled *Moralischer Fortschritt in dunklen Zeiten: universale Werte für das 21. Jahrhundert* (2020) in which he argues in favour of universal basic values that apply to all people. In addition, during a recent discussion about Covid-19 mandates, prominent American philosopher Cornell West reminded us that 'we have to keep an eye on the common ground and the overlap of our humanity' (Holberg Debate 2021).

We can add other philosophers to this list as well, such as Ernst Cassirer who stresses "fundamental unity" and sees "dissonance" as part of this unity (see opening quote of this chapter), Warwick Fox and his 'Theory of General Ethics,' Iris Murdoch's writing on radical empathy, which calls us to recognize ourselves in the other, despite apparent differences. We could also think of neo-Aristotelians such as Philippa Foot, utilitarians such as Peter Singer, and neo-Kantians such as Onora O'Neill and Christine Korsgaard.

Among contemporary philosophers, however, it is arguably Martha Nussbaum who has presented the most worked out universalist position in normative ethics. In her 1992 article “Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defence of Aristotelian Essentialism” (henceforth “Human Functioning”), Nussbaum attempts to counter what she refers to as ‘the new subjectivism’ and the “assaults” on ‘non-relative accounts of human functioning’ (p. 203). The article was an important precedent for later politically normative works such as *Women and Human Development* (2000), *Animal Rights* (2004), *Frontiers of Justice* (2005), *Creating Capabilities* (2011) and *The Cosmopolitan Tradition* (2019) which, together with other works, form the main corpus of her ever-expanding political and moral philosophy.

Much like her earlier projects (e.g. *The Fragility of Goodness*, 1986), “Human Functioning” was heavily based on Aristotelian virtue ethics and ancient tragedy. In this essay, she particularly values the room Aristotle and the tragedians – as opposed to Plato and the Stoics⁶¹ – leave for human fragility and luck in ethics. Her preference for Aristotle also follows from her dissatisfaction with modern approaches to ethics, such as those inspired by Kant and the utilitarian philosophers who principally focus on moral justice (Kant) or utility (Bentham and Mill), and present a significant narrowing of the ancient concept of the good life (Dohmen 2013, p. 287; for a similar critique on modern ethics, see MacIntyre 2007).

“Human Functioning” opens with a series of examples of “assaults” on essentialism by academics in the social sciences. The paradox that emerges from examples such as an American economist who celebrates “the embedded way of life” in rural India, where menstruating women are not allowed in the kitchen or on the work floor, or a French anthropologist who regrets the British introduction of a smallpox vaccination in India because it “eradicated” a cult that relied on praying as a remedy, is found in the alternative pro-

⁶¹ The Stoics will become important for Nussbaum in different areas, as I will proceed to explain later.

posed by the “attackers”; which is a kind of (politically correct) “anti-essentialism”, extreme relativism or even subjectivism. Ironically, given the self-proclaimed progressive orientation of most academics in social sciences, Nussbaum argues the forms of relativism proposed by them readily open the door for highly undesirable legitimation of various kinds of oppression, sexism, and racism.

The problem is that the positions advocated for by anti-essentialists do not connect to real-life experiences (of oppressed women in India, for instance). By contrast, Nussbaum is interested in real-world changes:

Right now, the new subjectivism – whether in economics or in literary theory – is false of our experiences and responses. But we can choose to follow theory into our lives, focusing on our differences from one another and refusing to acknowledge what is common to all. (Nussbaum 1992, p. 242)

For such changes to occur, Nussbaum argues that a universal position focusing on human commonalities is required.

In an effort to find a viable alternative to anti-essentialism, which simultaneously avoids a Foucauldian reduction to a normative theory of power, Nussbaum offers an Aristotelian-inspired essentialism. Let us immediately note that Nussbaum is mindful of the problematic connotations of the term “essentialism”, a fact that becomes most evident when she clarifies that she uses the term somewhat polemically.⁶² Moreover, Nussbaum defines essentialism rather broadly: ‘the view that human life has certain central defining features’ (1992, p. 205).

In doing so, she does not turn a blind eye to the criticisms that have been articulated against essentialist worldviews – particularly

⁶² See Nussbaum (1992, p. 243 n6). This is also true for her ‘thick vague theory of the good’, which is intended not as a definitive list, but rather an intuitive and open-ended one inviting further reflection. See also (1992, pp. 214-216).

the neglect of cultural-historical differences in human life, the neglect of human autonomy, and the political exclusion and oppression of certain groups – and their metaphysical foundation in realism, which refers to the idea that truth and knowledge structures exist independently of human interpretation. According to Nussbaum, it is still possible to be mindful of the problems caused by metaphysical realism and uphold a ‘historically grounded empirical essentialism’ (1993, p. 208). She proposes this is possible by examining human “being” or experience from within, and looking for properties in human lives such as our ability to think, reason and act, as well as our affective and social nature, or our vulnerability.⁶³ This also explains why she refers to her position as “internalist essentialism”, which later became the theoretical foundation of her “capability approach.”⁶⁴

As far as the untenability of a transcendent metaphysical truth is concerned, Nussbaum agrees with Kant (and Foucault). That is, she holds the position that evaluative judgments cannot be said to be based on metaphysical realism, since there is no such universal truth that we could unproblematically access for those evaluative judgments. However, according to Nussbaum, the absence of a transcendent basis still allows for the exchange of views based on reason, argument, and analysis (1992, pp. 212-213). The lists of features for basic human life and human flourishing she offers in “Human Functioning” demonstrate how this is achieved.

Human life and basic human functional capabilities

Nussbaum’s list of limits and capabilities is intended to be as universal as possible, based on (1) the fact that human beings can recognise others as human beings regardless of time and place, and (2)

⁶³ In *The Cosmopolitan Tradition*, she supplements this with an emphasis on the worth and dignity of sentient beings (2019, p. 17).

⁶⁴ The Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen laid the groundwork for this approach in his critique of Rawls’ *Theory of Justice* (1971), which was later published in *The Idea of Justice* (2009).

a more or less shared consensus regarding the central features of our common humanity converging across cultures.

The first list distinguishes several items – loosely comparable to Maslowian needs – that represent a basic threshold with needs to be met to be able to speak of a “fully human life”. Should a feature in this list be lacking or out of reach (e.g. absence of water, nutrition or shelter, and variables such as mobility and social interaction, including sexuality) then a life does not deserve the predicate “human”.⁶⁵

As a second threshold, Nussbaum also distinguishes ten normative “functional capabilities”, which refer to one or more capabilities to function. Functional capabilities enable Nussbaum to speak of a *good* human life, which is the category that interests her most in terms of public policy.⁶⁶

One might wonder, as Nussbaum does, whether the fulfilment of a good life is a concern that needs to be addressed beyond the private realm. According to Nussbaum, we would do well to realise that both thresholds cannot be separated that easily. One can strive to be a healthy human being as part of the search for the good life, but access to so-called “social conversion factors” such as adequate information, healthy nutrients, or healthcare, for instance, is not something individuals can always provide for by themselves. To this list we could also add personal and environmental conversion factors. Furthermore, the shift of focus from means to potential ends does justice to the fact that not everyone achieves the same ends when given access to the same goods (Robeyns *et al.* 2021; cf. Rawls’ social primary goods approach). Consequently, Nussbaum does not see plainly demarcated differences, but rather prefers to speak of a “continuum” between both thresholds.

In any case, the capabilities are articulated in a way which leaves room for, or rather, stresses personal choice and autonomy. They are

⁶⁵ See (1992, p. 227) for an argument that explains why Nussbaum prefers “human” over “person” as a basis for her ethics.

⁶⁶ For the list, see Nussbaum (1992, p. 222).

clearly not meant to coerce anyone into living a certain sort of life. The focus is to provide for the necessary resources and conditions to thrive, and therefore to enhance opportunities to live a certain way of life, all the while remaining mindful of the diversity both in needs and context.

Nussbaum's focus on common humanity – which includes any human being as a member of the same group – and on the plurality of functionings via an account of the good, focuses on shared human capabilities. Apart from the central value of dignity, the approach also includes a recognition of the value of different goods, such as freedom, a certain degree of control, meaningful relationships, and the ability to (joyfully) employ cognitive, physical and emotional capabilities. More than a philosophical position seeking universal agreement, Nussbaum's normative lists of limits and capabilities are primarily intended to stir up moral discussions and put into motion public policy aimed at well-being.

At the same time, Nussbaum's capability approach can also be characterised as an open-ended evaluative-ethical framework which seeks to answer which human capabilities are truly valuable in a just society. The concept of capabilities is mindful of the fact that different cultures value different things, but does not fall prey to cultural relativism. After all, certain essential capabilities (e.g. bodily integrity, emotions, practical reason) transcend cultural boundaries and can be said to have importance to all members of the human race, because they are derived from the collective *condition humaine* (Dohmen 2013, p. 309), or as Nussbaum shows, from within – hence “internalist essentialism”.

Ultimately, Nussbaum's capabilities are not based on any kind of metaphysics or meta-ethical realism, but rather on an inquiry which is ‘both evaluative and internal to human history’ (1992, p. 223). What remains is a historically sensitive kind of essentialism that concentrates on basic human needs, functions, and ends, which Nussbaum employs as a basis for human well-being, social justice,

and living together peacefully. With the focus on interrelatedness and the citizenship of the entire universe (Πολίτης του Κόσμου; *civis mundi*), Nussbaum's universalist ethics serves as a concrete example to help us better grasp Hadot's orientation on the universal as part of a modern ethics inspired by the ancients.

We will now turn our attention to *Therapy of Desire*, in which Nussbaum explicitly connects her focus on what is common to all ancient philosophy, before ultimately proposing to revitalise some of the practical ideals of the past in the present.

Ethical truth

In *Therapy of Desire*, Nussbaum invokes the practice and understanding of Hellenistic philosophy as the 'soul's art of life' (τέχνη του βίου). Her purpose in this work is to study the meaning of a 'compassionate "medical" philosophy',⁶⁷ based on three major Hellenistic schools of thought – Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Scepticism – and offer a sketch of what philosophy might look like when understood in medical terms, and how this might help improve the lives of individuals and their communities.

Similarly to the work of a doctor, philosophy is tasked with the art of diagnosing human difficulties and subsequently, healing them, so that human beings can flourish. Unlike the doctor, however, the sort of healing in which philosophy specialises is concerned with diseases of the human soul, which Nussbaum characterises as 'diseases produced by false beliefs' (2009, p. 14).

Nussbaum connects to her earlier endeavours in "Human Functioning" by stressing that the norm of health can only be a norm of health if it responds to human beings' deepest needs and desires. This presupposes a universal perspective, as it suggests that all human beings share certain needs and desires, and goals aimed at al-

⁶⁷ According to Nussbaum, it was probably Democritus who first proposed the analogy between philosophy and medicine (2009, p. 51).

lowing people to flourish. Indeed, the way in which these goals are realised may differ relative to the historical and cultural context, but in their general form, they can be characterised as ‘universal human goods’ (2009, p. 488), or ‘ethical truth’ (p. 491).

As in “Human Functioning”, Nussbaum emphasises the need for human beings to understand themselves in relation to other human beings. They should specifically consider their individual ends to be intertwined with those of their fellow human beings. After all, as citizens of a single world order, Nussbaum points out, we are able to interact with others through speech, reason and art, regardless of where we were born and what language we speak.

We are what Nussbaum calls ‘interdependent and interactive beings’, which alludes to the fact that we are capable of grasping and acting on the basis of the harm of another moral citizen, and interpreting it as a human event that may affect us as well. Although this concept may be foreign to certain cultures, this makes us members of a certain global moral community, or as Kant would say, a world citizen (Nussbaum 2019, p. 207).

From this perspective of interrelatedness, it follows that one’s individual well-being cannot exist separately from the good of others’ well-being, especially not when we consider the depth and tightness of our interrelatedness in global networks expressed in communication and consumption; but also in war, migration, and the care of our planet (Nussbaum 2009, pp. 341-342; 2019, p. 207).⁶⁸ I return to this idea in my discussion of Oosterling’s ecosophy in Chapter VI.

Considering the universal nature of spiritual exercises, which were meant to bring the practitioner beyond him/herself and his partial point of view, and situate him/her in the web of the universe, Hadot also stresses social interrelatedness. Like Hadot, Nussbaum connects this perspective of interrelatedness explicitly – not exclu-

⁶⁸ Among the recent examples that show how interrelated the planet has become, are most notably the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

sively⁶⁹ – to the Stoics. She does this by emphasising the capacity for reasoning:

our reverence for reason is and should be a reverence for the entire species, for humanity wherever it occurs. In this sense, we are to view ourselves as citizens of a worldwide community of rational beings (...). And we are to regard the political community in which we are placed as a secondary and somewhat artificial matter, our first loyalty and attachment being to the whole. (Nussbaum 2009, p. 343)⁷⁰

Consequently, Nussbaum cannot accept Foucault's position that everything is intertwined with power, because it does not allow us to see the crucial element in both ancient and present-day philosophy, which is reason (λόγος). As an art of life – as opposed to a mystical or present-day therapeutical practice – Stoic philosophy depends on valid and sound arguments, which can and should be tested for their rational validity:

Stoicism is indeed, as Michel Foucault and other affiliated writers have recently insisted, a set of techniques for the formation and shaping of the self. But what their emphasis on habits and *techniques du soi* too often obscures is the dignity of reason. Many forms of life in the ancient world purveyed *techniques du soi*. What sets philosophy apart from popular religion, dream-interpretation, and astrology is its commitment to rational argument. What sets Stoicism apart from other forms of philosophical therapy is its very particular commitment to the pupil's own active exercise of argument. For all these habits and routines are useless if not rational. (...) For Foucault, reason is itself just one among the many masks assumed

⁶⁹ She also points to the importance Aristotle attributes to community, especially considering the good life. See, for instance, Nussbaum (2009, pp. 64, 71 & 73-74).

⁷⁰ Nussbaum clearly agrees with Hadot in locating the origin of attributing importance to the community in Stoic thought. See Nussbaum (2009, p. 12; also pp. 319 & 341-344).

by political power. For the Stoic, reason stands apart, resisting all domination, the authentic and free core of one's life as an individual and as a social being. Argument shapes—and, eventually, is—a self, and is the self's way of fulfilling its role as citizen of the universe. (Nussbaum 2009, pp. 353-354)

In addition to the human capacity for reasoning, Nussbaum argues, the Stoic emphasis on the dignity of humanity across social, racial, and sex-related differences, as well as the emphasis on self-government, and the potential for virtue, make Stoic philosophy a valuable vehicle for contributing to present-day accounts of freedom and human rights 'with an eye to the good of all human beings, and, indeed, of the entire world.' (Nussbaum 2009, pp. 504 & 507; see also 2019, p. 17).

Nevertheless, Nussbaum's conception of philosophising can come across as a bit narrow sometimes, especially due to the strong emphasis on reason. While it is undeniably central to her approach, and Nussbaum sees the exchange of argument as something practical (see for example 2009, p. 58), it seems to neglect the practice of exercises, including physical ones, that were not just there to correct for false beliefs, but to strengthen the body and test one's commitment to certain doctrines (see Introduction). It seems to me that this is due to the implicit difference between theory and practice in most conceptions of philosophy. But as Hadot shows, theory and practice – discourse and exercise – are not separable, but are instead reciprocally intertwined.

At the same time, Nussbaum does not fail to stress that philosophy is an art of living, and that "medical" ethical philosophy commits to action, which inevitably encompasses more than just thinking differently. It is also important to realise that the central motivation and goal of philosophy in Hellenistic Greece was human flourishing – understood as activity, not as a state or feeling:

‘[a]s in the case of health, what we are looking for is something that we are trying to bring about in human life, something essentially practical, whose point is living and living well’ (Nussbaum 2009, p 22).

In closing this chapter, I will briefly articulate the most important considerations and deciding factors in my methodological approach going forward – while still remaining in close contact with the ancients and emphasising human interrelatedness. I believe that these factors can be brought back to two interrelated aspects. As a result of tasking philosophy with the effort of shaping a certain way of living, I proceed to advocate a balanced approach between theory and practice; one in which both are intertwined and constantly reciprocally informed.

Theoretical approach

The focal point of this study is that ancient philosophy is understood as a living practice with corresponding exercises. In this conception, philosophy in all three of its ancient subdisciplines (ethics, logic, and physics) ultimately appeals to the intellect *and* the transformation of the soul. Based on this conception, I want to demonstrate in the first part of this project that listening is a fundamental element of the ancient approach to philosophy.

Attempting to understand and interpret ancient ideas related to the subject of listening and hoping to contribute to the body of knowledge of the relevant existential ancient attitudes that come with it, I rely on Hadot’s “theory of existential practices” (2011, p. 132). In a combination of historiographic-hermeneutic scholarship and philosophical-philological argumentation, Hadot not only offers a model for reading and interpreting ancient texts – which he prefers to ‘reconstructing philosophical systems’ – but in a certain sense, for writing the history of philosophy. Hadot’s model can be used for Hellenic and Roman philosophy: both share the practical

aim – *paideia* – and the practice of spiritual exercises, where unity is found in the requirement for repeated and constant exercise.

By showing that ancient philosophy is always connected to a living practice, Hadot and some of his commentators claim to also offer a model for practising philosophy itself, despite the fundamental differences between us and the ancients. This issue forms the main focus of the second part of this project, where I offer my understanding of what listening as a spiritual exercise might look like in contexts where philosophy is practised today.

Understanding and reading ancient texts:

Methodological commitments

Due to the differences between the modern and ancient conceptions of what philosophy and its history and contents are, one cannot simply apply the same methods and criteria to reading ancient texts that one would use to interpret modern ones, as so-called popular writers would have us believe. Works of antiquity were created under very distinctive conditions, and it would be wholly anachronistic to assume that a text in ancient Greece or Rome emerged from the same or even a similar intellectual and social context as a present-day one.

If we want to understand a text in a more profound way, that is, in a way that transcends the immediate meaning of words (which is already very difficult in itself), it is necessary to take into account the context from where that text emerged, and be mindful of our own at the same time. One would have to add a layer in addition to the ideas expressed that consists of the philosophical process as a lived reality, including factors such as politics, religion, and law. Plato, for instance, lived during the decline of Athenian democracy after the Second Peloponnesian War, which no doubt motivated him to come up with an ideal king within an ideal state, governed by laws.

The main socio-historical context that I will consider in the present study is the aim of spiritual exercise, embodied in the term *paideia* (discussed in more detail in the next chapter). After all, the

conception of philosophy as a spiritual exercise which aims to transform one's being matches the pedagogical context in which Plato and Plutarch practised philosophy. The relation between *paideia*, spiritual exercises and philosophy is explained by Hadot as follows:

All the schools agree that man, before his philosophical conversion, is in a state of unhappy disquiet. Consumed by worries, torn by passions, he does not live a genuine life, nor is he truly himself. All schools also agree that man can be delivered from this state. He can accede to genuine life, improve himself, transform himself, and attain a state of perfection. It is precisely for this that spiritual exercises are intended. Their goal is a kind of self-formation, or *paideia*, which is to teach us to live, not in conformity with human prejudices and social conventions (...) but in conformity with the nature of man, which is none other than reason. (Hadot 1995, p. 102)

What is often forgotten is that philosophy was born from an educational spirit. Almost all philosophical texts from the pre-Socratics to the Neo-Platonists can be explained in light of this *living* context in which they were born. What *paideia* shows is that philosophy was always tied to formation of character and self-transformation, in other words: the effort of shaping an attitude and form of life based on reason. Therefore, I will consider not only the questions that were posed by the ancients themselves, but also their motivations to pose the questions, the context in which they were posed, and how the questions evolved over time (Hadot 2020, pp. 46 & 50).

Moreover, if we want to understand ancient texts, recognize the author's intentions, and even consider their contents for present-day philosophical guidance, Hadot advises that they must be read within a certain literary genre,⁷¹ as well as an institutional and cultural context that encouraged the author to say and write what

⁷¹ For example, dialogue, exhortation or protreptic, consolation, correspondence, poem, hymn, and so on.

he did. After all, ever since Wittgenstein and others made us aware of the fact that philosophical language does not always function in a uniform way, one cannot directly translate thoughts by just looking at language. One also needs to distinguish between the attitudes represented, for instance, by spiritual exercise, dialectic, rhetoric, or logic, since the choice of an author to position himself in a certain tradition co-determines the content of his message (Davidson 1995, p. 18).

In his interpretative methodology, Hadot always situates ancient texts within socio-historically specific “forms of life”. Instead of building a ‘herbarium full of dead leaves’ (2011, p. 91), he attempts to uncover a certain attitude or style of life to which the text owes its content. A source Hadot cites as an example of philosophy as a form of life is Plutarch’s “Whether old men should engage in public affairs”; where Plutarch, influenced by Socrates’ and Plato’s conception of philosophy, says everyday life in the city itself is a philosophy, or at least something akin to it (Plutarch, *An seni*, 796d).

Another example of a form of life is found with Stoicism. It would make little sense to read Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* as a guide to modern life without understanding the Stoic doctrine as articulated by his teacher Epictetus, and the corresponding meaning and intention of spiritual exercise (see Hadot 2001; Davidson 1995, pp. 9-15; Hadot 2020, p. 62).

On the one hand, the fundamental problem of studying and interpreting ancient texts and ideas, is that they cannot be studied structurally.⁷² This is meant in the sense that we cannot look for constructions of conceptual systems⁷³ similar to those of modern philosophers such as Descartes, Kant and Hegel.⁷⁴ Nor can we pretend

⁷² “Structural” refers to the approach of some of the main representatives of the French structural and structuralist method in the history of philosophy: Guerot, Goldschmidt and Matheron. See Sharpe and Testa (2020, p. 56 note c) and Hadot (2020, p. 14).

⁷³ Conceptual philosophical systems first arose after philosophy became a “servant” to theology in the form of conceptual construction. See Davidson (1995, p. 32).

⁷⁴ In some respects, Kant’s “cosmic philosophy” had a very similar take on the meaning and aims of philosophy; see Hadot (2020, p. 40).

– as we have established in this chapter – to be able to unproblematically offer an objective account of history, without including the fact that it is always a subject that interprets it. On the other hand, if one succumbs to a form of relativism that allows one to ‘say anything about anything’ then it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to grasp what a text means. This can lead to all sorts of interpretations (Hadot 2011, pp. 61-62).

According to Hadot, who follows the approach of Ernst Gombrich and Eric D. Hirsch in studying the history of philosophy, one must, despite the difficulties that such an endeavour presents, look for and attempt to grasp the author’s intention, while at the same time acknowledging that it is possible to offer multiple interpretations of a literary work in the sense that there is not one universal interpretation. Hadot also follows Hirsch in insisting that seeking the intention of the author is best served by situating the text in the literary genre where it belongs (Hadot 2011, p. 62). To avoid falling into anachronisms during the interpretation process, Hadot emphasises the importance of becoming aware of the socio-historical conditions under which texts were written.

Towards a Hadotian approach

The ancients considered the task of philosophy to be very different than what most philosophers of the modern canon consider the task of philosophy to be: first and foremost, in the sense that the production of written texts was not its essential task. Of course, philosophers produced texts, but ancient writing is not based on the model of modern writing, nor did it have the same aim. Writing was meant to inspire listeners into sculpting their lives in a certain way. In addition, writing served as a reflection on philosophical principles, and aided in memorising them.

Today, philosophy (especially the analytic variant) is a theoretical and conceptualising activity, often restricted to linguistic and logical analysis. In general, ancient philosophers theorised and conceptual-

ised as well, but the existential choice of the philosopher to live in a certain way dictated the contents of the discourse, which was in turn intended to shape a certain way of life. Put differently, practical reason had priority over theoretical reason, which makes it even more important to look beyond the immediate meaning of words in an ancient text.

In my approach to reading ancient texts, I attempt to bring to life the relation between listening and the cultivation of virtue and wisdom as part of the philosophical formation of the soul in Greek and Roman antiquity. To understand philosophical works from ancient times, I derive from Hadot the following four methodological imperatives:

(1) It must never be forgotten that theory and practice are inseparable in PWL. The ancients did not write texts and exercises to distribute knowledge, but rather “prescribed” and practised them (Sharpe & Ure 2021, p. 5). Put differently, philosophical texts always aim at *forming* more than *informing*, and the discourse is meant to motivate listeners to transform their way of living (Hadot 2020, p. 35). What allowed one to transform one’s whole being were spiritual exercises focused on improving the faculty of judgement and instilling new habits. Ancient philosophy itself cannot be understood without taking into consideration the modes of living it intends to achieve:

We must discern the philosopher’s underlying intention, which was not to develop a discourse which had its end in itself but to act upon souls. In fact, each assertion must be understood from the perspective of the effect it was intended to produce in the soul of the auditor or reader. Whether the goal was to convert, to console, to cure, or to exhort the audience, the point was always and above all not to communicate to them some ready-made knowledge but to *form* them. (Hadot 2004, p. 274)

In other words, Plato's and Plutarch's texts were not primarily meant to argue for a certain perspective, or to transfer knowledge. What all schools of thought shared, is that philosophy always had a paideutic purpose in the form of spiritual exercises intended to transform and practice a certain way of life.⁷⁵ Therefore, I interpret their works, as well as those of Heraclitus and Sophocles, with their formative and pedagogical intention in mind.⁷⁶ What emerges from conceiving philosophy as a way of life and thus as more than just texts and arguments, is not a self-standing artefact, but (oral) cultures and practices (Sharpe & Ure 2021, pp. 10-11).

(2) To avoid a relativistic reading in which a text can mean whatever the reader makes it to mean, one must situate the text in a socio-historical context of an audience for whom it is meant: in other words, within a school of thought. A text has been conserved, situated, and interpreted as part of larger tradition, and the contents are almost always directly related to the education and teaching (*paideia*) of a particular school of thought. As Sharpe and Ure (2021, p. 324) put it:

For Hadot, the work of contextualization aims at understanding philosophers as they understood themselves. His grounding concern is that, faced with the apparent strangeness of ancient texts, moderns wrongly project their own expectations onto these texts, thereby mistaking why they were written, with which audiences in mind, and with what goals.

At least as important as situating ancient texts in their socio-his-

⁷⁵ According to Hadot, an example of an ancient text with a clear pedagogical purpose is Plato's *Phaedrus*, which was not intended to transmit information, but 'to produce a certain psychic effect in the reader or listener' (1995, pp. 19-20). I discuss more examples in detail in Chapter III.

⁷⁶ I read several primary sources for this study. Since I am not a classicist and I am not fluent in Greek or Latin, I read most texts in their English, German and Dutch translations. Having said that, I always kept the Greek texts next to the different translations, to look up certain words whenever I was in doubt of a translator's choice or to ensure consistency in my use of a certain word. This is reflected in the regular addition of Greek words in parentheses.

torical context, is the fact that we can only do justice to their calls for practice if we realise that they were responding to concrete life at the time. This should prevent the reader and listener from constructing abstract and timeless truths based on their works (see also Nussbaum 2009, p. 44).

(3) I will not only consider the socio-historical context and the school of thought to which a text belongs, but also the form and literary genre in which its contents were presented (e.g. as poetry, tragedy, dialogues, epitomes, exhortatory texts, and so on). This also means that I will refrain from criticising the contents of an essay too harshly for its lack of rigour, order, clarity, and consistency – as, for instance, translator and classicist William C. Helmbold has done in his introductions to Plutarch. This is because the purpose of such texts was more likely to convince listeners psychologically to transform their lives, than to create impeccably argued written documents (see also in this regard Nussbaum 2009, p. xi). In Hadot's words:

for the most part the literary productions of the philosophers are a preparation, extension, or echo of their spoken lessons and are marked by the limitations and constraints imposed by such a situation. (1995, p. 62; but see also p. 267)

(4) Finally, to revitalise and revalorise the ancient messages and models, we will not strictly abide by one school of thought. It is the plurality of the different schools that Hadot finds valuable for our present. The fundamental positions of the schools understood in their contexts remain, while at the same time allowing for convergence with contemporary fundamental attitudes that belong to anyone seeking wisdom today.

In addition, spiritual exercises will have to be separated from the philosophical and mythical discourse that no longer fits our context so that something productive can be done with them. For instance,

although it is necessary to understand what was once meant by it, one does not need to believe in an all-encompassing and never changing *logos* to practise exercises of wisdom (Hadot 1995, p. 212). Exercise is not a matter of belief, but a matter of choice, practice and living.

Lastly, in order to uncover these fundamental attitudes (which may have ‘eternal value’⁷⁷), it is also necessary to continuously pose decisive questions such as: what does it mean to philosophise, and what would spiritual exercise look like today? (See Hadot 2004, pp. 273-278; 2009, pp. 160-161; 2020, p. 53).

Conclusion

We began this chapter with a discussion of Foucault’s genealogical method, which tasks philosophy with the exposure of the complexity of problems in modernity in order to unravel power and freedom. The goal is to ultimately find an alternative ethics that allows us to transform ourselves. Although one is guaranteed to find value in Foucault’s contributions to the understanding of modernity, his commitments to a philosophical way of life are found wanting, primarily because he was not actively trying to formulate normative commitments (Koopman 2013, p. 190).

Following Foucault’s genealogy, which ultimately qualifies truth as polymorphous and always dependent on power relations, we risk finding ourselves in a situation where everybody is entitled to his or her own truth. It is certainly difficult to deny that the “post-truth era” is tightening its grip on societies worldwide. In addition, if power is everywhere – if there is nothing that can be viewed as being (completely) without power – what, then, should we make of the power implicated in the analysis of the genealogist? At least the genealogist is assumed to be in a position to know about his own power determinations, but it does not follow that he himself is not engaged in enforcing a power dynamic of the sort he is claiming to

⁷⁷ When it comes to contemplating our finiteness, for instance. See Hadot (2009, pp. 69-70).

be analysing. In other words, Nussbaum is right to question whether Foucault could admit the possibility of a community of freedom (let alone a Stoic one that is based on a fundamental commitment to reason), given his views on the inseparable relation of knowledge to power (Nussbaum 2009, p. 5).

Although I agree with Foucault that an uncritical return to ancient models of living is naïve at best, and undesirable at worst, Hadot and Nussbaum make this point as well. Hadot admits that the ancient universalist orientation does not have much meaning any longer. This may even account for modern philosophy's lack of guidance (Sharpe & Stettler 2021, p. 11; Hadot 1995, p. 208). Based on Nussbaum, I have tried to show how an explicit universalist position relative to goods and values could still be credibly argued for, without pretending to be entirely value-neutral. Aspects such as the universal capacity of humans to reason, the emphasis on dignity and self-government, and the potential for virtue, are qualities that Nussbaum considers capable of connecting ancient philosophy to a present-day universalist orientation on ethics. An orientation which could make the universal aspect of Hadot's work more plausible, as I will elaborate in Chapter VI.

Ultimately, Hadot helps seek inspiration from the ancients, to find new ways of interpreting their modes of living and corresponding exercises. To my mind, Hadot is in a better position to do this than Foucault, because in his historiographic-hermeneutical approach, he stays closer to the ancients – and therefore to the truth – which allows for a certain continuity, but without uncritically copying the ancients or turning a blind eye to the differences between the ancients and ourselves. This is the first deciding factor for choosing a Hadotian theoretical approach.

The second deciding factor is that Hadot sees a certain “humanity” in ancient thought, a humanity that allows people from other historical periods and cultures to recognize something of themselves. It is not an essence or *Ursprung*, but a certain kinship that

binds us all, regardless of our apparent differences. Social customs were very different from ours, and yet such contingencies do not preclude our ability to recognise something in the ancient approach to spiritual exercises. In attempting to revitalise some of the ancient existential attitudes, we do not need to do the exercises in the exact same manner as the ancients did. Instead we should understand them as signposts that do not tell us what to do, but rather point us in a direction where we can look for context-specific answers and invent new exercises.

Some have suggested that Hadot's books on PWL are protreptics themselves, whose aim has been to turn readers toward a philosophical life (Hadot 2011, p. ix). Interestingly, Hadot himself claimed that he was not attempting to tell people to live in a certain way, but instead to allow for calls for a spiritual attitude "to be heard" (Hadot 2011, p. 147).⁷⁸ In other words, Hadot treats his readers as listeners, and encourages them to hear the formative treatises of the ancient philosophers.

Hadot does not depart from our own time, and avoids backwards projection of our thinking onto the ancients. Nor is he looking for continuity by trying to find evidence to prove that the ancients had already thought about a problem we are faced with today. In his unique approach of dedicating significant attention to context, combined with doctrinal knowledge and philological excavation, Hadot makes the ancients (who wrote relatively accessibly because their texts were meant to be heard) speak again, so that we can learn to listen to them again.

Having discussed and outlined my methodological commitments, the first pair of protagonists in this study, Heraclitus and Sophocles, and their teachings on listening spiritually will be explored and analysed.

⁷⁸ In line with Hadot, Nussbaum seems to compare the act of listening to grappling with arguments that follow from philosophy as therapy. True grappling, which I would interpret as truly letting philosophy's content resonate – from Latin *resonatus* and *resonare* which means "to sound again" – cannot but invoke change in the life of the listener (2009, p. 41).

CHAPTER II

Paideia: Listening for aretè

My friends, Danaan warriors, squires of Ares, meet is it to give ear to him that standeth to speak, nor is it seemly to break in upon his words; grievous were that even for one well-skilled. And amid the uproar of many how should a man either hear or speak? —hampered is he then, clear-voiced talker though he be. (Homer, *Iliad* XIX, 78-83; King Agamemnon addresses his men)⁷⁹

Introduction

As philosophers, Plato and Plutarch stand in a long tradition of educators who sought for ways to acquire personal excellence (*aretè*) as part of an answer to the question of “right living”. The pursuit of a living practice of philosophy is closely related to the Greek term *paideia*, which is here understood as referring to the process of self-formation according to a certain ideal (Hadot 1995, p. 102). Spiritual exercises had a pedagogical aim, and as such, they form part of a broader cultural tradition.

A pre-Socratic and representative of the so-called group of natural philosophers, Heraclitus was one of the earliest philosophers in Greek history – if not the earliest – to dedicate special attention to listening in relation to self-formation. Heraclitus was also the first to introduce the concept of *phronèsis* (φρόνησις “insight into human values and conduct” or “knowledge related to action”) as part of *sophia* (σοφία, “knowledge of Being”).

With his claim that sound thinking is a great virtue, Heraclitus helped the word *aretè* shift meaning from warrior-like courage and prowess to something that had more in common with philosophi-

⁷⁹ All Homer translations are from Perseus Digital Library (2022).

cal wisdom.⁸⁰ Thanks to these significant developments, Heraclitus earned a place in the pantheon of ancient teachers of wisdom.

In a certain sense, Sophocles continued the Heraclitean process of relating listening to practical wisdom. Based on his tragedy *Antigone*, I argue that he did so by demonstrating what happens when one fails to adopt a listening attitude that considers perspectives other than one's own.

Neither Heraclitus nor Sophocles provided concrete guidelines or instructions for exercising listening. As stated in the previous chapter, such details unfortunately do not exist. However, what we do find are potential building blocks for what listening as a spiritual exercise might mean in each philosopher's respective historical-pedagogical context.

Following the methodological commitments outlined previously, I begin this chapter with a very brief discussion of the pre-Socratic context, and more specifically, the oral culture in Greece in which Heraclitus and Sophocles brought their contributions into being. The pedagogical intention in poetry to form listeners based on the content, which was later adopted by philosophers, poets, and other educators, emerged from a predominantly oral tradition: poetry and philosophy were *heard* by most, not *read*.

Oral culture

While there are several ancient sources that address the subject of listening, we do not possess sources that offer a detailed description of what listening as a spiritual exercise entailed. The reason for this lack of sources can be partly explained by Greco-Roman civilization being an oral civilization. Education was based on lectures, and ancient writing was often meant to be delivered orally to a group of disciples. Plato's dialogues, for instance, were meant to be publicly read to audiences, and Aristotle's texts were also first read aloud to

⁸⁰ According to Robinson, Xenophanes was the first to change the meaning of *aretè* in favour of wisdom as practical knowledge (2003, pp. 153-154).

students, which accounts for the sometimes “slow” impression of pacing that ancient texts can give (Hadot 2011, p. 52).

According to the late classicist Werner Jaeger, the true representatives of *paideia* were educators with a voice: poets and musicians,⁸¹ orators in their function as statesmen, and philosophers.⁸² Although the Greeks often compared education with the work of sculptors and painters, they did not believe man could be educated by just looking at works of art. For this, one needed words and sounds inspired by the heroic epic, which is why literature was the decisive factor in the efforts of shaping the Greek ideal in practice: *paideia*.⁸³

Although Greek society was formed to some extent by literature, it was not written texts that people were exposed to, but rather narratives unfolding in oratorical speech, or more specifically, in dactylic hexameter lines sung by a singer (Ong 2012, pp. 57-58). Much remains uncertain about the identity of Greece’s first and arguably greatest architect of Greek culture: Homer. The same is true with respect to the conception of Homeric poems. Classicists (e.g. Milman Parry, Albert Lord, and Eric A. Havelock) showed that the language used in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* depended on the repeated use of certain prefabricated formulas and themes. This seems to suggest that instead of being an inventor, Homer could have been more like a messenger, passing on stories generated by poets of previous generations, which had been preserved orally.

Homer probably repeated previous formulas and themes, because oral culture and the corresponding wisdom that originated from it could only be preserved and administered by constant repetition (Ong 2012, pp. 22-24). According to Ong, this also accounts

⁸¹ Homer and Hesiod’s poetry was often sung and accompanied by the lyre. In general, music and poetry were much closer in ancient Greece than they are today; see De Rijk (1965, pp. 43 ff & p. 58).

⁸² Apart from sculpture and vase paintings, it is literature in the form of epics, elegiac poetry, lyric, philosophy, and history by which Greek culture can still be traced today.

⁸³ Plato also refers to poetry as “imitation” that is heard (*Republic*, 603b). This most likely also accounts for why Plutarch’s essays on interpreting poetry are called *De audiendis poetis* and *Quomodo adolescens poetas audire debeat*. Both titles relate poetry to listening.

for the fact that poetry is so full of “heavy” figures, as these are easier to remember than colourless personalities (p. 69).

In general, written philosophical works in ancient Greece were dictated by the author to a scribe. Emphasis was laid by the authors on the rhythm and sounds, and they anticipated achieving certain effects by dictating the work first. The effects of spoken words were considered as very important by the Greeks and Romans (Hadot 1995, p. 62). Written texts were read aloud by a slave to his master, by the philosopher to an audience, or by the reader himself. Reading was generally not conducted in silence, and even if it was, a reader would always want to hear a philosopher speak, and interact with him by asking questions or participating in a discussion.

In philosophical-pedagogical communities such as Plato’s Academy (see Chapter III), writing was only a tool to serve memory. It could not replace the spoken word as the basic condition for dialogue. The same is true for Roman audiences: most, if not all readings occurred in the presence of a listening audience (Larsen 2016, p. 451).

The Greek fascination with speech later developed with the Sophists into the art and science of rhetoric (τέχνη ῥητορικὴ, “speech art”). Rhetoric remained popular even after the Greco-Roman world gradually embraced writing in the centuries after the development of the Greek alphabet, during the eighth century BCE (Ong 2012, pp. 2 & 9).

Let us now turn to the first protagonist of this chapter, Heraclitus of Ephesus, and situate him in the oral and paideutic context from which he emerged.

Heraclitus of Ephesus

Of Heraclitus’ life, little is known. He was active between the end of the sixth century and the beginning of the fifth century BCE. Based on his own writings, it is safe to assume that he lived in Ephesus (present-day Turkey) under Persian rule, and that he was of aristo-

cratic descent – frequently referring to those below his rank as the “commons” or the “mob”.

Like any other philosopher in Greece, he was influenced by his predecessors, which included Homer, Hesiod and Pythagoras, whom he respected but also criticised quite severely. Heraclitus also drew from Anaximander and his contemporary Xenophanes, but compared to the Milesian thinkers (Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes), Heraclitus’ work is difficult to situate in a specific philosophical tradition of his time due to its idiosyncrasy.

According to the biographer Diogenes Laertius, who wrote about Heraclitus centuries later, he enjoyed a sufficiently good reputation among his own generation to cause some disciples to refer to themselves as “Heracliteans” (Laertius, *Lives* IX, 6; see also III, 5-6 & 8). Diogenes further notes that Euripides introduced Heraclitus to Socrates. Socrates’ alleged response was as follows:

The part I understand is excellent, and so too is, I dare say, the part I do not understand; but it needs a Delian diver to get to the bottom of it (Laertius 1959, p. 153; see also Laertius 1925, p. 419).

The best-known among these Heracliteans was probably Cratylus. According to Aristotle, Cratylus was the first to introduce the young Plato to the writings of Heraclitus, in particular the doctrine of flux (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 987a).⁸⁴ This may account for why Plato wrote a dialogue titled *Cratylus*, in which Socrates mentions Heraclitus’ *panta rhei* principle (*Cratylus*, 439d).

The fragments of Heraclitus’ writings are said to have been deposited as a single book in the temple of Artemis in Ephesus. According to Diogenes Laertius, his book was titled *On Nature*, but scholars still debate this (Laertius, *Lives* IX, 5; Robinson 2003, p. 3). Indeed, to this day, it remains challenging to reconstruct Heraclitus’ thoughts, not only because of the scarce amount of his work that

⁸⁴ All Aristotle translations are from PDL (2022).

survived, but also because ancient readers – particularly the Stoics – regularly projected their own views and interpretations onto Heraclitus. This is sometimes referred to as “Stoic contamination” (Kahn 1981, pp. 156 & 295).⁸⁵ As a consequence, and despite some scholarly advancement in understanding his work, Heraclitus may always remain a somewhat enigmatic figure.

Despite the ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding Heraclitus, however, there is no doubt that he attributed great importance to listening. According to Heraclitus, the *logos* is something to be heard – both literally and metaphorically, as I will presently show.

Listening to *logos*

In what is left of Heraclitus’ fragments,⁸⁶ which were handed down by various authors and philosophers such as Aristotle, Plutarch, Diogenes Laertius, Marcus Aurelius, Plotinus, Hippolytus of Rome, Sextus Empiricus and Stobaeus, the central message is one of living and acting by the realisation of wisdom through listening to and following the philosophical *logos*. The following fragment attests to this:

Sound thinking [σωφρονεῖν] is a very great virtue [ἀρετή μεγίστη], and practical wisdom consists in our saying what is true and acting in accordance with the real constitution of things, by paying heed [ἐπαίοντας]⁸⁷ to it. (Heraclitus, *Fragments*, 112)⁸⁸

This “real constitution of things” is referred to by Heraclitus as the *logos*, which afterwards became a central notion in Greek philoso-

⁸⁵ According to Kahn, the Stoics saw in Heraclitus their predecessor, and they interpret Heraclitus accordingly. This is especially the case in relation to Heraclitus’ “doctrine of *logos*”. See Robinson (2003, pp. 4 & 6).

⁸⁶ All Heraclitus translations are from Heraclitus 2003.

⁸⁷ Literally “taking things in”, from ἐπαίον, which translates as “having knowledge”, but can also mean “educated”.

⁸⁸ All Heraclitus fragments are from Heraclitus (2003). The order of fragments follows the Diels-Kranz edition. I left out Robinson’s brackets and question marks to favour readability. In most cases, the brackets indicate doubtful ascribability or natural additions in English, but they do not seem crucial for understanding the philosophical value of the fragments.

phy (Hadot 2012, p. 236). According to Heraclitus, the highest universal principle of the world, by which all humans are nourished, is the *logos*, and we should follow the *logos* by listening to it so that we may ultimately come to understand what is true. This is no easy task. Nonetheless, listening to the *logos* can ultimately be realised by practice.

But what exactly is the *logos*? One may wonder whether Heraclitus actually had a “doctrine of *logos*”. After all, it was not his own words he wanted others to hear, but the *logos* itself. Heraclitus likely regarded himself not so much as a philosopher, as a messenger of a certain truth (Graham 2021). His words (λόγοι) are often mysterious and lend themselves to different interpretations, but what he means by *logos* is most likely not the Stoic rational principle which directs the universe.⁸⁹

For referring to the rational principle of the universe, Heraclitus uses ‘that which is wise’ (το σοφόν).⁹⁰ This is not the *logos* itself, but *that which utters the logos*. Moreover, the *logos* Heraclitus refers to in fragment 112 (see above) is something one hears, and rationale is not typically heard; it is rather truth that is heard (Robinson 2003, pp. 3 & 75). Therefore, it is most likely not Heraclitus’ truth which we should hear; Heraclitus is merely a translator. It is the *logos* of ‘that which is wise’ and which reveals ‘all things are one,’ that we should listen to:

Not after listening to me, but after listening to the account [λόγου],
one does wisely in agreeing that all things are in fact one thing.
(Heraclitus, *Fragments*, 50)

Heraclitus advises us to be cautious when listening to him, because it is not the same as the universal *logos*. It cannot be, because Heraclitus’ *logos* is uttered in words. The *logos* does not speak in everyday

⁸⁹ For an explanation of the Stoic *logos*, see Hadot (2012, pp. 133-145).

⁹⁰ Possibly Zeus, judging from Heraclitus’ fragment 32 (see also Robinson, 2003, p. 102).

words, which is why we should learn to understand the language it expresses itself in as a totality.⁹¹

The wholeness of things is famously introduced by Heraclitus in the general conception of tension and flux, of which nature provides numerous examples: life and death, day and night, summer and winter, young and old, beginning and end, health and disease, warm and cold, and so on. All opposites constantly replace each other: the life of one thing is the death of another, making life and death in essence two aspects of the same phenomenon.

Regrettably, however, people seem to be deaf, ignorant, or forgetful to everything that supersedes the individual:

But of this account [λόγου], which holds forever, people forever prove uncomprehending, both before they have heard it and when once they have heard it. For, although all things happen in accordance with this account [λόγον], they are like people without experience when they experience words and deeds such as I set forth, distinguishing as I do each thing according to its real constitution, i.e. pointing out how it is. The rest of mankind, however, fail to be aware of what they do after they wake up just as they forget what they do while asleep. (Heraclitus, *Fragments*, 1)

In other words, people often listen without comprehending or without translating what is heard into anything meaningful, even though they think otherwise:

Many people do not ‘understand the sorts of thing they encounter’! Nor do they recognize them even after they have had experience of them - though they themselves think they recognize them. (Heraclitus, *Fragments*, 17)

⁹¹ Cf. Daodejing (2019): ‘The way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way. The name that can be named is not the constant name.’

Instead of listening to understand, people prefer to argue and quibble over what they hear.⁹² But dogs that bark do so at whoever they do not recognize. Whatever humans are not familiar with – in this case, the true *logos* uttered by ‘that which is wise’ – they will have trouble recognising, and therefore accommodating, one way or another (fragment 97).⁹³

Understanding is not conducted with the senses only, however. What is needed is a conjunction between the senses and knowledge of the language spoken by the *logos*: ‘Poor witnesses for people are eyes and ears if they possess uncomprehending souls’ (Heraclitus, *Fragments*, 107).

It seems that for Heraclitus, the soul is responsible for “interpreting” the sounds perceived. But the soul also needs to be in possession of the language of the *logos* to interpret in the first place. Although the *logos* speaks directly to the soul, the senses are the channels through which this language is perceived (Robinson 2003, p. 151). It follows that the soul interprets, but the ears listen; both are required to hear and attune to the same wavelength of the *logos* so that it can be understood and ultimately followed.

In relation to the senses, Heraclitus holds objects of sight, sound, and experience in high esteem (fragment 55), higher than casually speculating and conjecturing about truth. He even says sight is more accurate than hearing (fragment 101a). Still, Heraclitus also holds that sight can be deceptive (fragment 46) and that practical wisdom is found in listening to the *logos* and acting in accordance with it. This suggests that listening could potentially be understood as an exercise that can lead to “sound thinking” and thus virtue, allowing for the exercise to become “spiritual” (cf. fragment 112).

Indeed, Heraclitus does not say that the ears are bad senses; they are simply less reliable than eyes. Based on the other fragments, it seems this is because people commonly deceive themselves and oth-

⁹² Cf. fragment 87 (found in Plutarch’s “De Audiendo”).

⁹³ Found in Plutarch’s *An seni respublica gerenda sit* 787c; see Robinson (2003, p. 145).

ers by not listening to understand (fragment 87), and by the amount of interpretation ‘that which lends itself to being heard’ requires (Fiumara 2006, p. 41). In other words, seeing is more immediately evident, while listening provides information that is more susceptible to interpretation. This is why sounds are more prone to misinterpretation as well. In this sense sight is more accurate and reliable, but not necessarily normatively superior.

Moreover, in fragment 19, Heraclitus says ‘Reproving certain people for their credulousness, Heraclitus says: They are people who do not know how to listen or how to speak.’ It may be worth noting, as Fiumara does (2006, p. 3), that Heraclitus has listening precede speaking in this fragment. As with most of Heraclitus’ fragments, one must be cautious when drawing certain conclusions with respect to a definitive meaning, but it is possible that listening precedes speaking here, because in order to be able to voice the *logos*, one would first need to have heard it (Robinson 2003, p. 89).

With respect to the rest of the fragment, it remains tentative what it is that certain people – probably his poetic and philosophical predecessors – cannot listen to, but it can be expected that Heraclitus has the *logos* in mind. After all, Heraclitus’ *logos* affects every sphere of human action; it is a divine law (cf. fragment 114), which is why it cannot be merely the kind of conceptual thinking (νοεῖν, νόημα) found in his rival Parmenides (Jaeger 1946, p. 180). It is rather a form of knowledge that can be exercised and experienced by listening. Indeed, only those who *experience* the different layers of meaning are able to grasp the true *logos* (Graham 2021).

Ultimately, full realisation of the *logos* as the all-embracing formula indicates having insight and understanding (νόος) into the meaning of the universe. Few achieve this, according to Heraclitus, but practice can make a difference.

Heraclitus' *paideia*

Heraclitus is sceptical of the ability or willingness of his fellow humans to hear the *logos*:

Uncomprehending, even when they have heard the truth about things, they are like deaf people. The saying 'absent while present' fits them well. (Heraclitus, *Fragments*, 34).

The *logos* cannot be heard in the same way that everyday sounds can be heard. To hear the truth – the way things really are – requires something more than perceiving things the way they appear to be (cf. fragment 123).

According to Heraclitus, people are asleep even when awake, by which he seems to suggest they are awake without being aware. In a sense, they live in their own universes, whereas those that are awake live in a single, common universe.⁹⁴ Judging by Heraclitus' advocacy of being inquisitive (see below), people who live in their own universe probably do so because of a lack of curiosity and interest in listening well.

Indeed, what is needed to become aware of the 'difficult to discover' is open-mindedness. In the words of Heraclitus, one should expect the unexpected (fragment 18) and traverse every road to discover the limits of the soul (fragment 45). In addition, Heraclitus recommends perseverance and determination (fragment 22) and lovers of wisdom (φιλοσόφους) should enquire into the many things (fragment 35). Finally, a willingness to listen is required to become aware of the truth that all things are one (fragment 50).

These interrelated aspects may eventually lead to insight and understanding, but they are *de facto* laborious. After all, human beings are not born possessing truth. They are to gods what children are to humans (fragment 79), by which Heraclitus seems to suggest they need education and exercise to develop.

⁹⁴ Fragment 89. This fragment survived through a paraphrase by Plutarch, so there is doubt about the phrasing, but philosophically it seems consistent with other fragments (see Robinson 2003, p. 138).

There is still hope for some as long as they do not sink to the level of ignorance of the “barbarian souls” (βαρβάρους ψυχὰς). This is Heraclitus’ somewhat harsh epithet for his intellectual predecessors – i.e. Homer, Hesiod, Archilochus, Pythagoras, Xenophanes, and the historian Hecataeus. They failed to listen to the *logos* because they did not understand its language, which makes them poor examples for others (fragment 107). Perhaps Heraclitus is so critical of his predecessors because in his view, they are not only wrong about the truth; they also make false claims about it, which he probably deemed worse than the mere deafness of common people.⁹⁵

Literally, “barbarous” referred to those who did not understand Greek. However, in this case, it probably refers to those who do not understand the language in which the real *logos* is articulated by “that which is wise”. Another possibility is that the term “barbarous” refers to the language of the senses, of seeing and hearing in particular. According to Robinson (2003, p. 151), the best interpretation is found in a combination of both: “That which is wise” speaks (directly and/or via Heraclitus) to the soul (fragments 1, 2, 50), and so do the senses; and the language they speak is ultimately the same language.

In all cases, exercise might correct for this flaw in human nature and the failure to listen to and understand the language of truth. Heraclitus may not articulate a concrete pedagogical proposal anywhere – and in case he did, it did not survive – but he does suggest in what direction it should certainly *not* be sought.

For instance, learning is not a matter of hearing a lot, at least, as far as understanding is the object of what we might call “Heraclitus’ *paideia*”. After all, if it were the case that understanding follows from the accumulation of facts, it would have taught practical wisdom to Hesiod (whom Heraclitus acknowledges to have known a great number of things, cf. fragments 40 and 57), Pythagoras, Xenophanes

⁹⁵ Fragment 107; cf. Xenophanes’ critique and Plato’s harsh but milder critique of the poets in relation to truth-speaking.

and Hecataeus. What all of them fail to recognize, however, is that wisdom consists of one thing, and one thing only: insight into the true *logos* (cf. fragments 1, 10, 32, 41).

As the famous saying attributed to Heraclitus, *panta rhei*, proounds, one can never step into the same water of a river (fragments 12 and 91b). But the river itself does not change in the same way. It is by virtue of the constancy of the riverbanks that water is allowed to flow. In turn, change is what grants things, such as a river and everything that lives, a certain permanence. It is not just that things constantly change; it is through change that things exist (Graham 2021). This idea can be understood, and possibly exercised; not by a collection of knowledge of other things, but by listening to the *logos*.

A related take on exercise is found in fragment 101, where Heraclitus proclaims he has sought or investigated himself (ἐδιζήσάμην ἑμωυτόν), an unheard-of expression in times before Socrates. It could mean different things,⁹⁶ but relating it to fragment 116 (where Heraclitus says ‘all people have a claim to self-knowledge and sound thinking’), it seems that knowing oneself (γινώσκειν ἑωυτοῦς literally, “self-ascertainment”) and thus examining oneself, is a vital aspect of the virtue of sound thinking (σωφρονεῖν, cf. fragment 112). Just like any other virtue, however, knowledge and *aretè* do not come without strife and effort (cf. fragments 22, 45, 53).

Becoming the *logos*

Unfortunately, Heraclitus’ answer to the question of how one is expected to exercise listening and “sound thinking” remains shrouded in darkness. But as far as Heraclitus was concerned, the teachers of his time were not fit for the task of teaching truth:

What discernment or intelligence, he says, do they possess? They [δήμων, “common people”] place their trust in popular bards [ἄοιδοῖσι], and take the throng [παίθοντα] for their teacher,

⁹⁶ See Robinson (2003, pp. 147-148) for different perspectives on the meaning of fragment 101.

not realizing that the majority are bad, and only few are good.
(Heraclitus, *Fragments*, 104)

Who should “common people” listen to instead? Heraclitus does not say. However, it is safe to assume that a man of his social standing would choose to listen to noblemen (*αγαθοί*) such as Bias of Priene (6th century BCE) – one of the Seven Wise Men, famous for his justice and aristocratic views of “the majority” (fragment 39). Such men can be expected to be the ones who owed their intelligence and wisdom to their willingness and ability to listen, and to their understanding and acting in accordance with the *logos* (Robinson 2003, pp. 149-150).

Clearly, wisdom and understanding are rare among humans. Born without the virtue of understanding, humans do not know how to listen or speak truthfully. Still, practical insight and *aretè* are achievable according to Heraclitus. Exercise may teach one how to listen to the *logos*, which means grasping the complexity of the universe, and discovering its unity (Graham 2021). Indeed, *logos* is a form of knowledge that can be understood, and understanding consists in listening to the *logos* that says all things are one.

Unity is found everywhere according to Heraclitus. As became clear from Heraclitus’ metaphor, the water in the flowing river forms a unity with the riverbanks through which it flows. They are not identical, but one cannot separate them either. The riverbanks could be viewed as the *logos*, and the water that flows between those banks as life itself. Following Heraclitus, a virtuous listener becomes homologous with that which is heard. In this case, listening to the *logos* could be said to involve *becoming* part of the *logos*, and acting in harmony with it.

Again, little can be said with certainty about Heraclitus’ philosophy. Yet, based on what is available, it is plausible to suggest that Heraclitus relates the act of listening to the act of reaching an understanding of the *logos*, and arguably becoming the *logos*. In es-

tablishing this relationship, he may very well have been the first to take formative steps in the process of shaping listening as something “spiritual”; something that belongs to practical wisdom, the kind of wisdom that allows one to transform and act according to the *logos*.

The second protagonist of this chapter is Sophocles, who also seems to have attributed special importance to listening, in his epic tragedy *Antigone*. Let us begin the discussion of Sophocles with some general remarks on the context and meaning of Greek tragedy and its pedagogical purpose.

Sophocles and the flowering period of Greek tragedy⁹⁷

In the age of the Greek tragedians, the power of poetic art in relation to the conversion of the human soul was called ψυχαγωγία (“educational entertainment”). Art had this power because it united two essential pedagogical methods of influencing the mind – immediate appeal and universal significance – to create a deep and lasting and transformative impression.⁹⁸ Everyday life had immediate appeal, but it lacked universal significance. While it is true that ancient Greek philosophy attempts to deal with the essence of things, only those that are able to see the essence in personal experience are inspired by it. This gives poetry an advantage over philosophy as abstract thought, and over contingent events and experience, because it is more philosophical than everyday life, but more authentic to life than abstract philosophy (Jaeger 1946, p. 37). These aspects remained significant at least until Plutarch, who, in his attempts at forming philosophers, attributed great significance to poetry.

Greek tragedy owes its traditional content and pedagogical spirit to epic poetry, but the tragedians were the first to articulate the new ideal of *aretè* that included care of the soul. This was a central aspect

⁹⁷ A part of this section is taken from a book chapter I published separately, entitled “Listening, Phronesis and the First Principle of Happiness” (Muruzabal Lamberti 2020).

⁹⁸ Cf. Aristotle’s remark on the nature of tragedy: ‘it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions’ (*Poetics*, 1449b).

of Socrates' philosophical way of life (Jaeger 1946, p. 43). Indeed, Greek tragedy was never just meant to be mere entertainment, but was rather an essential part of Athenian life that dealt with the religious, civic, political, military, and philosophical aspects of life.

As such, state-sponsored tragedy, or drama – from the word *drao* (“act”) – is perhaps one of the most noteworthy inventions of the ancient Greek world. While storytelling and related artforms existed long before, the addition of actors and the idea of performance is an Athenian invention (Scott 2013). In addition to Greek tragedy being a vital source of inspiration for all kinds of art forms, it is recognised by many for its pedagogical value.⁹⁹

According to Gadamer, Aristotle defined the essence of tragedy by including its effect on the audience. In this sense, the audience does not only spectate and listen; it “belongs” to the play and gets involved in it (2013, p. 131). For the ancient Athenians, drama is a tragedy in which the events offer the audience an extraordinarily difficult decision, without there being an obvious best choice. It is especially in this decision-making process, the inevitable nature of fate, and its projected and lived consequences, that we find “tragedy”.

In focusing on the decision-making process, Greek tragedy confronts the audience with a problem in which the question is raised: what would they do, if they were in the same situation? This explains why one of the most important remarks in any Greek drama is *ti draso*, “what shall I do?” or, “what am I to do?” It is in this invitation to engage in the great questions about community life, extreme plights in human lives, and conflicts between natural and civic laws, that we find some of tragedy’s pedagogic and integrative potential (Scott 2013). Sophocles, who was not only a brilliant playwright but also a former general and treasurer of the Delian League, excelled in creating dialogues between the actors and the public.

⁹⁹ Although it is impossible to say whether aesthetics or cultural ideals were the most important aspect of drama in antiquity, it is worth noting that playwrights and educators shared a pedagogical purpose. After all, education, poetry and sculpture significantly affected one another (Jaeger 1946, pp. 279-280; Muruzabal Lamberti 2020, pp. 75-78.).

To further appreciate this, we can consider the etymology of the word “playwright”, which in Greek is *didaskalos* and means “teacher” or “instructor”. In an immediate sense, this refers to the instruction of the actors and the chorus (literally meaning “dance”) in preparation for the play. However, it also refers to teaching the audience about something. This pedagogical part is typically accounted for by the chorus, who therefore have arguably the most important role in the play.

According to classicist Oliver Taplin (in: Scott, 2013), the members of the chorus are costumed and masked in an identical or near-identical way. In addition, they move and speak as a group. In other words, the chorus is not a group of individuals, but rather a group in which individuals submerge their identities and form a monophonic unison. They are thus constituted by multiple sounding voices simultaneously expressing the same “tone”, symbolising the transcendence of individual opinions. In its groupness, the chorus tries to make sense of what it is witnessing, of something that plays out between two or more individual protagonists. Furthermore, the chorus is deeply and emotionally involved, simultaneously causing strong passionate experiences, as well as a strong incentive to think and listen.

Sophocles’ legacy

In her 1986 book, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Nussbaum argues that Greek tragedy writers are especially helpful in providing insights into the painful and tragic character of what it means to be human. This resemblance of Athenian drama to our own lives is among the reasons for her central hypothesis in the *Fragility of Goodness*, which suggests that drama and literature, given their subject matter and social function, are better candidates for developing our moral compasses than philosophy itself (2001, p. 13).

According to Nussbaum, Greek tragedy addresses us not only in

an argumentative, philosophical sense, but also in a deeply emotional and aesthetic sense by confronting us with the equally beautiful and tragic nature of contingency. In this sense, Hadot remarks that ‘art, poetry, literature, painting or even music can be a spiritual exercise’ (2009, p. 140). Tragedy provokes fundamental existential questions such as: how far should a life be made self-sufficient? What is the role of reason in the search for self-sufficiency, and what is the appropriate kind of self-sufficiency for a rational human life? (Nussbaum 2001, p. 3). These questions not only reveal the complexity and indeterminacy of human deliberation, but also make it emotionally and aesthetically “tangible”.

The added advantage for audiences of tragedies such as *Antigone* is that they can do this now without suffering the real-life consequences and pains of the decisions we take. This is something Nussbaum believes rationally-dominant philosophical texts are less capable of doing, since they do not appeal to us emotionally and aesthetically in the way that Greek tragedy does (1998, pp. 24-25; see also Van Buuren *et al.* 2013, pp. 289-296).¹⁰⁰

The Athenians were well aware of the pedagogic potential of their unique form of art. Sophocles even saw tragedy as an instrument through which human beings reach self-knowledge; a tragic self-knowledge, because it is the realisation of (wo)man’s powerlessness and the inevitable suffering that belongs to life (Jaeger 1946, p. 284).

Thanks to the emphasis on the formation of human character, and the ideals embodied in his characters, Sophocles may have been the most important contributor to Greek culture in his day and age. In addition, he was the first to recognize the soul ($\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$) as the centre of human life, and the origin of human action.

Sophocles was a playwright who created tragedies around cur-

¹⁰⁰ We find a similar view in the Preface of *Philosophy in the Classroom*, where Lipman *et al.* write that it was literature and drama that first provided what philosophy needed. Thanks to the tragedy writers, philosophers were able to learn how to organise ideas dramatically – i.e. ‘how to put them into sparkling interaction’ (Lipman *et al.* 1980, p. xv).

rent problems, rather than the religious themes one would more commonly find in the works of Aeschylus and Euripides. Specifically, Sophocles' character-drawing and his ability to represent real passions and emotions, while at the same time embodying cultural ideals, uncovers a specific pedagogical purpose. In not merely representing ordinary men and women, Sophocles' drama emphasises the Greek world as a society whose highest ideal is culture as the process of deliberately forming human character (Jaeger 1946, pp. 269-274).

This relates to the notion of *aretè* as a form excellence of the psyche, which at the time of Sophocles was a pedagogical phenomenon that Sophists were predominantly involved with. The Sophists also emphasised the moral aspect of education and the development of personality and character. Consequently, some argue that the Sophists marked a move towards personal development and self-realisation as the goal of all human endeavour, which would later develop into the meaning of *paideia* as the ethics of Hellenistic civilisation (Marrou 1964, p. 97).

The move towards individual development is deeply rooted in Sophocles' plays, where the audience is often confronted with the inevitability of suffering, which is related to the inevitability of destiny. This is a destiny that is not determined by some supernatural entity, but is rather the consequence of the nature of the characters. This suffering is experienced from the point of view of the individual character, which, compared to the works of Aeschylus for instance, marks a shift from universal to individual problems.

The element of personal suffering becomes particularly evident in Sophocles' *Antigone*, where both Antigone and Creon are "destined" to endure a certain misfortune – the former because of her own embracing of her tragic destiny, and the latter because of his adherence to the structures of law and order in the state as he sees them, and – more central to this study – his failure to listen.

Antigone

The famous tragedy *Antigone* (442 BCE) tells the story of Oedipus' daughter, the princess Antigone. After Oedipus's withdrawal, his sons, Eteocles and Polynices, decide to take turns in ruling over the kingdom of Thebe. When it is Polynices' turn to rule, however, Eteocles refuses to step down, forcing Polynices to go into exile. While in exile, Polynices marries one of king Adrastus' daughters, who helps him form an army to attack Thebe. The attack is successfully countered, and the two brothers kill each other in battle.¹⁰¹

After this tragic event, their uncle Creon – son of Menoeceus – ascends to power. In accordance with Athenian law, Creon refuses to release the dead bodies of the enemy troops for a funeral, including the body of Polynices: a traitor does not deserve to be buried, but is to be left to rot far outside the city walls. Antigone, however, wants to bury her brother in accordance with what she believes to be the law of the gods, and decides to defy her uncle.

When Creon finds out about what she has done, he is furious and condemns Antigone to death. Creon's son, Haemon, who is in love with Antigone, urges his father to reconsider. According to Haemon, not everyone in Thebe agrees with his decision, and a city cannot be a city if it is the holding of just one man. However, Creon does not listen and remains determined to stick to his intention. As a consequence, the play ends with Antigone and Haemon both committing suicide, as well as Creon's wife Eurydice. Creon is left empty-handed in every conceivable way.

Because there are no such "heroes" in Sophocles' plays, it would be incorrect to portray Haemon as the one who speaks "the truth" (Sourvinou-Inwood 1989, p. 144). Nonetheless, I will now focus on a part of his speech that is echoed by several other protagonists, including Creon himself and the chorus – who speak as critics from neither above nor below.

In the third act, Haemon addresses his father and says:

¹⁰¹ Euripides' *Phoenician Women* tells this story.

Father, the gods endow men with good sense [φρένας], —
 Highest of all the things that we possess. (683-684)¹⁰²

The word that is translated as “good sense” here is *phrenas*. *Phrenas* is the plural accusative of the noun *phren*, which translates as “mind” and “spirit”, but in Homeric times and after, it also translated as “lung”, “heart” or “midriff”, as the seat of mental activity (Goldhill 1986, p. 133; Muller *et al.* 1969, p. 789).¹⁰³ This last understanding of *phren* relates especially well to the term *phronein* as used later in the same verse:

Whoever thinks that only he himself
 Owns all good sense [φρονεῖν], that he and no one else
 Has such a tongue and mind [ψυχῆν]—when men like that
 Are opened up, it’s seen that they are empty (707-709).

Here, “good sense” is the translation of the verb *phronein*, which means “to think” and “to be wise”, and in the non-contracted first-person singular simple present form: “to be minded” (φρονέω). The term for “to be wise” is *eu phronein*, qualified by the adverb *eu* which means “well” (Goldhill 1986, p. 133). The question is: how does one exercise and acquire good sense? Sophocles’ Creon will serve as a remarkable example, by “teaching” us to avoid a non-listening attitude of mind.

Bad examples for good teaching

I pick up where I left off in Haemon’s speech:

¹⁰² All *Antigone* quotes are from Reginald Gibbons’ and Charles Segal’s critically acclaimed translation (Sophocles 2003). For facilitating cross-references, I added the lines of the play that correspond to the quote, instead of the page numbers.

¹⁰³ Unlike modern (Western) cultures, the ancients did not localise the thinking organ in the brain, but somewhere closer to the heart instead. This is why metaphorical meanings came to be associated with intentions, thoughts and mind. See Muller *et al.* (1969, pp. 788-789).

Even a man who's clever [σοφός], should feel no shame
 In learning things—however many they are —
 And in not keeping himself so tightly strung.
 (...)
 Now, if there's judgment in the young, like me,
 Then I would say it's best by far if a man
 Is completely filled with knowledge [ἐπιστήμη] by his nature.
 But since things aren't inclined to be that way,
 It's also good to learn [μανθάνειν] from what's well [καλόν] said.
 (710-723)

The chorus replies that it would only be fair to learn from Haemon if he speaks to the point, and vice versa. However, Creon refuses to listen – not to Antigone and Haemon, nor in a more general, placid manner. Creon only speaks and does so in a way that his will (what he says) is law (what will happen).

In a certain sense, he is “within his rights” to do so. After all, he is the king and therefore the law. However, there are other perspectives which he does not consider: for instance, an even higher law, the law of the Gods. In another, more pedagogical sense, by not listening, Creon does not consider the possible consequences of his actions and of the words others are telling him.

But the interesting thing is perhaps not so much Creon's refusal to listen. This “speaks” for itself. Rather, it is the attempts by the different protagonists around him to convince him to listen that are more noteworthy. Their efforts clearly presuppose some kind of positive aspect of listening.

To somehow grasp what this positive effect may consist of, it is worth noting that those who do not *phronein*, are generally considered to be “the stupid” (Goldhill 1986, p. 133; I will use the nominative form, “those that do not think”, οἱ μὴ φρονούντες). Interestingly, Creon acknowledges the importance of *phronein*, but subsequently fails to realise he does not *phronein* himself:

TIRESIAS: Ah!

Does no man know, does no man understand —

CREON: What is this great shared truth that you're expounding?

TIRESIAS: —to what extent the best of all we own is prudence [εὐβουλία]¹⁰⁴

CREON: Yes—to the same degree wrong thinking is the worst.

TIRESIAS: But that's the very sickness that fills you! (1049-1052)

As a consequence of not *phronein* (i.e. “wrong thinking” following a failure to listen), Creon adopts an attitude of mind that is unwilling to consider Antigone's perspective, and denies his son the possibility of saying something sensible because of his age.¹⁰⁵ Subsequently, he undermines the will of the people, and does not listen to the voice of the councillors when they say it would only be fair to learn from those who speak to the point. Creon at first even refuses to listen to the one person whose advice he always took: the seer Tiresias. Although it may seem so in the case of Tiresias, and although “hearing” and “obeying” share root terms (see Introduction), we should distinguish listening from obeying.

Indeed, Creon eventually seems to listen to the seer, but in fact this is more a kind of obeying. After all: Creon explicitly asks: “What must I do? Tell me! I will obey” (1099; *πείσομαι*, from *πείθω*, which translates as “I obey” or “I yield to”). Clearly, obeying is something that predominantly benefits despotic systems; autocrats want to be obeyed, and force their will onto others. On the contrary, a leader who favours *phronein* is presumably more interested in listening to those that speak well.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Also translated as “quickness of counsel”, cf. Aristotle, *EN* VI.10, 1142b1.

¹⁰⁵ This is not necessarily something that the Greek audience would have disapproved of; a son should obey his father, see Sourvinou-Inwood (1989, p. 145). In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus prohibits his mother from speaking, since speaking is the privilege of men.

¹⁰⁶ The emperors Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius both seem to be examples of figures in Roman antiquity that were more interested in listening than in dictating what was right and wrong, at least in the way they have been characterised by most (ancient) sources. In the first book of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* (paragraph 16), he makes several references to his uncle's ability to listen patiently to those that were more knowledgeable than him, or had something of importance to say.

This difference between listening and obeying may suggest that Sophocles favours listening over obeying, since listening to Haemon and Antigone is what could have triggered the prevention of an unfortunate decision, whereas obeying Tiresias came after the unfortunate decision had already taken effect. Put differently: when it is too late to listen, the next best thing seems to obey. But by having Creon repeatedly miss the opportunity of listening and painfully exhibiting the consequences thereof, we may learn from the play that *phronein* implies an attitude of mind that favours listening over obeying.

Instead of showing what should have been done differently in hindsight, *phronein* makes clear how and what should be avoided before shame and disaster have crystallised. Many protagonists try to have Creon listen (i.e. *phronein* as an attitude of mind that involves listening) so as to avoid the terrible harm that follows from his actions (i.e. ultimately, from the lack of *phronèsis*). But Creon chooses not to, and it is here that Sophocles teaches us something about the meaning of *phronein* and *phronèsis* in relation to listening.

By the end of *Antigone*, the chorus clearly condemns the non-listening attitude of mind and related behaviour of Creon. Although there are signs of Creon trying to be a reformer at the beginning of the play by demonstrating his commitment to Athenian law and order (Crane 1989, p. 106; Sourvinou-Inwood 1989, p. 144), he later transforms from reformer to despot. Creon's transformation serves an important dramatic purpose. After all, the greater the contrast, the greater the power of tragedy. But this transformation also demonstrates the transient nature of human character. Whereas Creon may have possessed some signs of *phronein* in the beginning, it is later evident that he is completely devoid of it.

Creon's misfortunes are found on different levels of the drama. From the perspective of the Gods, burying a living person (i.e. Antigone) and keeping a corpse unburied and unhallowed in the upper world are both serious wrongdoings. This is not to suggest that

Polynices should have received an appropriate optimum burial, but it demonstrates the disturbance of the cosmic order (Sourvinou-Inwood 1989, pp. 146-147). However, these examples are not necessarily about attitudes of mind, the likes of which one finds in the last words of the chorus:

Good sense is the
 First principle
 Of happiness [εὐδαιμονίας].
 (...)
 Grand words of arrogant [ὑπεραύχων]
 Men, paid back with
 Great blows, in old age
 Teach good sense [φρονεῖν ἐδίδαξαν] (1347-1353).

True to the nature of Attic tragedy, *Antigone* is a painful drama. But this is precisely the point. By focusing on Creon's misfortunes (μεγάλας πληγὰς, "great blows") at the level of an attitude of mind (φρονεῖν, "good sense"), we can consider him an example from which Athenians could learn alternative, more listening-friendly attitudes of mind and ultimately, courses of action. This way, *Antigone* becomes a story with the pedagogic power of preventing painful drama, and perhaps even promoting happiness (εὐδαιμονία) as a result.

Listening spiritually through exposure to tragedy

In the spirit of Aristotle's advice of following the example of others, Sophocles may be seen to convey the following lesson: if we want to avoid the misfortunes of Creon, we need to exercise *phronein* as an attitude of mind that expedites listening. Creon proves deaf to any other perspective than his own, and refuses to listen until it is too late to avoid terrible harm. Haemon, however, acknowledges the impossibility of "being filled with knowledge by his nature" (721), and emphasises that '[i]t's also good to learn from what's well said'

(723). I interpret *phronein* here as an attitude of mind that is willing to learn from “what is well said”, *by listening*. This is precisely what Creon repeatedly fails to “see”, hear, and do.

Creon not only refuses to consider other perspectives; he does not even respond to them. Judging by his stubbornness, as he eventually comes to see for himself, Creon shows a lack of willingness to listen. As a result, he exhibits an attitude of mind that does not *phronein*. The unwillingness to listen impedes engagement with thoughts other than his own, which in turn wards off the opportunity for learning from what is said well by others. This not only has consequences for learning from what is well said, but also prevents Creon from acting on the basis of what was well said.

By setting the wrong example, Creon may help audiences realise that listening allows one to benefit from what has already been done before by others. Indeed, what Sophocles offers, among many other things, is an opportunity to learn not only from one’s own mistakes, but from the tragic mistakes of others that follow from unwillingness to listen, without getting hurt in the process.

In relation to the specific content of the play, I tried to show how we can derive a possible meaning of listening as a spiritual exercise from Sophocles. The message Haemon and the councillors appear to convey in *Antigone* – and in a sense, what Creon teaches by setting a misguided example – is that one would miss out on opportunities for learning to *eu phronein* if one was to only speak and not listen to those we speak to. Put differently, in not listening one misses out on opportunities to learn something about the world and oneself, *without getting hurt in the process*. Therefore, not listening is not only disrespectful to others (in the play, disrespectful to the Gods), it is sheer “ill-advisedness” or “thoughtlessness” (ἀβουλία, 1242). In the words of Creon himself, this amounts to both mistaken thinking and foolish actions (1261-1269), which is the opposite of *phronèsis*.

Furthermore, not listening as the attitude of mind of *hoi me phro-*

nountes not only has personal implications, it has implications for the community as well. Creon loses all his loved ones, as well as his authority in accordance with Tiresias' prophecy that Creon would offend the gods and the 'city would be sick' (1013). Although I have not discussed Antigone's conduct in detail, this also applies to her, as her death has severe implications for her community as well.

Due to his determination to do exactly what he wants, Creon's unwillingness to listen eventually leads him to pay the ultimate price: the loss of his family and his authority. In the final act, the chorus notes that the desire for wisdom, understood as a particular attitude that also includes reverence for the Gods, is the first principle of happiness. When Haemon speaks of good sense, he states that it is the 'highest of all things we possess' (683-684). This is reiterated in different ways throughout the play (e.g. by the chorus, by Tiresias, and ultimately by Creon himself).

Given its tragic nature, Nussbaum's idea is that tragedy enables the audience to contemplate how they would act when confronted with the most difficult events life can throw at us. It is here that I propose we look for the spiritual aspect: in the invitation to reflect and transform one's lives by listening to the play and entering into a dialogue with its contents, which enables one to shape various meanings that allow us to transform.

Unlike a systematic philosophical discourse, tragedy does not directly articulate fundamental problems and dilemmas, but this is exactly the point. Thanks to the lack of a philosophical schema, the characters of a tragedy display an eternal quest for 'the morally salient,' and the play invites the audience to never cease doing the same (Nussbaum 2001, p. 14).

The spiritual dimension of Sophocles' *Antigone* is found in the importance of listening before harm is done as a consequence of not listening. This is achieved by paying close attention to examples of *hoi me phronountes*, as embodied by Creon. What Creon shows is that a lack of *phronein*, which includes an attitude of mind that is

not interested in listening, is ultimately a lack of *phronèsis* that may result in great harm.

Let us not forget that in ancient times, poets, tragedians and comedians were just as interested as philosophers in the question of *aretè* and human flourishing. In fact, it could be argued that philosophers such as Socrates and Plato continued and built upon these literary efforts.

Sophocles demonstrates, on the one hand, that one can learn after harm was done, which is how Creon eventually comes to see his own misfortunes. On the other hand, one can also learn in a way that prevents harm from being done (in the play: “foolishness”, “sheer folly”, or “sailing upside down”), which is what ultimately characterises *phronèsis*. After all, by thinking and listening, one is careful (prudent and practically wise) not to call misfortune upon oneself. This can be exercised by listening to tragedies such as *Antigone*.

Conclusion

I have mapped the motivations, context, and approaches towards *aretè* – as the object of *paideia* – in the pursuit of a living practice of philosophy, by relating it to listening. I have also briefly described the oral and historical context in which ancient pedagogical ideals were practised, and showed the role of listening based on Heraclitus and Sophocles.

Heraclitus set a precedent for establishing a philosophical-pedagogical practice of listening by relating listening to *aretè*. The adjective “spiritual” is adequate to the extent that it refers to the idea that listening is a choice to commit to changing one’s entire life and soul (Hadot 2020, pp. 34 & 59).

Although it would be premature to state that listening became an Athenian virtue as a result, Sophocles’ *Antigone* further paved the way for listening to be understood spiritually. After all, what Sophocles showed is that an attitude of mind that includes listening is crucial to the process of achieving *phronèsis*.

What Heraclitus and Sophocles share is that listening is seen as a potential contributor towards acquiring *aretè*, and thus, living a philosophical life based on reason. Heraclitus is the first to consider listening as part of sound thinking to be the highest virtue of all. For Heraclitus, practical wisdom consists in speaking about and listening to what is true, and acting in accordance with it.

Sophocles considers the desire for practical wisdom to be the first principle of happiness because it is the highest thing we may possess. With the emphasis in Sophocles' work on the formation of human character, he taught spectators (and listeners) to reach self-knowledge and, in the case of *Antigone*, to include willingness to listen as an aspect closely related to *aretè*.

Plato would probably have agreed with Sophocles more than he would have liked to admit. After all, Plato did not try to create an entirely mythical world, as the tragedians and poets did. But he shares several common interests, particularly the interest in *aretè*. With Plato, philosophy as a way of life became the object of *paideia*. But it was Socrates' idea of the aim of life that proved the most pivotal moment in the history of *paideia*, because it encouraged men to attain *phronèsis*: knowledge of the good. As we will see in the next chapter, spiritual listening further developed through the practice of dialectic and dialogue.

CHAPTER III

Socrates, Plato and the moulding of human character

LORD GORING: I adore political parties. They are the only place left to us where people don't talk politics.

LADY BASILDON: I delight in talking politics. I talk them all day long. But I can't bear listening to them. I don't know how unfortunate men in the House stand these long debates.

LORD GORING: By never listening.

LADY BASILDON: Really?

LORD GORING (in his most serious manner): Of course. You see, it is a very dangerous thing to listen. If one listens one may be convinced; and a man who allows himself to be convinced by an argument is a thoroughly unreasonable person. (Wilde, 1997, p. 601)

Introduction

Plato assimilated and continued the tradition of the “serious poets” (*Laws*, 817a) in different ways. However, similarly to many others at that time, Plato was also heavily influenced by Socrates.¹⁰⁷ Socrates' way of life and practising philosophy set the example for Plato to elevate philosophy to new heights. By engaging with both his predecessors and contemporaries – especially rhetors such as Isocrates and Sophists such as Protagoras – Plato subsequently cultivated a new philosophical ideal.

This chapter serves to argue that listening was an important part of that ideal, and was based on the practice of dialectic and dialogue – Socrates' and Plato's favoured philosophical “method”. For both,

¹⁰⁷ Since only few sources remain from writers that could have known Socrates personally, there are many uncertainties about the historical Socrates. See M. Lamberti (2021, p. 185 n4). Unless otherwise specified, I equate the historical Socrates to Plato's Socrates.

living dialogue was the way to realise self-transformation *par excellence*. It was through the actual participation in dialogue, not just the reception of words, that listening became constitutive for the philosophical life.

I begin this chapter with a continuation of the discussion of orality in ancient Greece, supplemented with a few relevant impressions of Plato's Academy, to sketch the socio-historical context Socrates and Plato operated in. This will also aid in understanding the audience Plato's written works were intended to address. I will then give an overview of the meaning of philosophy as a way of life in classical Greek times, predominantly based on the figure of Socrates and his maieutic approach for practising philosophy. It will become clear that listening, in accordance with oral culture, played a significant role in Socrates way of life.

Some have even argued that Plato had a philosophy of listening. Based on an analysis of the *Symposium*, Haroutunian-Gordon observes that listening 'involves drawing inferences about the implications of what one hears,' which she counts as the most important activity of listening. Moreover, a listener tries to articulate a relevant response to what has been heard (Haroutunian-Gordon 2011, pp. 131-131).

To my mind, and without necessarily disagreeing with Haroutunian-Gordon, there is even more explicit and perhaps therefore more convincing evidence of the importance Plato attributed to listening in other writings. To argue my position, I discuss the most relevant pedagogical ideas expressed in the *Republic*. I subsequently relate my findings to the subject of listening, by focusing on the adjective *philekoos* (φιλήκοος, compounded of the verbs φιλέω, "to love"; and ἀκούω, "to hear"; "listen" or "heed") which appears in both the *Republic* and in *Lysis*.

The flowering period of philosophy

Let us first recall the meaning of "philosophy" and the oral tradition

in which it emerged. Philosophers in ancient Greece and Rome were not philosophers because they produced philosophical discourses (written or oral) per se, but because they lived in accordance with a certain philosophical ideal. Figures like Socrates, Pyrrho of Elis, and Diogenes of Sinope did not write, but rather embodied their discourse quite literally and expressed it by setting an example in their actions. Although Plato was the first to fully develop and innovate the meaning of philosophy,¹⁰⁸ Socrates was the model for others to depart from in considering philosophy not merely as discourse, but as philosophical life (see Plutarch, *An seni*, 796c-d).

Both the oral discourse and the written discourse that was based on the philosophical life had the intention to influence and form the addressees to adopt a certain way of life, based on all sorts of practical knowledge. According to Beaton, the real achievement in the violent times in which Socrates and Plato found themselves,¹⁰⁹ was that they enabled their contemporaries (and us) – thanks to Plato’s masterful writing – to listen to what they were thinking and saying in conversation (2021, p. 140).

The way of life advocated in the texts and speeches was based on an existential choice that guided one’s entire life, which is what Hadot refers to as the “spiritual” dimension: it was directed at the practitioner’s soul. As we have observed, this aim, the paideutic effect a philosophical discourse hoped to produce in the addressee, cannot be overlooked when interpreting an ancient text (Hadot 2020, pp. 58-59).

From reading Plato’s works, it is clear that they have both a proreptic and a paraenetic value. They also have an “exoteric” character: they were meant to be understood by a cultivated public. I will

¹⁰⁸ With respect to the distinction between *sophia* and *philosophia* see Plato (*Lysis* 219a), (*Symposium* 203d) and (*Phaedrus* 278d).

¹⁰⁹ The Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE), in which Socrates took part as a hoplite in the Athenian army (see M. Lamberti 2021, pp. 48-53), which resulted in the brutal reign of the Thirty Tyrants led by Theramenes and Plato’s cruel uncle Critias. Shortly afterwards came the Corinthian War (395–387 BCE), which was followed by the Boeotian War (378-371 BCE) and the Macedonian hegemony of Philip II and his son Alexander the Great.

return to this shortly, but for now let us reiterate the fact that texts were meant to be taught orally. Historically it was necessary to emphasise the oral because Greek civilisation had political discourse at its centre. Thus, citizens had to be proficient in speech (Hadot 2020, p. 84), and therefore in listening.

Philosophically, however, it is important to emphasise that philosophical texts – which existed to transform souls – were meant to be taught orally, since listening to speeches and participating in dialogue is what ultimately was thought to drive the alteration of oneself (Hadot 1995, p. 20). In Plato's Academy (the name was derived from the mythical hero Academus, who was believed to have saved Athens under Theseus' rule), dialectic was practised in the form of dialogues. The approach was one where participants spoke and listened in friendly association about subjects that interested and concerned everyone, i.e. the highest values in life (*Gorgias*, 507e).

Judging by what Plato wrote elsewhere (e.g. *Phaedrus*, *Seventh Letter*),¹¹⁰ dialogue was likely considered to be more reliable than written work, because the student did not have to rely on the ready-made truths one finds in books. Instead, he could come to realise something for himself after engaging in actual interactive dialogue. As Hadot puts it:

Only living dialogue is formative: it brings to the disciple the possibility of discovering by himself the Truth because of long discussions, because of a long 'agriculture' which is pursued during his whole life, very different from the ephemeral gardens of Adonis which grow in books. For it is in souls, not in books, that it is necessary to sow [the seeds of philosophy] with the aid of speech. (Hadot 2020, pp. 85-86)

¹¹⁰ Orality and writing are addressed in *Phaedrus* 276a-e and the *Seventh Letter* 344b-c. In *Phaedrus* the oral is valued more highly than the written.

In Plato's *Seventh Letter*,¹¹¹ we learn that there are no such things as written texts on wisdom, and there never will be (341e). Philosophical insights cannot be written down, nor even be articulated in language. This is because truth is ultimately not a matter of words; it is internalised in the soul. This is the reason Plato seems to refuse to define wisdom clearly and consistently. What written words do is offer *suggestions of wisdom*. For wisdom itself, you must look into your own soul, and the most appropriate method for that is dialectics.

As a result, ancient philosophy may have relied more on oral discourse than on written discourse, but it still cannot be reduced to either – it is a way of living and being in the first place. Transformation of the soul ultimately does not depend on discourse; discourse serves as encouragement to exercise and set transformation in motion.

Before I explore the relevant writings of Socrates and Plato in relation to listening, we will first consider who they were meant to speak to, and who were meant to hear them.

Plato's Academy

In the beginning of the fourth century BCE, Plato founded his own school and research institute to prepare pupils of aristocratic descent for a role in politics, and to promote free discussion (Hadot 1995, p. 106). Although little is known about the institutional functioning of the Academy, a few things can be said with reasonable certainty.

The Academy was a community of people bound by a certain (erotic) desire for “fertility” and philosophy (see *Symposium*). The notion of fertility is important to emphasise, because it presupposes the dealing with others, so central to dialectics and the shared love for truth (Reid 2011, pp. 61-64). This method of oral teaching and

¹¹¹ Plato wrote the *Seventh Letter* towards the end of his life, during the period of decline that succeeded the Periclean Golden Age in which Athenian democracy thrived as never before. This was the result of many preceding factors such as Solon's laws, as well as Clisthenes' reforms aimed at achieving *isonomia* or “equal laws”, the killing of Hipparchus in 514 BCE by Harmodios and Aristogiton, and the 479 BCE defeat of the Persians at Plataeae.

dialogue was not written down by Plato, although some testimonies from his disciples remain.

The students of the Academy lived together, attended classes, conducted scientific work, and enjoyed meals together. Members of the Academy lived as a community of free and equal men (and some women)¹¹² who desired virtue and pursued shared research in general. Due to the status of its students and its impeccable organisation, Plato's Academy already had significant influence in his day.

According to Hadot, there are good reasons to assume that the Academy was grounded on both Socrates' way of life, as well as the Pythagorean way of life. The latter assumption is based on the fact that Plato praises Pythagoras and his rule of life in *The Republic* (600b).

Plato's initial intentions for founding a philosophical school seem to have been political. Based on his *Seventh Letter* (328b-329c), we can assume he believed in the possibility of altering political life by means of the philosophical formation of those who have influence in the city. Indeed, many students at Plato's school had significant political influence in different city states (Hadot 2004, p. 59).

Compared to the Sophists, who used the term *philosophia* as a synonym for "enthusiasm for learning" or "zeal for culture" (De Rijk 1965, p. 54), Plato's pedagogical ambitions reached further, since he was not strictly educating politicians. Rather, he sought to educate human beings, which is why *philosophia* often means "dialectic" for Plato. For as long as his students did not take part in politics, they practised governing themselves according to the same principles of governing an ideal city. While Plato creates an artificial milieu in which education took place, he adopts from Socrates the principle that education centres on living contact between students and teachers (Hadot 2004, p. 60).

¹¹² Axiothea of Phlius was a female student of Plato's, who was familiar with *The Republic* before coming to Athens. Another female student of both Plato and his successor Speusippus was Lasthanien of Mantinea.

There were two categories of members: (1) elders, researchers, and teachers; and (2) younger students, who wore a simple cloak to distinguish them from ordinary people. Among the elders were Speusippus (Plato's direct successor, appointed by Plato himself), Xenocrates (Speusippus' successor, most likely elected by the students), Eudoxus of Cnidos, Theaetetus and Heraclides of Pontus (both astronomers and mathematicians), and finally Aristotle, who entered as a student and became a teacher later, spending a total of twenty years as a member of the Academy.

Geometry and mathematics played a key role in the training, but they served an instrumental purpose more than anything. These topics had no intrinsic value, but were instead intended to prepare the student for philosophical training by cleansing the mind of dependence on sensible representations. As becomes clear in *The Republic*, the view was that subsequent philosophers should not participate in dialectics before they reach a certain maturity (see further). However, it is not clear to what extent Plato applied this rule in his school.

As a debating technique, the practice of dialectics was subject to strict rules. First, a "thesis" was posited in the form of a question such as: can virtue be taught? Is death an evil? Is the wise man ever angry? One student assumed the role of Socrates, which meant that he was charged with attacking the thesis by asking questions, while another student had to defend it. Questions were designed to have the defender admit to the opposite of what he wanted to defend. The task of the defender was to give answers that would find a way around the questioner's traps. This model of interaction would remain the principal form of teaching for many centuries (Hadot 2004, pp. 60-62).

Platonic dialectics not only served the purpose of discursive mastery, which was undeniably necessary in politics, but was also meant to shape the student ethically so that his ability was used in the service of the good and the just. In addition, dialectics is not a

contest between two interlocutors, but a cooperative and friendly effort between two individuals who strived to rationally arrive at reasonable discourse.

Instead of imposing truth upon each other, participants of dialogue ultimately attempt to move away from their own truths and consider the other's perspective and potentially discover something that is not dependent on subjectivity, but the *logos* (Hadot 2004, p. 63). According to Hadot, this is what ultimately makes dialectics a spiritual exercise: it demands personal transformation. The individual transcends himself and submits to the higher authority of the *logos*, which is also what regulates friendly cooperation.

The Academy allowed and probably even encouraged differences of opinion, which suggests there was a high degree of free thinking and discussion. Diverse opinions and perspectives, which differed from Plato's ideas, seem to have been expressed after the exposition or lecture (Hadot 2004, p. 64). Despite the differences between teachers within the community, what seems to have united them was the love of, and striving towards, the good; as well as the attempt to live philosophically, facilitated by the practice of dialogue.

It will not come as a surprise that Plato thought philosophers to be superior to all other members of the state. True philosophers for Plato are 'those for whom the truth is the spectacle of which they are enamoured' (*Republic*, 475e). Only the philosopher is able to take on the divine mission of ruling the soul, which implies letting justice (*δικαιοσύνη*) – the desire to do good as the greatest good of the soul – prevail.

Many of the Academy's fundamental principles were derived from Socrates' way of life and his approach to dialogue. These will now be explored.

Socrates and *paideia* in the service of philosophy

In the age of Socrates, defined by Thucydides as the *Pentecontaetia* or the fifty-year period between the end of the Persian Wars (479 BCE)

and the beginning of the Second Peloponnesian War in 431 BCE, *paideia* became philosophical in the sense that it was an attempt to form the entire human personality, aimed at acquiring (practical) wisdom. As Socrates states in the *Apologia*:

Most excellent man, are you who are a citizen of Athens, the greatest of cities and the most famous for wisdom and power, not ashamed to care for the acquisition of wealth and for the reputation and honour, when you neither care nor take thought for wisdom and truth and the perfection of your soul? (...) I go about doing nothing else than urging you, young and old, not to care for your persons or your property more than for the perfection of your souls. (Plato, *Apologia*, 29d-30b)

Given the pedagogical intention, philosophical discourse from Plato onward became less theoretical, and more focused on cultivating a certain habitus in the soul, which allowed the disciple to learn how to act and judge well in service of the good life.

Socrates, however, did not refer to his activities as *paideia*, and did not claim to possess knowledge of the good, let alone to be able to teach about it. Indeed, Socrates was always looking for, but never claimed to possess (practical) wisdom (σοφία or φρόνησις).¹¹³ Socrates states that

if you have heard from anyone that I undertake to teach [παιδεύειν] people and that I make money by it, that is not true either. (Plato, *Apologia*, 19d-e)

¹¹³ Aristotle divided σοφία and φρόνησις into two different stages. From the first, the philosophical life (βίος θεωρητικός), followed the highest form of εὐδαιμονία. The other form of happiness followed from moral excellence and was founded not on pure knowledge but the active life (βίος πρακτικός). Plato, however, did not make this distinction but united σοφία and φρόνησις in the philosophical ideal based on his conception of human nature. This is the purpose of *paideia* in a certain sense, which is ultimately oriented towards practice, not contemplation (Jaeger 1947, pp. 308 & 350).

He also explains in *Gorgias*:

For my story is ever the same, that I cannot tell how the matter stands, and yet of all whom I have encountered, before as now, no one has been able to state it otherwise without making himself ridiculous (Plato, *Gorgias*, 509a).¹¹⁴

Socrates does not want to be seen as a teacher, because he wants to learn from others. In his *Memorabilia*, Xenophon also writes that Socrates never professed to be a teacher of goodness.

Despite this, Xenophon, Plato and many others most certainly saw Socrates' activities as expressions of *paideia*, in the sense that he encouraged others to transform. Socrates was not a teacher in the traditional sense of the word, but he made those that spent time with him desire to take care of themselves. And it was not that he minded having other people listening to him:

If any one, whether young or old, wishes to hear me speaking and pursuing my mission, I have never objected. (Plato, *Apologia*, 33b)

Socrates did not teach anything concrete, but nonetheless his followers learned from him. By setting an example, Socrates' students would be led to become good themselves. This is why Xenophon, just like Plato, cannot accept the charge that Socrates is supposed to have had a bad influence on young men (Plato, *Apologia*, 19b-c).

Socrates had many young and old admirers (see, for example, *Apologia*, 23c and 33e-34a). In addition, Athenian aristocrats such as Nicias and Laches solicited his advice in the upbringing of their sons. This perhaps explains why Socrates continually emphasises that one should not care for money and fame – of which his admirers had plenty – but rather for wisdom and the health of one's soul (ψυχῆς θεραπεία).

¹¹⁴ Also consider: 'As a teacher, I seem to have a laughable inability to make my meaning clear' (Plato, *Republic* 338b & 392d).

The variety of knowledge informing this type of life was not just any kind of casual, everyday knowledge (cf. *Meno*, 87d), nor was it a matter of abstract contemplation of truth. Rather, it was the highest kind one could possess: the practical knowledge of right and wrong that comes from reasoning (φρόνησις, e.g. Plato, *Meno*, 88c), which is the art or skill (τέχνη) that allows one to make the right decisions and actually *live* the good life based on truth (ἀλήθεια).¹¹⁵

As Jaeger points out, the Greek meaning of the good should be thought of as “good for the individual”, which corresponds to the meaning of *aretè*: the good is always related to human life, because it helps human nature to fulfil itself. Indeed, the good for Socrates is rather broad. In the all-encompassing sense it has no direct object; it is that which we ought to will or do for its own sake. But also implied in the good are the beautiful, beneficent and, ultimately, the happiness-bringing or the “excellent”. Political *technè* requires knowledge of the good, and Socrates’ pedagogical aim is making men better by exercising them so that their talents can be employed toward good ends (Jaeger 1947, pp. 44, 48 & 146).

A recurring idea in *The Republic* is that justice coincides with the soul, which is why nothing delights a man of sense more than holding and hearing discourse on that subject (358e). And finding and cultivating justice in the soul means being able to act justly:

for the man who is to attain the title of “Great” must be devoted neither to himself nor to his own belongings, but to things just, whether they happen to be actions of his own or rather those of another man. (Plato, *Laws*, 732a)

Acting justly, in turn, presupposes self-control and all the other virtues. To reach perfect happiness (εὐδαιμονία), the soul has to be brought

¹¹⁵ “When truth led the way, no choir of evils, we, I fancy, would say, could ever follow in its train.” “How could it?” “But rather a sound and just character, which is accompanied by temperance.” (Plato, *Republic*, 490c).

in harmony with the natural order of the cosmos,¹¹⁶ with God:

What I maintain is this: that the right life ought neither to pursue pleasures nor to shun pains entirely; but it ought to embrace that middle state of cheerfulness (...), which—as we all rightly suppose, on the strength of an inspired utterance—is the very condition of God himself. (Plato, *Laws*, 792d)

Thanks to Socrates, morality (as a lived practice) came to depend on the excellence of human nature (realm of the soul, ψυχῆ), which in turn depends on the implementation of the right knowledge (realm of the mind, νοῦς).

Importantly, for Socrates, caring for the soul does not mean one should stop caring for the body. Socrates does not separate the soul from the body, as Descartes would do later. The soul is instead the guiding principle of the body, *within the body*. This means the body also needs to be cared for and trained, so that it can contribute to overall health:

For I, for my part, do not believe that a sound body by its excellence makes the soul good, but on the contrary that a good soul by its virtue renders the body the best that is possible. (Plato, *Republic*, 403d)

Socrates set an example by training and hardening his own body, and advised others to train their bodies (e.g. by dancing) and eat properly.¹¹⁷ Socrates' approach (μέθοδος) for training the soul was dialectics.

Socrates' "method": The power of the Muse of Philosophy

It is generally accepted as a historical fact that Socrates' main meth-

¹¹⁶ The original meaning of the word was 'order' or 'arrangement', but the first to use the cosmos in the sense of 'the universe' was Heraclitus. Interestingly, 'implicit in what Heraclitus says, then, is the idea that the natural universe is rationally ordered, even though no rational being created it' (Beaton 2021, pp. 97-98). This makes sense, because the *logos* is not a rational being (see Chapter II).

¹¹⁷ See Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, 2.1, where Socrates has a discussion with his associate Aristippus on the true nature of *paideia*.

od was dialectics (from διαλέγομαι, “to converse”), or inductive questioning and answering. This was often practised in the gymnasium, and specifically in the wrestling area (παλαίστρα). However, the modern word “method” is not entirely adequate in referring to Socrates’ activities. After all, Socrates did not follow a strict procedure; he was engaged in an activity that was second nature to him.

Despite this, many scholars have tried to systematise Socrates’ style of questioning, and construct all sorts of theories around it that supposedly underlie Socrates’ approach. Yet not everyone agrees about defining the essence of Socrates’ approach along the lines of a method. One of the main objections, which I agree with, is that Socrates’ approach was not formal in the first place; it was his way of life that dictated his approach (O’Connor 2015, p. 78). As such, dialogue and dialectics were the most intuitive forms for expressing his character.¹¹⁸

Generally speaking, the purpose of Socratic dialogue is to reach consensus on a subject with all participants.¹¹⁹ In order to reach such an agreement, Socrates usually starts with what is generally accepted as common sense, which in turn serves as a hypothesis to test and refute by means of dialectics.

For Socrates, dialogue is the way of philosophical learning and understanding. Its purpose is to reach a valid agreement recognised by all participants. Here, Socrates’ protreptic characteristic is found most clearly: Socratic questioning – and thus listening – encourages us (“to encourage”: προτρέπω) to continue philosophising, and to live an autonomous philosophical life. This is also what makes it a spiritual “exercise”.

The foundation of dialogic inquiry is reason, negatively defined by Socrates as follows:

¹¹⁸ *Parmenides*, *The Sophist*, and *The Statesmen* are Plato’s more ‘dialectical’ dialogues. *The Statesmen* could even be considered an exercise in dialectics. In the first two, the conditions for the possibility of dialogue are even the topic of discussion (Hadot 2013, p. 84).

¹¹⁹ See Muruzabal Lamberti (2019, pp. 258-259) for a discussion on the meaning of consensus.

- (1) One should not follow the opinions of the general people (e.g. *Gorgias*, 476a); if needed, only the opinions of experts (e.g. Prodicus in relation to Simonides, see *Protagoras*, 341b-c).
- (2) One should not follow one's emotions.
- (3) One should not consider the potential negative consequences for oneself to be a decisive factor.

Whoever follows the principle of *logos* (as opposed to the rhetorical method of the Sophists) is not interested in being persuaded, but rather attempts to arrive at a truth that reasonably follows from one's own insight (Raupach-Strey 2013, p. 29). In Plato's *Theaetetus*, this is commonly referred to as *maieutics* (*Theaetetus*, 149a-b).

Maieutic listening

As Fiumara points out, the art of wooing (προμνήστρια) or matchmaking, in this case not of potential lovers but of the best combinations of thoughts, is closely related to philosophical midwifery (2006, pp. 146-148). It is a capacity for "wedding" different perspectives into well-matched connections. In *Theaetetus*, it is the art midwives are even more proud of than 'cutting the umbilical cord' (149d-e).

Midwives can be matchmakers of thoughts thanks to their ability to give birth to thought. Socrates demonstrates, however, that this department of the midwives' profession has become the work of the panderer, who links and combines thoughts without knowing how to bring to birth the fruits of thinking (150a).

Socrates is not often associated with his role as listener, and thus, as a seeker of knowledge (Haroutunian-Gordon 2011, p. 126). However, Fiumara notes that, in so far as maieutics is the art of bringing to life new insights, Socratic midwifery involves listening (2006, pp. 146-148). This kind of listening may be referred to as "maieutic"; in that it is not simply about hearing what the other says, nor does it depend on translating whatever is received into correct and coherent articulations.

The maieutic quality of listening is an attitude conducive for the birth of thoughts. It is not a matter of applying rules and projecting conceptual frameworks on reality, but rather of abiding-by so that one can listen genuinely (*viz.* free from limitations):

In our concern for listening a demand for change is made upon us – indeed, almost a demand for a mutation. Unless we are prepared to become in some way different from what we are, listening cannot be understood properly: the maieutic method is not comparable to the learning of a set of intellectual axioms, theses or paradigms but rather to an experience – unattainable unless we are to some degree ready, receptive and vulnerable. (Fiumara 2006, pp. 165-166)

Fiumara shows maieutic listening revolves around engagement in dialogue, the subsequent gathering of thoughts, *and* knowing in what ‘soil the plants and seeds are most likely to flourish’. Socrates excels at this because he is not only an expert in the art of dialectics, but also in listening.

Therefore, she refers to maieutic listening as “dwelling” in dialogue. To dwell is Heideggerian terminology, used to refer to a genuine attempt to listen. It is not an attempt to understand the other in advance, but rather receptively waiting for whatever may come forward from the person or (animate) thing that is playing the more active role. In fact, this passive attitude is precisely what attracts, promotes, and even demands the birth of thought in dialogue. In other words, passivity becomes a creative quality that “auscultates”¹²⁰ thought in the sense that we are open to heed each message, and that we try to examine it for its content (Fiumara, 2006, p. 190).

Socrates understood and practiced the art of maieutic listening like no other in his time. In a certain sense, Plato continues Socrates’ quest by inquiring into the nature of knowledge in the service of the good life. However, for Plato, Socrates’ efforts in his unique

¹²⁰ Literally, auscultation (from *auris*, which means “era”) refers to listening with a stethoscope.

approach to philosophical exhortation are less important than the effort to arrive at knowledge of virtue. Put differently, Plato wanted to transcend the Socratic *aporia* (ἄπορος: “impassable”) in order to make Socrates’ pedagogical power and his knowledge part of a large-scale philosophical structure (Jaeger 1947, pp. 91-92). Let us therefore recount some of the main themes and arguments Plato expressed in written form.

The Republic: Music and dialectics

In *The Republic*, Plato’s unique manner of approaching the question of how the ideal type of citizen should be moulded is by imagining a whole new state to use as a measure for comparing individual humans. In the following paragraphs, I elaborate on this idea, and finally relate it to the subject of listening based on *The Republic* and *Lysis*.

In reference to Archilochus’ proverb ‘the fox knows many things, the hedgehog one great thing’, Plato, in *The Republic*, writes that education (παιδεία) and upbringing (τροφή) are the first and greatest determinants of a happy state (423e). If these two conditions are met, one can expect good citizens to arise, who, in turn, will produce even better citizens. What Plato offers is a training in the form of a systematic moulding and purification process of one’s entire character and life (Cottingham 2013, pp. 174-175).

However, as many commentators have noted, the primary (but not exclusive) interest of Plato in *The Republic* is not the political state, but rather the human soul and the question of forming it. It is about the state *within* us. Because the notion of justice is more easily applicable to a state, Socrates proposes to

first look for its quality in states, and then only examine it also in the individual, looking for the likeness of the greater in the form of the less. (*Republic*, 368e-369a)

Plato's answer to the question of how perfectly shaped men within the state are realised, is found in the upbringing of the guards (φύλακες) for the ideal state. This new warrior class should be educated in both gymnastics (γυμναστική) and music (μουσική).

Unfortunately, a detailed description of both subjects of instruction cannot be given due to a lack of sources.¹²¹ Most would agree, however, that gymnastics, often in the form of combat sports such as boxing, wrestling, and pankration, was not just intended to make the body fitter. Just like music, the focus is on the soul. Physical exercise is not meant to make one stronger, but more spirited and courageous, particularly in the period where the body is developing from boyhood to manhood (*Republic*, 410b-c, 498b-c; see also Poliakoff 1987, pp. 12-18, 99-100).

Similarly, and relevant to the subject of listening, music in Plato's idea of educating the guards also has a much more significant meaning than just melody and rhythm. A key feature of vocal music is that it is closely connected to speech (λόγος). In fact, Greek dance as the most comprehensive aesthetic expression was a combination of rhythm (ῥυθμός), harmony (ἁρμονία), and *logos*.¹²² With the help of speech, which both in a dialogue and musical context always presupposes listening, one can discover the truth or falsity of certain claims and statements.

Importantly, Plato believed music had the power to emulate moral attitudes. In other words, music for Plato has an ethical content: it has the power to train one to listen and recognise the right and the wrong (*Republic*, 401e-402a).¹²³ According to Plato, simple music is best suited for training the faculty of judgement. In addi-

¹²¹ In *Laus*, Plato writes: 'We are establishing gymnasia and all physical exercises connected with military training, — the use of the bow and all kinds of missiles, light skirmishing and heavy-armed fighting of every description, tactical evolutions, company-marching, camp-formations, and all the details of cavalry training' (813d-e). In addition, he recommends practising different mimic dances; see (796b-c).

¹²² Pythagorean *paideia* was also based on these elements; De Rijk (1965, pp. 60-61 & 66-67).

¹²³ This attitude is not necessarily Platonic, but peculiar to the Greeks of his age. More specifically, Plato takes the theory of musical ethos (further developed by Aristotle) as the basis for musical and rhythmic *paideia* from the leading musical theorist Damon (Jaeger 1947, p. 227).

tion, too much exposure to music sacrifices the spirited part of the soul by softening it to the point of completely dissolving it. This makes for a “feeble warrior” (411b).

With the ideal of harmony of the character in mind, in *Laws* Plato notes the young were to be educated with poetry and music (specifically, choir-training, which embraces both dance and song).¹²⁴ Education in poetry and music serve to find and articulate the different values that teach what is worthwhile doing in life, before harmonically applying it to one’s ethical conduct (*Laws*, 967e).

We may note here that the earliest forms of education relied heavily on listening. The well-educated student is first able to dance and sing well (*Laws*, 654b). The meaning of “well” or “good” (καλῶς) refers to the degree to which the movements and melodies correspond to the virtues of the body and soul. This is a very important point for Plato, because music in particular can lead to great harm if it instils bad morals and habits in the minds of the listeners (*Laws*, 669b-c). Apart from music and poetry, other aspects of Plato’s curriculum also rely on listening.

Apart from turning the soul to the world of reason and exactness of thought through mathematical knowledge (arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy; *Republic*, 525b-531d), the other part of the educational program found in *The Republic* is centred on dialectic. Dialectic for Plato is ‘being able to render and exact an account of opinions in discussion’ (531e), which equals Socrates’ approach of argument and contradiction (ἐλεγχος) for coming to understand his interlocutors:

“Then,” said I, “is not dialectics the only process of inquiry that advances in this manner, doing away with hypotheses, up to the first principle itself in order to find confirmation there? And it is literally true that when the eye of the soul is sunk in the barbaric slough of the Orphic myth, dialectic gently draws it forth and leads it up,

¹²⁴ Plato: ‘[T]he order of motion is called “rhythm,” while the order of voice (in which acute and grave are blended together) is termed “harmony,” and to the combination of these two the name “choristry” is given’ (*Laws*, 664e-665a).

employing as helpers and co-operators in this conversion the studies and sciences which we enumerated, which we called sciences often from habit, though they really need some other designation, connoting more clearness than opinion and more obscurity than science. (Plato, *Republic*, 533c-d)

Dialectics had the power to teach others to see unity in the multifold, and *phronèsis* as the divine knowledge of all good in unity always remains his supreme ideal. Dialectic knowledge, which is knowledge of the good, is a superior science and knowledge compared to mathematical knowledge, because it is not concerned with “shadows” and “reflections”, but the true nature of things (cf. *Republic*, 514a-520a). Put differently, dialectic helps the mind move towards knowledge of the good, thereby developing the character. But dialectic is not without dangers. The negative aspect is that it can seduce young (wo)men to regard it as a mere intellectual activity, because of its competitive character.

Although it is often not made very explicit, dialectic relies heavily on listening. Let us finally study what role Plato attributed to listening in his paideutic efforts.

Listening to Plato: Eyes versus ears

Come now, let us listen to one another and address one another on this subject with greater care than ever. (Plato, *Laws*, 797d)

Of the human senses, Plato, like many of his predecessors and contemporaries, valued the eyes highest.¹²⁵ Several examples come to mind. In the chariot allegory told by Socrates in *Phaedrus*, Plato refers to the eyes as the ‘natural inlet to the soul’ through which beauty passes (*Phaedrus*, 255c). In *The Republic*, Plato refers to the eyes as by far the most “sunlike” of all senses (508b). The sun for Plato

¹²⁵ See Ihde (2007, pp. 6-8) for a brief overview of visual dominance in ancient Greece.

is a divine image that symbolises the good, because it makes us see things. Hence, the eyes cannot be identical to the sun: the sun is not vision, but the cause thereof. The eyes come closest because they receive the power of the sun to see.

Plato also introduces the metaphor of “the eye of the mind” in the allegory of the cave. Although, as Nancy points out (2007, p. 75 n42), there are echoes of voices in addition to the shadows of objects in the cave, for Plato, truth is ultimately “seen” by the mind (*Republic*, 510e-511a). This visual emphasis is also found in the two worlds Plato introduces in the cave allegory: the visible world of the senses where things appear, and the intelligible world of the soul where things are, the divine source and cause of all knowledge and all being, everything just and beautiful embodied in the Idea of good (*Republic*, 514a-520a).

Examples of Plato’s dominant use of the visual are also found in his adherence to the pedagogical *paradeigma*. Not unlike his predecessors, Plato works with pictures and patterns to imitate (μμεῖσθαι). Greek *theoria* (θέα, “view” or “sight” and ὁράω, “to see”) not only involved rational thought, but also – implied in the name – vision that enabled one to “see” every object as a whole: an idea as a *visible pattern* that “oversees” all life, which explains the frequent recurrence of the virtue of lucidity (Hadot 1995, p. 95). Indeed, *paradeigma* or the model and *mimesis* or imitation, are the two ideas upon which Greek *paideia* are built (Jaeger 1947, pp. 258-259; Plato, *Republic*, 472c-d).¹²⁶

Plato’s ultimate *paradeigma* is the godly Idea of good, but Plato cannot define the Idea of good – this would always result in a *contradictio in terminis*: one cannot make the singular express the godlike, universal measure of all things (cf. Protagoras’ ‘man is the measure

¹²⁶ The first to introduce the idea that heroes are models to copy was Homer. Plato does not change this, but he does criticise Homer for including the imitation of bad characters: ‘For if, dear Adeimantus, our young men should seriously incline to listen to such tales and not laugh at them as unworthy utterances’ (Plato, *Republic*, 388d). In addition, imitators don’t possess the “right” knowledge of the beautiful and the truth. According to Koller, however, *mimesis* in pre-Platonic times had a different meaning. Instead of “imitation” it referred to “musical expression”. See De Rijk, 1965, p. 60.

of all things') – so he chooses to use visual analogies and metaphors to explain what he has in mind (Jaeger 1947, p. 283).

As becomes clear in *Meno*, education for Plato means awakening and remembering (ἀνάμνησις) already present knowledge. Our soul had knowledge before we were born; knowledge that has been temporarily forgotten following the traumatic event of birth.¹²⁷ Therefore, philosophical education aims at “conversion”: the soul is turned to the divine source, the light – the Idea of good, from which knowledge flows (Jaeger 1947, p. 295). After having seen the light, the philosopher returns to the cave to educate those that have not yet seen it (*Republic*, 500d, 520c).

Thus, it seems logical to assume that Plato's *paideia* is ultimately visually oriented. However, in *Laws*, Plato explicitly includes hearing and emphasises the unity of senses, and not so much the visual faculty in particular:

By the existence of reason [νοῦς] in the soul, in addition to all its other qualities, and by the existence of sight and hearing, in addition to all else, in the head; thus, to summarize the matter, it is the combination of reason with the finest senses, and their union in one, that would most justly be termed the salvation of each animal. (Plato, *Laws*, 961d)¹²⁸

Perhaps Plato wrote this because he attributed great importance to hearing in the education of the guards, as I will demonstrate further on.

Let us recall that poetry, which was never abandoned by Plato, was primarily heard, and taken in via the ears.¹²⁹ In addition, it was

¹²⁷ We can understand the doctrine of remembering today in the way that learning means unfolding, or working out, or making clear what we always already know – only in an unclear manner.

¹²⁸ Although Philo also values sight as the most vital of all senses – in accordance with Plato, one ultimately “sees” philosophical truth – it becomes clear that it is through the ears and the act of listening during lectures that one learns “soul sight”, or seeing truth in the mind (Larsen 2016, pp. 460 & 463).

¹²⁹ Lysis, I think your remark is true, that if we were inquiring correctly we could never have

not visual art, but rather the fruits of the Muses – music, as part of poetry education – that remained the real pillar of Plato’s *paideia*. After all, knowledge of the good (philosophy) presupposed musical “knowledge” because melody imparts harmony to the soul, and rhythm is responsible for measure and grace in one’s character (Plato, *Republic*, 522a).

In *Phaedrus*, Socrates describes himself as a man who is “sick” with the love of ‘hearing discourse’ (λόγων ἀκοήν, 228b; “a lover of discourse” is the translation of λόγων ἔραστοῦ, 228c). In other works, Plato uses a specific term to refer to the love of listening. The adjective *philekoos* is found in different forms to refer to those of a certain disposition or willingness to listen to (philosophical) discussions, and learn from others.¹³⁰

The etymology of the word informs us that *philos* is a “companion” or “friend”: someone who is an advocate of a certain cause, because he is interested in becoming friends and shows affection. In line with this, the term *philekoia* is translated as “fond of hearing”; but closer to the essence would be “becoming friends of hearing” or “advocate of hearing”. Additionally, a *philekoon* is a lover of the sound of speeches in particular; a lover of music is a *philomouson* (see Plato, *Republic*, 548e).

In *Euthydemus*, Ctesippus is described as an eager listener (φιλήκοος, *Euthydemus*, 274c), and Crito describes himself in those terms as well (304c).¹³¹ A more prominent use of the word *philekoos* is found in Plato’s early dialogue *Lysis*, when Hippothales, who is in love with Lysis, describes the beautiful Lysis as ‘singularly fond of listening [φιλήκοος]’ (206d). Let us briefly examine this dialogue in more detail.

gone so sadly astray. Well, let us follow our present line no further, since our inquiry looks to me a rather hard sort of path: I think we had best make for the point where we turned off, and be guided by the poets; for they are our fathers, as it were, and conductors in wisdom.’ (Plato, *Lysis*, 213e-214a)

¹³⁰ See *Euthydemus*, 304d. In the *Republic* the term appears on 475d and 476b (φιλήκοοι), 535d (φιλήκοος), 548e (φιλήκοον).

¹³¹ Cf. *Phaedrus*, 228b.

Becoming friends of hearing: *Lysis*

When Socrates and Ctesippus enter the wrestling-school, they see Lysis with a garland on his head. Lysis not only looks good; Socrates notes he is also well-made (καλός) and well-bred (ἀγαθός). This observation is relevant because the *kalokagathos* is the best among the best for Plato. However, it is clear that Lysis cannot yet be a *kalokagathos* because he is not yet wise (cf. 210c; see for the meaning of *kalokagathia* M. Lamberti 2021, p. 22). Rather, he is observed to possess the qualities required for becoming one. Among these qualities is also the ability to listen well.

Lysis proves to be a keen listener in several instances. After Socrates asks Lysis about his upbringing and criticises his parents for entrusting him to a slave-tutor (παιδαγωγός), Lysis wants Socrates to approach Menexenus, son of Demophon, in the same way. But Socrates thinks Lysis himself might as well tell Menexenus what he just told him, because Lysis paid close attention (*Lysis*, 211a). Here we find an allusion to Lysis' ability to listen. After all, the expression he uses (προσεῖχες τὸν νοῦν) literally translates to “turning one's attention to the mind” (from *prosecho*, “turning one's attention to”, and *nous*, “mind”). In this case, the attention is turned to the mind by listening to Socrates' way of reasoning.

Lysis agrees with Socrates' observation that he has paid close attention to him, and assures him that he will tell Menexenus the whole of what they just discussed. However, he suggests that Socrates first talk to him about something else. That way, Lysis can continue to do what he seems to like more than speaking:

But tell him something else, that I may hear [ἀκούω] it too, until it is time to go home. (*Lysis*, 211b)

Menexenus is a keen disputant [ἐρισιτικός], which is why Lysis – presumably as a result of his fondness for listening – asks Socrates to have a talk with him. A philosophical inquiry into the meaning of friendship unfolds.

When the conversation threatens to stall and Socrates asks whether something has been wrong with their inquiry so far, it is not Menexenus who answers, but Lysis. As Socrates notes, however, this must have been unintentional, because Lysis starts to blush as soon as he has uttered his words. Lysis was so engrossed in the conversation, not by speaking, but by listening. This delights Socrates, who sees in this display of behaviour a sign of his taste and talent for philosophy (*Lysis*, 213d).

When Socrates wonders why friends are friends, he notes it cannot be for the reason that they are alike, because there would not be an added benefit of being friends: it would have nothing to add to whatever is already present in oneself.

How can such things be cherished by each other, when they can bring no mutual succor? Is it at all possible? No. And how can that be a friend, which is not cherished? By no means. (*Lysis*, 215a)

Whoever is entirely good, will have no need for anything because he is entirely self-sufficient. Strictly speaking, he will not need friends either; he will not cherish anything as a result, and according to Socrates, that which does not cherish does not love, and cannot be a friend (*Lysis*, 215b). The more mutual likeness between people, the more envy, contention, and hatred among them.

Conversely, the less they are like each other, the less hostility there will be because the other possesses that which is desired, in the same fashion that wet desires dry, cold desires hot, bitter desires sweet, and so on. The problem with this line of reasoning is that it implies that friendship between enemies is the greatest kind of friendship, for they are the least alike. But who of the two enemies is the friend in such a case?

Towards the end of *Lysis*, the metaphysical problem of friendship is – unsurprisingly – not solved. However, it is the practice of friendship that is of more interest to this study. What Lysis shows us is that

listening comes from the desire to hear something that we have not heard before. A person who thinks he has heard everything will not be a keen listener, nor will a person who simply does not listen to others out of rudeness or unawareness of his own ignorance. Only a person who realises there are things he has not already heard, will turn a friendly ear to someone with the aim to learn something new. Such a person qualifies as a *philekoon*. As Plato shows in *The Republic*, this is typically a person who is eager to learn and desires to become wise: a philosopher.

The Republic revisited

Towards the end of Book V of *The Republic*, Socrates states that it is high time to produce a definition of philosophers. After all,

either philosophers become kings in our states or those whom we now call our kings and rulers take to the pursuit of philosophy seriously and adequately. (*Republic*, 473c-d)

Plato is aware of the risk of assigning the highest status to philosophers, as most people are not philosophers, and do not necessarily admire those who are because of their peculiar nature and their “uselessness” to society (473e-474a, 487d, 490e-491a). Consequently, Plato introduces a new class: the philosopher king.

In finding an adequate definition of what philosophers are, Socrates focuses on the word *philein* which, as pointed out earlier, means “to love” or “regard with (friendly) affection”. Socrates proceeds to argue that a lover of something, whatever it is, loves it as a whole, not just parts of it. The same applies when we speak of someone who is keen about something. According to Socrates, this person will have an appetite for it as a whole.

The reason Socrates brings up these comparisons is to argue that a philosopher cannot be someone who desires a part of wisdom. Instead, a philosopher desires wisdom in its entirety. Therefore, he

cannot be selective about his studies and prefer some forms of learning over others. Were that the case, it would be impossible to say that he is a lover of knowledge and wisdom as a whole:

the one who feels no distaste in sampling every study, and who attacks his task of learning gladly and cannot get enough of it, him we shall justly pronounce the lover of wisdom, the philosopher, shall we not? (*Republic*, 475c)

Glaucon – Plato’s older brother and Socrates’ interlocutor – objects to this definition because it would embrace a great many peculiar individuals (ἄτοποι, “those who are out of place”). This would include lovers of spectacles (φιλοθεάμονες), who also delight in learning, albeit not in wisdom. Furthermore, it would include those who always want to hear something new (φιλήζοοι). Such individuals are not interested in serious debate, but, as Glaucon notes condescendingly, rather attend every play that forms part of the various Dionysiac festivals. Consequently, they cannot be regarded as philosophers either.

Remarkably, Socrates points out the likeness that lovers of listening, *philekooi*, bear to the true lovers of truth: philosophers. The similarity between these different lovers is that they share a delight of beautiful tones, colours, and shapes. However, the great difference is that simple lovers of listening are not capable of apprehending, approaching, contemplating and ultimately loving the beautiful in itself; they only delight in beautiful things – i.e. copies of the beautiful. Such a person is in a dream state, as opposed to the person who is awake and recognises beauty in itself, in the midst of beautiful things.

Plato is aware of the fact that true philosophers are very rare (*Republic*, 476c), but the use of *atopoi* for the group that Glaucon refers to, suggests that those who are fond of listening are a rare category as well; most people (οἱ πολλοί) are not *philekooi* and certainly not philosophers. The question is: are philosophers also *philekooi*? In other

words, is the ability to perceive beautiful things, in this case with the ears, a characteristic of a philosopher?

There is reason to suspect that it is. First, it would be strange if a philosopher was able to perceive beauty in itself, but not beautiful things. In *Euthydemus*, the Sophist Dionysodorus asks Socrates whether he has ever seen a beautiful thing. Socrates replies that he indeed has. In fact, he has seen many beautiful things. When he is asked whether he found them different or the same as the beautiful, he states that they were different, but each had some beauty within them (*Euthydemus*, 300e-301a). In other words, Socrates knows both beautiful things and the beauty itself, and he is able to distinguish between them.

Did he know beauty before he knew beautiful things, or is it more likely the other way around? It makes sense to presuppose that the ability to perceive beautiful things is required to learn how to perceive beauty in itself. After all, as Plato shows, one cannot look directly into the sun either; one must let one's eyes get used to the brightness first.

Further evidence to back up this suspicion is found in Book VII of *The Republic*. When discussing the curriculum for the education of those who will become future leaders, Socrates states that students should be required by law to pay special heed

to the discipline that will enable them to ask and answer questions in the most scientific manner (*Republic*, 534d).

Socrates is referring to the 'art of dialectics' (διαλεκτική; cf. 534e), the art that is central to philosophical inquiry.¹³²

As noted, those that will be subjected to the study of philosophy are specially selected for certain natural characteristics:

¹³² Socrates often refers to inquiring as σκέψις, from σκέπτομαι "to consider" or "to reflect." He also refers to it as ζήτησις ("seeking, search for") and uses the adjective ζητητικός ("disposed to search"). For examining oneself he uses the verb εξετάζω; see the famous saying about the unexamined life in *Apologia*, 38a.

The most stable, the most brave and [intellectually and physically] enterprising are to be preferred, and, so far as practicable, the most comely. But in addition we must now require that they not only be virile and vigorous in temper, but that they possess also the gifts of nature suitable to this type of education. (*Republic*, 535a-b)

The qualities Socrates is referring to also include keenness for study: a philosopher loves to learn in general and does not find it difficult to learn. This is especially important for philosophy, because, Plato believes, compared to gymnastics, people tend to drop out of “severe studies” (ισχυροῖς μαθήμασιν) sooner. The reason for this is that the toil of philosophy touches the soul, which is a more intense kind of strain than the strains related to the exercise of the body.

Further characteristics of easy learning are found in the presence of a good memory and in the (aristocratic) endowment of perseverance and general laboriousness (φιλόπονον). As with Plato’s argument in Book V (see above), here too *phileponon* cannot refer to only some kinds of toil. The ideal student should love *all* kinds of toil and should show perseverance in all circumstances, not just some. What Plato is trying to make clear here is that “toil-lovers” are those who love both physical *and* spiritual labour. After all, shunning toil is what happens when one is

a lover of gymnastics and hunting and all the labors of the body, yet is not fond of learning or of listening [φιλήκοος] or inquiring [ζητητικός], but in all such matters hates work. And he too is lame whose industry is one-sided in the reverse way. (Plato, *Republic*, 535d)

It is meaningful that Plato chooses to use the terms *philekoos* and *zetetikos* (from ζητέω, “seek” or “inquire for”) in one breath alongside aspects of learning that relate to what we may refer to as “spiritual toil”? It is not surprising, however, since both listening and inquiring are prominent parts of philosophical inquiry and the art of dialectics.

Conclusion – Listening and philosophical *paideia*

We began this chapter with a brief discussion of orality in classical Greece. Not unlike earlier times, texts were meant to be taught orally and in order to extract anything from it, one had to listen. With the arrival of Socrates, participating in dialogue became the prominent philosophical activity, which again presupposed listening. Both philosophical texts and engaging in dialogue had *paideia* as their goal: character formation. As such, listening to speeches and participating in dialogue served the purpose of altering oneself.

I argued that Plato's writings in relation to the earliest forms of education relied heavily on listening. Music – closely connected to speech (λόγος) – allowed one to listen and recognise the right and the wrong (*Republic*, 401e-402a), which in turn was expected to enable one to discover the truth or falsity of certain claims and statements as well. More closely related to this is the listening that forms part of the practice of dialogue and maieutics.

We are usually inclined to think someone listens because the other began to speak. But it may very well be the other way around: someone began to speak because the other listens. The latter is what maieutic listening aims to achieve. It is the cooperative activity that makes it possible to extract from a text or someone else that which is not being explicitly articulated, but perhaps presupposed or implied. Listening is the opportunity in dialogue for such cooperative creativity (Fiumara 2006, pp. 172-173).

Plato shares with Heraclitus the need to inquire into truth, and he would probably agree that listening is one way of doing so. It is true that Plato's work is full of visual metaphors. "Seeing" came to refer to an act of the mind: the act of figuring out the main idea behind separate things. Nonetheless, I have tried to demonstrate by discussing *Lysis* and *The Republic* that it is hard to deny that listening plays an important role in the practice of philosophising.

We listen because there is something to hear that we do not already know. This seems to account for *Lysis*' fondness of listening. It

is not necessarily the fact that Lysis can repeat and remember what someone else said that Socrates sees as a sign of his philosophical disposition; it is the fact that he *enjoys* listening. After all, simply hearing is not enough to speak of a spiritual practice. Ultimately, the fondness of hearing is expected to coincide with a fondness of learning and wisdom, which in turn is thought to lead to a transformation of character – a change of soul.

In the *The Republic*, Glaucon describes “friends of listening” (φιλήκοι) as those that are not interested in discussions. But Socrates uses the term differently in *Lysis* and *Euthydemus*, and relates it to the process of inquiring. Both listening and inquiring are talents required by students embarking in the study of philosophy.

What Heraclitus, Sophocles and Plato share is that listening is seen as a contributor towards acquiring *aretè*. Plato is not necessarily known for having written much about listening, but the evidence in some of his dialogues indicates that he thought it crucial for a philosopher to be a *philekoon*: a person who desires to become wise by listening to others. Being friendly to listening – befriending the ears – enables one to engage in the art of dialectics, the art he prioritises in his entire educational thinking in the service of virtue.

Given the oral context in which literature and philosophy flourished in classical Greece, listening has always been a part of certain pedagogy and thus, a spiritual practice. I now turn to Plutarch to see how listening for the first time takes centre stage in a philosophical educational programme designed to reach *aretè*.

CHAPTER IV

Becoming apprentices of listening: Plutarch

[Most people] think that those only philosophize who dispute from a chair and spend their leisure time in books, while the policy and philosophy which is continually exercised in works and conspicuous in actions is nowise known to them. (...) Wherefore Socrates did philosophize, not only when he neither placed benches nor seated himself in his chair, nor kept the hour of conference and walking appointed for his disciples, but also when, as it happened, he played, drank, went to war with some, bargained, finally, even when he was imprisoned and drank the poison; having first shown that man's life does at all times, in every part, and universally in all passions and actions, admit of philosophy. (Plutarch, *An seni*, 796c-d)¹³³

Introduction

As a historian, Plutarch is well known for his parallel biographies (Βίοι Παράλληλοι) of important figures and the contexts in which they lived, such as Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and Cato the Younger. These works reveal Plutarch's historical knowledge and rhetorical capacities, along with his interest in politics and philosophical character formation (Karamanolis 2020).¹³⁴

Before *Lives*, however, Plutarch wrote what is now known as the *Ethica* (Ἠθικά) or *Moralia*, which is a collection of 78 philosophical essays, letters, and lectures where he illustrates his ethical

¹³³ The full Latin title of this essay is: "An seni respublica gerenda sit", translated as "Whether old men should engage in public affairs".

¹³⁴ See for example Plutarch's *Pericles* and *Alcibiades*, both works that focus on the question how human nature can be moulded to a desirable character. This is in line with Plutarch's own claim that he wrote *Lives* to train the reader's character in preparation for a philosophical way of living (Karamanolis 2020).

and pedagogical principles in different forms, including dialogues (e.g. *Quaestiones convivales*, or *Table talk*). These more philosophical works, intended to persuade a specific audience by providing a small number of easily memorised principles, lay a great deal of emphasis on the application of philosophy to daily problems and life.

Philosophy to Plutarch was nothing less than the art of (good) living (τέχνην περὶ βίον). The accompanying ethical virtues (ἀρεταί) it alludes to were a vital precondition for political involvement in later life (Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.*, 613b). This conception of philosophy presupposes serious dedication to disciplined exercise, with the goal of self-transformation in mind (Hadot 1995, p. 268).

Interestingly, this implicitly means that politicians not only had to be good listeners, but a politician should impress and lead citizens by the ears – not the belly – emphasising *logos* instead of *pathos* (*Praec. ger. reip.*, 802d¹³⁵; Xenophontos 2016, pp. 128 & 137). Furthermore, the experienced politician is expected to set the right example when it comes to listening by not interrupting or agitating against what has been said by his students. Instead, he should induce obedience and willingness to listen (*An seni* 794c).¹³⁶ In this manner, listening remains a part of Plutarch's *paideia* from young to old: first students need to learn how to listen, then politicians lead their people by the ears, and finally, old politicians sharpen the ears of their students. This suggests that listening is not only important for learning and character formation, it is also very difficult.

The aim of this chapter is to offer an understanding of Plutarch's *paideia* and uncover the role of listening therein. I am specifically interested in understanding what role Plutarch assigns to listening in relation to the transformation (μεταβολή) of one's character. Since we cannot just assume Roman civilisation to be a mere copy of Greek civilization, something must be said about the specific con-

¹³⁵ The full Latin title of this essay is: *Praecepta gerendae reipublicae*, "Political precepts".

¹³⁶ Haroutunian-Gordon seems to agree with this observation: the role of the speaker should be to 'prepare the listener to listen to what he or she has to say' (Haroutunian-Gordon 2011, p. 136), in other words, a kind of *captatio benevolentia*.

text in which Plutarch operated. Therefore, I begin this chapter with a discussion of the Roman educational system wherein Plutarch operated, followed by Plutarch's main influences. This also serves to situate Plutarch in the classical philosophical tradition. I then proceed by offering a detailed discussion of Plutarch's listening-oriented works – *On reading the poets* and *On listening to lectures* – before closing the chapter with some general conclusions that will return in the final chapter.

A very brief overview of early Imperial Roman *paideia*

Honoured with both Athenian and Roman citizenship, Plutarch nonetheless spent the greater part of his life in Chaeronea, a small village in former Boeotia, central Greece. He journeyed frequently to Rome, where he contributed to state affairs, and delivered philosophical lectures in Greek (Plutarch, *Demosthenes*, 2.2; Babbitt 1949, p. ix).

Some scholars have suggested that Plutarch, apart from serving as a priest of Apollo, also acted as a diplomat for Delphi. This would have inevitably meant that he worked closely with Roman statesmen at the highest level, exercising considerable influence on public life (Stadter 2015, p. 70). Ancient sources also report that Plutarch received from Emperor Trajan – who ruled between 98 and 117 CE – one of the highest honours for members of the equestrian class: the consular insignia or *ornamenta consularia*. He also seems to have been an imperial procurator in Achaëa under Trajan's successor, Emperor Hadrian, but these accounts are contested (Xenophon 2016, p. 126).

It has been argued that Roman civilisation was archaic in its own way, and developed relatively independently from the Greek world in the early centuries (Marrou 1956, p. 229). However, more recent scholarship based not only on ancient sources but also on archaeological findings shows that intercultural exchanges already took place at least since the late eighth century BCE, making the encounter between both cultures more gradual and less sudden than previ-

ously thought (Sciarrino 2015, pp. 226-227). What is still generally accepted is that Latin culture and education from the third century BCE modelled itself after classical Greek culture and education.

According to Marrou, Roman virtues such as the willingness to die for one's country and respect for the old customs mostly came from the city-state in Republican times,¹³⁷ as opposed to the virtues praised by wise men in Greece, standing in the tradition of *paideia*. This difference is related to the fact that Greek education originated in the aristocracy, whereas Roman education at around the end of the sixth century BCE was initially meant to educate peasants, involving virtues such as hard work, frugality and severity. Later, Roman education was adapted for the aristocracy, but the peasant ideals influenced other Roman educational ideals, in that it was meant to be predominantly practical from the very outset: it focused on husbandry¹³⁸ and everything else a "gentleman farmer" should know (Marrou 1956, pp. 238-240; Sciarrino 2015, p. 229).

From approximately the third century BCE onwards, Roman education became more intellectual, with the addition of the art of war, medicine and law, and the introduction of rhetoric and philosophy under the influence of Greece. By the second century BCE it was not unusual to find Roman politicians that were fluent in Greek. One of the main advantages of Greek culture adopted by the Romans was the art of rhetoric, which became as prominent in Rome as it was centuries earlier in Athens.¹³⁹ After all, politicians had to know how to influence an audience, how to inspire an army, or how to address a tribunal (Marrou 1956, pp. 243-244).

By this time, Roman families were eager to arrange training in Greek for their children. The demand for Greek teachers in Rome

¹³⁷ Rome became an empire with Augustus in 27 BCE.

¹³⁸ Primarily knowing how to manage one's land and make it pay. For an interesting account see Foucault (1990, pp. 152-165).

¹³⁹ As noted before, speaking well in public, which also implies the ability to persuade an audience of listeners, was already crucially important in Greece, especially in a court of law. See Beaton (2021, p. 142 ff).

grew to such an extent that young Romans began to search for qualified teachers outside the city and in Greece. Towards the end of the second century BCE, prominent Romans such as Cicero and his contemporaries began to attend philosophical and rhetorical lectures in Athens and Rhodes (Reydams-Schils 2015, p. 125).

From his account of his own formation, Cicero explains the pedagogical hierarchy for a boy. He is first trained in the liberal arts, that is, practices and forms of knowledge that are suitable for free men and are valuable in and of themselves: grammar, literature, music, and mathematics. After these so-called *pro-paideutic* forms of knowledge that are thought to prepare the soul to receive virtue, the most important thing is to acquire from philosophy are ethical insights that lead to a good life. Lastly come the philosophical treatises on rhetoric, particularly those that remain close to actual practice, and preferably taught by Greek professional teachers (Reydams-Schils 2015, pp. 124 & 127).

The Greek influence on Roman education was found in the way children were brought up – as educated Greeks. In the curriculum they were subjected to in Latin schools, Greek pedagogical ideas inspired by the great poets sparked Latin poetry to come into existence, since the Romans had no equivalent of Homer. What Homer was to an educated Greek, Virgil became to an educated Roman (Marrou 1956, p. 252).

Xenophontos notes a correlation between the role of the poet and that of the philosopher: both act as moral teachers of the young. But where the poet employs myths and fables, the philosopher teaches through “philosophical truth.” The additional responsibility of the philosopher is to impart individual (and possibly unpopular) judgement of students, rendering the philosopher more substantial in his educational contribution (Xenophontos 2016, pp. 80-81 & 88).

With respect to philosophy, Cicero had some influence on its development. But despite the importance he attributed to philosophy, his weight was much more felt in rhetoric and eloquence. The first steps

in the emergence of “Roman philosophy” were inspired by Pythagoras, and later by Epicurus and the Neo-Platonists. But the Stoics, represented by Seneca, Musonius Rufus, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius had the greatest influence on Roman philosophy (Reydams-Schils, 2010).

As opposed to the Greek aristocratic approach to education, where well-off families entrusted their offspring to slaves, Roman education initially relied on the family. In particular the mother dedicated much of her time and efforts to bringing up the child in its earliest stages. Later, when the child reached the age of seven and onwards, fathers began to look after their sons’ formation, while daughters remained at home with their mothers.

When boys reached the age of around sixteen, their home education would be outsourced to an old friend of the family who was considered to be experienced enough, particularly in politics, to continue the upbringing of the child.¹⁴⁰ The boy was now a citizen (with accompanying rights and obligations) and exchanged his toga with purple edges for a *toga virilis*.

In elite Roman families,¹⁴¹ receiving the *toga virilis* indicated a release from the care of one’s elders and tutors. Young men were expected to become more serious and dedicate life to practical occupations such as horse riding, hunting, or in the case of the young Nicander, to whom Plutarch’s essay on listening is addressed, higher studies such as philosophy (Babbitt 1949, p. 201).¹⁴²

Having outlined some general aspects of Roman *paideia* and philosophy, the influences on Plutarch will now be explored, so as to situate his philosophy in the schools of thought that co-determined the content of his work on listening.

¹⁴⁰ See Marrou (1956, pp. 233-234) for a detailed discussion of what such an education looked like.

¹⁴¹ See Sloomjtes (2011) for a more in-depth discussion about local elites in the Roman World, and in particular some of the problems in studying these.

¹⁴² Horse training and horse riding, which could often include hunting deer or boar, were already common activities among the young elite in Archaic Greece. See Griffith (2015, p. 36).

Plutarch's influences

Scholars often divide Plutarch's categories of teaching in expository or protreptic – the advice to imitate or refrain from certain courses of action, commonly related to the *Lives* – and descriptive moralism, which studies universal truths about human experience. However, recent scholarship shows that these aspects are far more intertwined than was previously realised (Xenophontos 2016, pp. 13 & 20).

Central to this study are Plutarch's ethical works. These works expound Plutarch's philosophy of character formation and education, and situate listening at the core of its scheme. Plutarch's ethical works can be further divided into more theoretical works (e.g. *De virt. mor.* and *An virt. doc.*),¹⁴³ and more practically- and pedagogically-oriented works that give advice on attaining virtue and building character. *On reading the poets*, which, interestingly, has the Latin title *De audiendis poetis* ("On hearing the poets")¹⁴⁴, and *On listening to lectures* (*De aud.*), fall in the latter category.¹⁴⁵

Indeed, despite the different styles between these and Plutarch's other texts, separating his works into different categories does not entirely do justice to the similarities between them (Karamanolis 2020). The meaning of Plutarch's work always stretches beyond mere instructions, and entails a larger conception of philosophy as a way of life. According to Xenophontos, *On reading the poets* and

¹⁴³ The Latin titles of these essays are respectively: *De virtute morali*, "On moral virtue", and *An virtus doceri possit*, "Whether virtue can be taught".

¹⁴⁴ Another title is *Quomodo adolescens poetas audire debeat*: "How adolescents should listen to the poets". The reason it is translated to *On reading the poets* is that Plutarch discusses the study of poetry as an act of both reading and listening, but the English translation does not very accurately reflect the content of the essay.

¹⁴⁵ *On the education of children* (*De lib. educ.*) is also part of this list, but it has aroused uncertainty with respect to its authenticity among most scholars. The Wytttenbach edition which appeared between 1795-1810, named after the translator Daniel Albert Wytttenbach, contains the philological arguments for doubting the genuineness. However, the Dutch Scholar Alexander Sizoo attributed the work to Plutarch in his dissertation *De Plutarchi qui fertur de liberis educandis libello* (1918), and the Dutch translator Gerard Janssen agrees it must have been by Plutarch himself, although he offers little more substantiation for his claim than intimate familiarity with Plutarch's entire oeuvre, which he undoubtedly has. Despite the disagreement, many scholars still consider the text to be interesting, thanks to the insights it provides into the educational attitudes of that time. See Berry's article "The *De Liberis Educandis* of Pseudo-Plutarch" (1958).

On listening to lectures can even be read as companion pieces. This is not just because of the similarity in their respective titles, but in the repeated use of the Greek term for listening: *akouein*.

With Plutarch, we see a move away from the emphasis on dialogue to the art of listening and the cultivation of silence. Listening helps us discriminate between truth and falsehood, so that the student of philosophy ultimately does not depend on someone else, but rather on the internal voice of reason itself: the *logos*.¹⁴⁶

Following in the footsteps of his Greek predecessors such as Plato and Aristotle, *paideia* in Plutarch's work can be interpreted as long-lasting moral training aimed at achieving excellence of character. In line with this, "education" for Plutarch mostly refers to "ethical" – not vocational or cognitive – formation in the ancient sense: with the purpose of forming character (ἦθος) in such a way that ethical excellence (ἠθικὴ ἀρετή) can be attained, enabling one to live a good – i.e. philosophical – and happy life (εὖ ζῆν; Xenophon 2016, pp. 13 & 24).

Although Plato is not the only formative influence on Plutarch, it is clear that Plutarch draws heavily from the writings of Plato when it comes to ethical formation. Both Plato and Plutarch focus in their *paideia* on the practical life that unfolds in a social-pedagogical context. One of his translators, the classicist Frank Cole Babbitt, describes Plutarch's interest in practical philosophy elegantly:

For him philosophy does not dwell apart on the chill heights of speculation, but walks on earth as the everyday companion of man to guide him in right living. (Babbitt 1949, p. xv)

In addition, we find emulation (μίμησις) as a characteristic feature of their respective pedagogies. With Plato, it is in the figure of Socrates

¹⁴⁶ According to Foucault, the disappearance of the dialectical structure is one of the great differences between the era of Plato and the Roman imperial period, where listening to the truth and listening to the self become more prominent (Foucault 1997, p. 236).

that we find the example to emulate; with Plutarch, we find examples set by different famous men and women.

For his understanding of Plato, and to form his own philosophy, Plutarch draws from *Timaeus*, the metaphysics of which he interprets literally.¹⁴⁷ Plutarch also follows Plato in his epistemology of philosophical dialectics, which the latter saw as the highest *technè* of *paideia* (see Chapter III), and in the view that attaining true knowledge is indeed possible (Karamanolis 2020).

In relation to style, there are many Platonic characteristics to be found in Plutarch as well – for instance, the dialogic form in *Table Talk* and the use of metaphors, allegories, and myths throughout his oeuvre. Furthermore, and like Plato's dialogues, it is often challenging to discern the writer's own philosophical views.

As can be expected, there also exist differences between Plato and Plutarch. I have already mentioned that Plato centres his work on Socrates as the figure to emulate. Plutarch offers a greater variety of teachers that serve as moral examples, as is evident in his numerous biographies on noble Greeks and Romans. Some scholars also point towards other differences.

According to Xenophontos, for example, virtue in the Platonic realms denotes mostly qualities that make someone into a competent leader of his community. Plutarch, on the other hand, is alleged to have widened the notion of virtue to include 'continued self-exploration that ranges freely over various domains of human life, not just politics' (Xenophontos 2016, pp. 16-17). However, I find this claim a bit surprising, since Plato's notion of politics also includes self-care and the cultivation of virtues. As I argued in Chapter III, Plato's *Republic* is not to be understood as a political work in the narrow sense.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ See Plutarch's "On the creation of the soul in the *Timaeus*" (*De animae procreatione in Timaeo*). Furthermore, it is difficult to reconcile Xenophontos' claim to the statement on p. 19

that 'philosophical education equips Plutarch's statesman to be an ethical teacher for the body politic.' See also the ostensibly contradictory comment: 'In (seemingly) subordinating personal morality to the service of politics in the above cases, Plutarch did not mean to prioritise the latter over the former nor should we assume that he maintained such a firm distinction between the two constituents of philosophy. By contrast, in doing so he does appear to be following quite

When it comes to the cultivation of philosophical virtues, I tend not to see the differences, but rather the commonalities between Plato and Plutarch. Consider, for example, the following passage from “On reading the poets” where Plutarch defines virtue as

the best and godliest estate to which we can attain, which we think of as correctness of reasoning, the height of good sense, and a disposition of soul in full agreement therewith. (*De aud. poet.* 24e)

This is strongly reminiscent of Plato’s conception of justice (δικαιοσύνη), which he saw as the unison of all virtues in the soul. Harmony in the soul subsequently leads to just and therefore good actions, in which we recognise perfect *aretè* as the basis of happiness (εὐδαιμονία; see *Republic*, 443c-d).¹⁴⁹

Judging by the polemical nature of the essays arguing against them, Plutarch was less than impressed by his contemporary philosophical rivals, the Stoics and Epicureans. He criticised the Stoics and Epicureans for their misguided interpretations and criticisms of Socrates and Plato with respect to the dismissal of the dialectical spirit, and their mistaken assumptions about human nature and reality.¹⁵⁰

Nevertheless, as devoted to Plato as he was, Plutarch does adopt Stoic and Epicurean attitudes,¹⁵¹ and even quotes from them ap-

faithfully in the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition of the Imperial period, which held that ethics in the form of individual conduct and values was inextricably linked to excellence in social and political organisation: (p. 99).

¹⁴⁹ Happiness is defined stoically by Plutarch: ‘[the] complete possession or attainment of good, or the perfection of a life gliding smoothly along in accord with nature.’ (*De aud. poet.* 24f-25a)

¹⁵⁰ E.g. with respect to the materialist metaphysics that does not allow for the Platonic realm of God, Ideas, and immaterial souls. See *De communibus notitiis adversus Stoicos*; *De Stoicorum repugnantiiis*; *De virt. mor.* Plutarch was familiar with the content of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and considered Aristotle’s ethics to be articulations of Plato’s ethics. But Plutarch also criticises Aristotle for contradicting Plato on the Ideas, and only uses Aristotle instrumentally to expound his Platonic views (Karamanolis 2020). According to Xenophontos, Plutarch’s theories on character formation (e.g. *De virt. mor.*) originate, at least in part, from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, but this is not as certain as Plato’s acknowledged influence. See Xenophontos (2016, p. 24 and n5).

¹⁵¹ This may be partly explained by Plutarch’s misunderstanding of the Stoic dogma, see Helmbold in *De virt. mor.* pp. 16-17. For examples of agreement between Plutarch and the Stoics, see Reydams-Schils (2015, p. 131).

provingly (e.g. *De prof. in virt.*, 78e;¹⁵² *De aud. poet.*, 33c, 34b & 37a). Plutarch may also have been inspired by the Stoics in their pedagogical use of poetry,¹⁵³ which led him to come up with a more elaborate proposal for teaching poetry in *On reading the poets* (see Xenophon 2016, p. 83 n21). In addition, Plutarch shares with Plato and the Hellenistic schools that were influenced by him – including the Peripatetic school – that philosophy is meant to guide the ethical life and control the desires and passions that make one deviate towards vice.

Plutarch's indebtedness to Plato is well summarised in the moral virtues and vices listed in "On whether old men should engage in public affairs", in which he lists justice (δικαιοσύνη), prudence (σωφροσύνη), and wisdom (φρόνησις) as the 'true beauties of the soul' (*An seni*, 797e). While the fourth cardinal virtue (ἀνδρεία) is omitted here, bravery is still widely celebrated by Plutarch (*An seni*, 788d; cf. *De prof. in virt.*, 76b-c; *Cato the Younger*). These highest of virtues are ideally employed to serve the community (Xenophon 2016, p. 146).

A final important influence that guides Plutarch in the realisation of this ideal comes from Aristotle. Although it remains uncertain whether Plutarch was familiar with the specific contents of *Nicomachean Ethics* himself, there is no doubt that Plutarch's theories on character formation and the conceptualisation of moral virtue rely on Aristotle (Sandbach 1982, pp. 217-219, 221-222).¹⁵⁴

All in all, it would not be wide off the mark to state that Plutarch's attempts were to create a coherent system out of Plato's work as a whole. Its purpose was to ultimately prove it could bring about *aretè* and happiness, both on the individual and the state level. Studying philosophy meant acting like a bee for Plutarch. While the rest of

¹⁵² The Latin title of this essay is: *De profectibus in virtute*, "On progress in virtue".

¹⁵³ According to De Rijk, Pythagorean educators were the first to open the dialogue between Homer and Hesiod's poetry and philosophy, which set the tone for the further development of Greek culture and education, particularly with respect to the inclusion of poetry as the starting point for philosophical discussion (De Rijk 1965, pp. 43-44).

¹⁵⁴ Aristotle's influence becomes especially prominent in Plutarch's essay "On moral virtue".

the world sits and enjoys the colours and fragrances of flowers, the bee makes honey from what it gathers.¹⁵⁵ Therefore,

of persons who make use of Plato and Xenophon for their language, and gather therefrom nothing else but the purity of the Attic style, like dew and bloom, what can you say of them, save that they are the sort of persons that content themselves with the sweet odour and bouquet of medicines, but have no desire for their sedative and purgative virtues, nor the power to discern them? (Plutarch, *De prof. in virt.*, 79d)

For a philosopher it is necessary to be of a certain disposition to be able to collect something worthwhile from a discourse. This disposition is formed by habit and further implies a certain fondness for what is beautiful and proper (φιλίας τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ οἰκείου), which reminds of the fondness of hearing we discussed in the previous chapter.

What is necessary to gather and assimilate the morally beneficial is attention (προσέχειν) and listening exercise (ἀσκησις). Indeed, according to Plutarch, what makes one note virtue, and become fit for receiving it, is listening. This brings us to the heart of the matter, Plutarch's complementary works *On reading the poets* and *On listening to lectures*. Let us begin with the former.

Listening to the poets

Poetry was a part of the earliest efforts of *paideia*. But even after Plato, the works of Homer, Hesiod, Sophocles, and Menander remained popular in pedagogical contexts. In Plutarch's days, this was not different. Poetry continued to be a key element of elite formation and adult culture (Xenophontos 2016, pp. 82-83). The Romans brought forth their own poets such as Virgil, Horace and Ovid, who all left an indelible legacy on the Western world.

“On reading the poets” is a moralising essay in so far that stu-

¹⁵⁵ Cf. *De aud. poet.*, 32e-f.

dents are encouraged to exercise their judgement to tame their passions from the outset (Xenophontos 2016, p. 91). Poetry's strength is that it imitates the characters and lies of imperfect humans, who are subject to emotions, false opinions, and all kinds of ignorance. At the same time, poetry shows that humans have an inborn goodness which often leads them to a beneficial change in conduct.

As such, Plutarch's essay on poetry treats it as a means of preparation for the study of philosophy. After all, poetry touches on the same themes as philosophy does, albeit in a different and, to the layman and the young, more enjoyable way (*De aud. poet.*, 14e, 15f). The added benefit is that the student of philosophy will have some familiarity with philosophical issues before diving deeper into them.¹⁵⁶

Interestingly, the training in poetry focuses on recognising and shunning false and immoral passages in poetry. Students should learn not to be attracted by superficial beauty (*De prof. in virt.*, 80e-81b; *De aud.*, 41e-f). They should look past the splendour and colourfulness of language and art, and seek what is truly beautiful, that which is useful and salutary to the improvement of moral virtue:¹⁵⁷

For close-shut gates do not preserve a city from capture if it admits the enemy through one; nor does continence in the other pleasures of sense save a young man, if he unwittingly abandons himself to that which comes through hearing [ἀκοῆς]. On the contrary, inasmuch as this form of pleasure engages more closely the man that is naturally given to thought and reason, so much the more, if neglected, does it injure and corrupt him that receives it. (Plutarch, *De aud. poet.*, 14f-15a)

¹⁵⁶ Plutarch has such subjects as the philosophical doctrines about the soul in mind – that are combined with mythology such as Plato does in *Gorgias*, 523 ff (*De aud. poet.*, 14e-f) – but also contemplating death (*De aud. poet.*, 37a), the nature of happiness and blessedness (*ibid.*), and regarding wealth without virtue and repute as undesirable and useless.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Glaucon in relation to *philekoia*. See for examples of citations that Plutarch believes set the young on a better course in their lives; *De aud. poet.*, 33d-f.

In other words, listening, when not trained properly, can potentially do harm. Conversely, when philosophically trained – exercised spiritually – listening relates to the development of moral virtue because it makes the listener engage in self-examination.

However, according to Plutarch, most people who listen to poetry seek pleasure to the ear (see *philekoos*, Chapter III). Since truth can be unpleasant as well, it is not prioritised by the pleasure-seeker, who is more attracted to the charm of fiction which readily turns away from pain to the opposite, more satisfactory direction (*De aud. poet.*, 16c).

Poetry by its very nature contains falsehoods causing ignorance and delusion regarding the gods (*De aud. poet.*, 16b-c; 17b). This is not to say that the poets were all ignorant according to Plutarch. Poets such as Homer, Pindar and Sophocles, who Plutarch obviously held in high esteem,¹⁵⁸ must have known themselves that what they wrote was not always true.¹⁵⁹ But poetry is not entirely based on fiction. What makes it so attractive to Plutarch is that it cleverly interweaves “falsehood” (ψεῦδος, i.e. “fiction”) with “plausibility” (πιθανότης).

Thus, the young should be equipped from the beginning of their education with the fact that poetry is not primarily concerned with truth. After all, truth is laborious to obtain, which is why even philosophers are challenged by questions concerning truth. As a result, it cannot be emphasised enough that poetry relies on verbal ingenuity (*De aud. poet.*, 17e-f, 25b-c).

We now begin to see why Plutarch held listening in such high esteem. After all, language and speech, which address reason, are the instruments of virtue. It is not by accident that Hadot classifies reading and listening as *intellectual* spiritual exercises: they are intimately intertwined with human reason. In Plutarch’s case, reading and listening to poetry falls into this category because it is taken

¹⁵⁸ See *De aud. poet.*, 20a-b.

¹⁵⁹ For examples see *De aud. poet.*, 17c.

up for the purpose of one's own formation, which requires one to approach poetry with reason, and not merely with a desire to be entertained.

I have addressed the fact that the fundamentals for spiritual exercise, aimed at character transformation, strongly depend on speech and listening. In the discussion of Plutarch's work up until this point, the focus has been on what students should direct their attention to, and not so much on the nature of listening, and what is needed to listen well. "On listening to lectures" attends to these issues in more depth.

Catching a speaker's throw

The Greek title of Plutarch's essay is *Περὶ τοῦ ἀκούειν τῶν φιλοσόφων* and translates to: "On Listening to [the Lectures of] Philosophers". It is not clear when exactly it was written, but based on estimates of the identity of Nicander, and an estimation of a realistic age for Plutarch to have been considered an experienced philosopher, it is likely that the essay was written between 80 and 100 CE (Hillyard 1981, pp. xxxiv-v).

Plutarch wrote his essay for those embarking on the study of philosophy. One such person was the young man Nicander.¹⁶⁰ After having received the *toga virilis*, Plutarch noted that Nicander was now at an age where he could begin to live a life guided by *logos* or "reason". Young men (*μειρακίων*) of the likes of Nicander were expected to learn to become independent in their selfcare. Adulthood meant choosing freely how to live, without being dictated by one's own desires or by what others say one should do. After all, in the absence of a direct ruler, the risk of a false sense of freedom, where desires insist on exercising free reign, is always present (*De aud.*, 37c-d). To avoid becoming a slave in a life of pursuing pleasure

¹⁶⁰ Not much is known about Nicander, other than the assumption that he was probably between seventeen and twenty years old – this was a common age for receiving the *toga virilis* – and the likeliness of him being the son of a friend or colleague of Plutarch's (Hillyard 1981, p. xxxiv).

(βίος ἀπολαυστικός),¹⁶¹ and in order to find true freedom, Nicander is advised to replace his former tutor with reason, by engaging in the act of listening.

According to Plutarch, his essay on listening originated as a lecture, which is in line with the oral tradition of philosophy (see Chapter II and III). The lecture was possibly delivered at Plutarch's own school, where he gave lectures of the type he alludes to in *De audiendo*: lectures aimed at living a life guided by *logos* or reason (Hillyard 1981, p. xxvii).

Lectures in the Roman Empire delivered by Plutarch had the ability to strongly move the audience. As Seneca put it:

The beauty of the matter sweeps them along and stimulates them, not the sound of empty words. (Seneca 2010, p. 232)

Both the speaker and the audience had an active role to play for this to unfold. To be able to participate in the game of speaking and listening, an intricate set of unwritten rules (i.e. etiquette) had to be observed, including nodding one's head, moving one's hands, rising to the feet at appropriate moments, making a suitable number of compliments and comments, and asking the right questions at the right time.

According to Larsen, lectures in the Roman Empire were “agonistic” in the sense that a speaker attempted to overwhelm the audience. However, this could only happen if the audience played an active role in the process, which was done by abiding to a wide variety of rules and avoiding all sorts of *faux pas* such as nodding one's head without actually understanding, yawning, or making a sour face (Larsen 2016, pp. 448-449).

¹⁶¹ The first poetry of hedonism arose during the Periclean age, advocated by seventh century BCE poets such as Semonides of Amorgos and Mimnermus of Colophon. According to Jaeger, the introduction of hedonism in poetry marks one of the most important phases in the development of the Greek spirit. After all, the conflict between pleasure (τὸ ἡδύ) and nobility (τὸ καλόν) – i.e. the individual will and politics – would remain a central theme in the philosophy of the sophists, Plato – who does away with the idea of pleasure (ἡδονή) as the highest good – the Stoics, Epicureans, and Plutarch (Jaeger 1946, p. 129).

The lectures Plutarch refers to in *De audiendo* were delivered by moral philosophers in the broad sense of the term: they were from speakers who shared with their audiences practical guidelines for living the good life based on reason (Hillyard 1981, p. xvi). Similarly to classical Athens, not all such philosophers were “real” philosophers in the sense that they practised what they preached: sophistry still existed in Roman times.

Among the speakers were also those who specialised in rhetoric rather than practical wisdom. Such speakers would typically address the same issues as philosophers, but the content was instrumental to learning about speaking, rather than moving the listener towards a virtuous life.¹⁶²

According to Plutarch, young men often believe that philosophy has nothing to do with real life. For Plutarch, the opposite is true, which is why students should follow up on what teachers say by comparing their words with their deeds. As we have seen in “On reading the poets”, this is how true philosophers are recognised: by asking questions about their progress and examining their own way of life. Surely, there are philosophers living the contemplative life (βίος θεωρητικός) as well, and Plutarch is aware of this, but his admiration goes out to those that take part in public life (βίος πρακτικός). Since the majority of people are not good listeners, Plutarch notes that the subject of listening should be continually addressed in one’s own thinking and in discussions with others. Most people practice speaking before they have learned how to listen properly, because they assume that listening does not need any practice before one can benefit from it.

For Plutarch, however, knowing how to listen is at least as important as knowing how to speak. A listener not only participates in the lecture; he also contributes to the speaking process. To illustrate this, Plutarch uses ball-playing (σφαίριζω) – which was a popular

¹⁶² An interesting example is Fronto’s emphasis on rhetoric instead of philosophy in his correspondence with Marcus Aurelius.

pastime – as a metaphor. A listener catches the speaker’s throw:

(...) just as in playing ball it is necessary for the catcher to adapt his movements to those of the thrower and to be actively in accord [εὐρύθμως – rhythmical] with him, so with discourses, there is a certain accord between the speaker and the hearer, if each is heedful in his obligation. (*De aud.*, 45e-f)

There is an important difference between ball-playing and listening to a philosophy lecture, however: in ball-playing games one learns to throw and catch at the same time, but this is not the case with speaking and discourse. Here, one should first learn to catch – i.e. receive – before learning how to throw.

In other words, listening, just like speaking, requires exercise. After all, philosophical lectures are not one-sided affairs: everyone must play a part, which suggests more than merely showing goodwill and being polite (Hillyard 1981, p. 206). Characteristically, Plutarch compares a guest at a dinner, to students attending lectures: just as a guest at a dinner participates in the dining event (e.g. by entertaining conversation), a listener of a lecture acts as a fellow-worker with the speaker (*De aud.*, 45e).

Those who think otherwise and are more inclined to the practice of ‘winning’ arguments instead of collaborating, are generally very poor listeners according to Plutarch. They ‘fill their ears’ with what they don’t need, which is why one should learn to listen before one learns to speak; only after listening has been exercised can one be expected to say things of substance. In this sense, Plutarch agrees with the Stoics when he says good educators should focus on teaching their students to be good listeners by listening extensively and minimising speech. As the founding father of Stoicism, Zeno of Citium, is believed to have said:¹⁶³

¹⁶³ Plutarch probably drew more from Zeno. For relevant material, including Zeno’s views on education, see Hillyard (1981, p. 69).

The reason why we have two ears and only one mouth is that we may listen the more and talk the less. (Zeno as quoted in Diogenes Laërtius, Book VII, 23-24)

Based on Plutarch's description of the different types of listeners, however, it is clear that students were not always willing to listen patiently to the lecturer, and in some cases, had more interest in lectures of the lighter and more entertaining sort. This is why he stresses one should not waste too much time with Sophists – whom Plutarch gladly criticises¹⁶⁴ – but rather benefit from listening to the scholar who says and does things that contribute to the upbuilding of character (Babbitt 1949, p. 202).

Silence and auspicious listening behaviour

Although Plutarch acknowledges the then commonly held belief that the ears are the most delicate of the senses, and therefore intimately – but not exclusively – connected to the emotions, he suggests that our listening ability is even more connected with reason, since it makes possible the cultivation of a virtuous life.¹⁶⁵

For while many places and parts of the body make way for vice to enter through them and fasten itself upon the soul, virtue's only hold upon the young is afforded by the ears. (*De aud.*, 38a-b)

Unfortunately, Plutarch is unclear about the exact relation between the senses on the one hand, and vice and virtue on the other – such digressions would probably not have had the desired effect on his audience – but he seems to endorse the (partly) Stoic view that emo-

¹⁶⁴ See *Maxime cum principibus*, 778b. Nevertheless, Plutarch cannot have escaped some influence on his own thinking from the Sophists, particularly when it comes to *paideia* (Xenophon 2016, pp. 174-175).

¹⁶⁵ The dichotomy between emotion and reason probably serves to argue that emotions relate to vice, and reason is connected with virtue (Hillyard 1981, pp. 49-51). See also Plato, *Republic*, 530d.

tions as vices are caused by what comes externally through the different senses, whereas reason, and therefore virtue, is activated via the ears exclusively (Hillyard 1981, p. 51).

Still, vice can also reach us via the ears through flattery and ‘vile words.’ This is why Xenocrates (c. 396-314 BCE), the Platonic philosopher and teacher at the Academy, advised putting ear-protectors on children – rather than athletes¹⁶⁶ – until they reached the age to philosophise. In this way, children are protected from the ‘blows’ of words that can corrupt their characters.

It is clear again that speech for Plutarch conveys both virtue and vice, which is why Bias of Priene, one of the seven sages, sent on request to the Pharaoh Amasis the tongue of a sacrificial animal: it was simultaneously the best and the worst portion (*De aud.*, 38b-c). The view that speech can convey both vice and virtue is related to Plutarch’s reasons for seeing the ears as the most significant of all human senses, and why they should be protected in every conceivable way. At least, if they are to be put to use in philosophical formation.

Listening to a philosophy lecturer

What listening as a spiritual exercise could have looked like, we learn from such details as the emphasis on the importance of silence while listening to another, especially a philosophy lecturer.¹⁶⁷ One should always listen without interrupting, bear emotions silently, and any questions or other concerns should wait until after the lecture.¹⁶⁸

The listener should control his emotions with reason, even if he does not agree with what the speaker is expounding. Instead, the

¹⁶⁶ Probably boxers or wrestlers (Hillyard 1981, p. 53).

¹⁶⁷ In so-called sympotic groups or “clubs”, ritualised wine drinking with an educational purpose, younger novices were expected to remain largely silent during the speeches and performances of adults and experienced adolescents. This allowed them to “modestly receive” their elders’ wisdom (and/or romantic courtesies). Griffith (2015, pp. 46-47).

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Philo’s emphasis on active and attentive silence in *On the Contemplative Life*, 75-76. This is also reflected in Plutarch’s so-called sympotic work, *Table Talk*. See for example *Quaest. conv.*, 746b, where remaining silent and contemplating is valued higher than speaking (Xenophon 2016, p. 191).

listener ought to wait until the speaker finishes, and even then, he should restrain himself from immediately presenting his objection. The importance of allowing for an interval is so that the speaker has the chance to add something, should he wish to do so. He who understands the importance of listening with restraint, is able to accept and grasp what is said, and then discern between useful lectures on one hand, and useless or false ones (ἄχρηστον ἢ ψευδῆ) on the other. This is hard to achieve, if not impossible, when interrupting others.

Instead of losing good manners, then, the young should lose their self-conceit and pride as they become older. This way, they can make room in the soul for good things (cf. Stoicism and the physical understanding of the soul). People who enjoy disagreeing with others are bad listeners; they are so full of themselves that they cannot take anything in. Therefore, listeners need to be ‘deflated’ first (Hillyard 1981, p. 71).

In addition to self-conceit, Plutarch marks envy (φθόνος) – which stems from an unreasonable desire to fame (φιλοδοξία) and honour (φιλοτιμία) – as disadvantageous to listening. What is more, envy is one of the worst of human afflictions in relation to lectures. It is pointless for a listener, since the experience of displeasure hinders the opportunity to absorb what is usefully said:

(...) it is the very worst associate and counsellor for one that would listen to a lecture, inasmuch as it makes what is profitable to be vexatious, unpleasing, and unacceptable, because envious persons are pleased with anything rather than with the good points of a discourse. Now the man that is stung by the wealth, or repute, or beauty possessed by another, is merely envious; for he is depressed by the good fortune of others; but one who feels discontentment at an excellent discourse is vexed by what is for his own good. (*De aud.*, 39d-e)

In other words, envy makes a good lecture painful, and as a result

it stands in the way of personal growth. Taking a hostile attitude towards another's success amounts to taking a hostile attitude to oneself, because one stops listening, and consequently one stops benefitting from the lecture.

And as if that were not enough, envy confuses and distracts the mind, which is why the ideal listener controls his desire for repute and is 'gracious and well-disposed' (ἡλεων καὶ προῶν)¹⁶⁹ towards the speaker, 'as though he were a guest at some dinner or ceremonial banquet' (*De aud.*, 40b). What such an attitude alludes to becomes clear in the context of Plutarch's discussion of the different types of speakers.

Types of speakers and proper reactions to their performance

Broadly speaking, there are two categories of speakers according to Plutarch: good ones and bad ones. A listener can learn from both. In case of the former, they are somewhat obvious because good speakers set good examples. Accordingly, they should be praised for their ability to be a good speaker. Driven by the desire to admire and emulate (ζηλοῦντας, from ζηλέω, "to be zealous for"), they should also be imitated in their care, diligence, and study.

In case of a bad speaker, there is an opportunity to learn from his mistakes since they provide an opportunity for inquiring into the reasons and sources of bad speaking. Attitudes of bad speakers one typically finds in "showy" philosophical lectures include 'poverty of thought, emptiness of phrase, an offensive bearing, fluttering excitement combined with a vulgar delight at commendation, and the like' (*De aud.*, 40c). These characteristics should be avoided, but without being contemptuous. One should rather try to emulate what Socrates did with Lysis (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 237b ff.): listening, criticising his speech, and then delivering a better speech. In this manner, one uses someone else's discourse to inspect and adjust one's own life (*De aud.*, 45a).

Plutarch's categories of speakers show that regardless of who is

¹⁶⁹ Translated by Babbitt as listening "cheerfully and affably", see Plutarch (1949, p. 217).

speaking or how bad a lecture may be, to reap the benefits of listening, proper behaviour in the lecture-room is of the utmost importance.¹⁷⁰ One should keep in mind that criticising a speaker is easy. But for the criticism to be useful (χρήσιμον), it should be transferred to oneself by asking: “Am I like that?” This question is easier asked when listening than when speaking, and it also reduces contempt (καταφρόνησις), which along with overconfidence is harmful (Hillyard 1981, pp. 83-84).

Just as listeners should be careful not to exercise contempt and disdain for bad speakers, they should be careful with naïve admiration of good speakers as well. After all, goodwill (εὔνοια) and trust (πίστις) can cause one to accept harmful ideas. This is best avoided by cautious examination of the words and the content of the lecture itself, and by disregarding everything that may cause (blind) admiration, such as the repute of the speaker:

For as in war so also in lectures, there is plenty of empty show. For example, a speaker’s grey hair, his formality, his serious brow, his self-assertion, and above all the clamour and shouting of the audience as he brings them to their feet, combine to disconcert the young and inexperienced listener, who is, as it were, swept away by the current. (*De aud.*, 41b-c)

In other words, as a precaution against being harmed, listeners should be slow to believe and critically focus on the content, not the character or glory (δόξα) or – for that matter – the grey hair of the speaker.

Some speakers will try to impress the audience by putting on a show that emphasises character and style. According to Plutarch, this is typical of Sophists who conceal their thoughts with words and vocal effects (cf. Plato, *Protagoras*, 316e). They entertain and give pleasure, but it is an empty kind of pleasure. Inexperienced listen-

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Pliny’s *Letters*, VI.17 and I.13 for details on common *faux pas* committed by Roman audiences.

ers may be captivated by such behaviour and become prone to deception. Some listeners are even driven into a frenzy as an effect of poetic madness on the soul (cf. Socrates' reaction to Lysis' speech in *Phaedrus*). Instead of admiration or contempt, listeners should strip off all kinds of superfluities from the style, and seek the fruit of a lecture: that which has the potential to make them into better persons.

Fruits of a lecture

Good lectures have good effects on their listeners, according to Plutarch; in seeking the fruit, the listener is invited to imitate good examples (*παράδειγμα*). Again, Plutarch points to the behaviour of bees who gather what is useful from plants, as opposed to garland weavers, who produce sweet-scented and beautiful looking things from plants, but are more concerned with what is appealing to the senses than what is useful.

For Plutarch, the garland weaver is like the speaker in lectures who focuses on niceties of style, instead of content. Garland weavers look out for attractive plants, but their scent is not long-lasting. Bees, on the other hand,

in their flight frequently pass through meadows of violets, roses, and hyacinths, and come to rest upon the exceeding rough and pungent thyme, and on this they settle close, (...) and when they have got something of use, they fly away home to their own special work. In such wise, then, the sincere and single-minded student ought to regard flowery and dainty language and theatrical and spectacular subject matter as the pasturage of drones who practice the popular lecture; these he should leave alone and use all diligence to sound deep meaning of the words and the intention of the speaker, drawing from it what is useful and profitable, and remembering that he has not come to a theatre or music-hall, but to a school¹⁷¹ and class-

¹⁷¹ Σχολή, or to be precise, σχολάς, meaning "leisure", is a term first found in Aristotle, *Politics*, 1313b3.

room with the purpose of amending his life by what is there said. (*De aud.*, 41f-42a; see also Seneca, *Ep.*, 108.35)

Like productive bees, listeners extract from a lecture what is useful for their lives. After the lecture, the listener should check the effect it had on his condition, like he would check his hair before leaving a barber's shop:

(...) he should begin with himself and his own state of mind, endeavouring to estimate whether any one of his emotions has become less intense, whether any one of his troubles weighs less heavily upon him, whether his confidence and his high purpose have become firmly rooted, whether he has acquired enthusiasm for virtue and goodness. (*De aud.*, 42a-b)

One knows the lecture was good if one feels cleansed (*καθαίροντος*), like one would feel after taking a bath (Hillyard 1981, pp. 114 & 126-127).

Once the listener is more experienced, that is, once the listener has profited from earlier lectures (cf. *De prof. virt.*), he is allowed to take pleasure – along with profit – in examining the style in which a lecture was delivered. Plutarch knows the style of a lecture is no trivial matter, as it helps the philosopher convince his audience in giving beneficial advice, something he applies to his own lectures as well. In addition, Plutarch likely did not have principal objections against deriving pleasure from listening to a lecture (Hillyard 1981, pp. 131-132), as long as obtaining something valuable remained the goal (*τέλος*).

In the beginning, one should therefore pay as little attention to style as possible, and only examine that matter afterwards. We have seen that speech and style are very important for the delivery of a lecture, but an exclusive focus on style will distract from the content:

for just as those who drink, after they have quenched their thirst, begin

then to observe the ornamentation of the drinking-cups and to turn them about, so the young man, when he is well replenished with doctrines and has some respite, may be allowed to inspect the style to see whether it contains anything elegant and exquisite. (*De aud.*, 42d)

Raising problems and asking questions

When it comes to raising problems during a lecture, a listener should once again act like a dining guest according to Plutarch. To avoid bad manners and rudeness, he should not ask for anything other than what is set before him on the table. The same goes for the correct and polite behaviour during a ‘feast of reason’: you are coming to listen to what someone has to say, not to ask questions yourself, which is why listeners should first listen to the speaker in silence.

If a listener is asked to raise an issue after the lecture, he should be careful to choose useful topics and avoid trivialities, nor should topics be raised that are not ‘on the table.’ In other words, listeners should not digress to other topics by raising irrelevant questions which may throw the lecturer and his lecture into confusion.

Some students will want to show off their knowledge by asking questions, but according to Plutarch, this is far from appropriate behaviour for young men. What they should do instead is focus on propounding useful (*χρήσιμος*) problems, ridding themselves of all pretensions, and concentrating on a modest and healthy way of life (*βίον ἄτυφον καὶ ὑγιαίνοντα*). This is an important point: Plutarch wants Nicander to be concerned with matters that have to do with actual life, not trivial “academic” problems that are alienated from actual life (Hillyard 1981, p. 147).

In addition, it is desirable that the listener restricts his questions to the lecturer’s area of expertise and ability to answer a question satisfactorily. Questions that combine too many disciplines (e.g. ethics, mathematics, and physics – the three branches of Platonic

philosophy)¹⁷² are unfitting to raise during philosophical lectures.

According to Plutarch, in private consultation with philosophers it is especially important to listen, even when some issues may be personal and seem to be interfering with one's private life. Students may think they know just as much as philosophers do when it comes to practical affairs and matters pertaining to the outside world, but they are wrong for thinking along such lines. Instead of running away from discussions of things that matter for fear of interference in one's personal affairs, one should listen to philosophers' advice on relevant matters. After all, unlike Sophists, philosophers have useful things to say about life outside the lecture room, from which listeners can benefit in many ways, if they indeed listen (Hillyard 1981, pp. 153 & 163).

As a rule of thumb, listeners should not raise too many issues, nor raise issues too often, and listen to the topics proposed by others. Listeners should also be mindful not to ask too few questions. Those who ask too few questions do so out of shame or a desire to spare the speaker. Instead, they nod their heads as if they fully understood everything. As a result, they do not improve their understanding, and are driven to even greater shame when they are eventually by necessity required to ask questions they should have asked before.

There are also those that ask too many questions out of rivalry with other students, with an aim to display their mental abilities. They remain ignorant as a consequence, because they cover up and conceal their ignorance (cf. Plato, *Gorgias*, 463d-f). In both cases such behaviour needs to be reprimanded, and the listener needs to bear with this to overcome his ignorance (Hillyard 1981, pp. 243-244).

Closely related to the above types of listeners, there are lazy listeners, who are not willing to give themselves any trouble and will

¹⁷² Cf. the Stoic division of philosophy into logic, physics, and ethics. Plutarch clearly favours ethics by advising not to scorn an expert in ethics with questions in natural science or mathematics, otherwise listeners will not be able to take full advantage of the lecture (Hillyard 1981, p. 148).

not hesitate to repeatedly ask questions about the same issue. There are also those that are concerned with acquiring a reputation for sharpness (δριμύτητος). The latter fail to come to grips with the essence of the lecture because they are more preoccupied with their reputation than with self-improvement. They also get in the way of the teacher by posing problems that are not essential to the lecture.

Plutarch seems especially concerned with the lazy listeners. What these students need is not something to merely fill their minds with,¹⁷³ but a spark (ὕπεκκαύματος)¹⁷⁴ or impulse towards truth, and kindling to make a fire:

Imagine, then, that a man should need to get fire from a neighbour, and, upon finding a big bright fire there, should stay there continually warming himself; just so it is if a man comes to another to share the benefit of a discourse, and does not think it necessary to kindle from it some illumination for himself and some thinking of his own, but, delighting in the discourse, sits enchanted; he gets, as if it were, a bright and ruddy glow in the form of opinion imparted to him by what is said, but the mouldiness and darkness of his inner mind he has not dissipated not banished by the warm glow of philosophy. (*De aud.*, 48c-d; cf. Seneca, *Ep.*, 94.29)

In other words, the one that practices listening as part of a philosophical way of living not only seeks and finds the bright fire of philosophy, but more importantly, he ignites the fire in himself. This is what makes it wise for the student of philosophy to listen: it allows for the kindle to catch the spark (Mostert 2012, p. 2).

Listening with kindness and showing praise

The ancients saw it as a speaker's right to be listened to with kind-

¹⁷³ Linking the mind to a vessel was a common idea, found in Plato and the Stoics as well (Hillyard 1981, p. 259).

¹⁷⁴ In this sense, it is worth studying Schinkel's contributions to the field of "wonder" (2020; 2021).

ness (Hillyard 1981, p. 182). In this spirit, Plutarch notes that praise needs to be delivered with care and moderation. To be lacking in giving praise shows that one is arrogant and unfriendly. Philosophy, however, removes foolish wonder, not friendliness:

Now it is true that philosophic reasoning, through knowledge and acquaintance with the cause in every case, does away with the wonder and amazement that spring from blindness and ignorance, but at the same time it does not destroy our serenity, moderation, or human interest. (*De aud.*, 44b-c)

Listeners should not act as if they are immune from wonder by lacking any reaction and thereby showing contempt. On the other hand, and as opposed to contempt, excessiveness in praise is not good either, because it displeases both audience and lecturer, thereby risking the loss of benefitting from the lecture and one's own reputation by attaining the reputation of lacking taste (*ἀπειρόκαλος*).

By praising everything, the listener shows that he does not know what makes a good lecture; being a flatterer (*κόλαξις*) because the praise is employed to win the lecturer's favour, or being a dissembler (*εἰρωνία*) by giving the impression that one is mocking the lecturer, are both undesirable. As opposed to a judge in court, who simply listens and judges based on law and justice, a listener to a philosophical lecture is not bound to such obligations. Nothing is stopping the diligent listener from receiving the lecture with friendliness – even if it only is 'a gentleness of glance, a serenity of countenance, and a disposition kindly and free from annoyance' (*De aud.*, 45b).

Giving praise, if done properly, is one way of showing goodwill. No speaker is so bad that he offers nothing that is worth listening to. In the end, Plutarch argues, even beautiful flowers grow up amid tough weeds (*De aud.*, 44f).¹⁷⁵ One should be mindful of the form in which praise is

¹⁷⁵ Cf. Lysis' speech in *Phaedrus*, 230e-234c. Although Socrates condemns the arrangement as disorderly, he praises the style.

be given, viz. in the choice of terms of praise and in behaviour.

Especially peculiar to the modern reader is Plutarch's guideline which instructs that listeners should go to great lengths to avoid humming and dancing during a lecture, which is deplorable: someone outside may be thinking a musical entertainer is doing an act, while instead a philosopher is speaking. Failing to do so will result in offensiveness towards the lecturer. Even if the lecture is a complete failure, and there is nothing to praise, then listening remains a courtesy. Listeners should not be unreceptive to criticism either.

To be unaffected by criticism is a sign of bad character and a failing sense of shame. Nor should listeners be oversensitive, or soft and spineless (τρυφήν καὶ μαλακίαν, *De aud.*, 46e) and run away from criticism. This would show "unmanliness" and ruin the potentially beneficial effects of the philosophical discourse.

Dealing with reprehensions

When it comes to proper reaction to reprehensions, listeners can either exceed in fear and be cowards, or exceed in fearlessness and show insensitivity and shamelessness. In case something not entirely agreeable is said, the listener should, in accordance with Spartan conduct, accept this with a cheerful (ἰλαρόος) and generous air.

One who runs away from philosophical discourse has allowed it to inflict a wound, without then allowing for the process of healing to unfold.¹⁷⁶ It is like undergoing surgery, and then running away before the wound has been properly soothed. Although philosophy may cause wounds, it also heals:

he who is taken to task must feel and suffer some smart, yet he should not be crushed or dispirited, but, as though at a solemn rite of novitiate which consecrates him to philosophy, he should submit to the initial purifications and commotions, in the expectation that

¹⁷⁶ See, in relation to healing through the ears, Davidson (1995, p. 69).

something delectable and splendid will follow upon his present distress and perturbation. (*De aud.*, 47a)

In this sense, listening is about enduring the pain of being criticised, and looking forward to the healing process that is part of practising philosophy. Should one be reprehended unjustly, one should wait until after the lecture to address the alleged injustices.

Let there be no mistake: philosophy is, not unlike other activities such as music or physical training, difficult. But according to Plutarch, as the listener makes progress, familiarity will eventually turn it into a pleasure. Once this familiarity is achieved, the pleasure is found in the rewards that make life worth living:

For come it will without long delay, bringing with it abundant light for the subject of study; it will inspire also a passionate love for virtue; and anyone who could endure to pass the rest of his life without this passion, because he has exiled himself from philosophy for want of true manliness, brands himself either as a very presumptuous man or else a coward. (*De aud.*, 47c)

Following Socrates, one would not want to live a life without philosophy. While it is true that philosophy sometimes addresses difficult matters, especially for the young and inexperienced, listeners should bear responsibility for their own ignorance. If uncertainty or misunderstandings occur, the cause should be looked for in oneself. Therefore, the best one can do is to persistently discuss *aretè* and examine oneself and others (Hillyard 1981, p. 241).

Having discussed Plutarch's pivotal essays on listening, let us now end this chapter with a short summary of the meaning of listening as a spiritual exercise in Plutarch's *paideia*.

Conclusion

Much like Plato, Plutarch considers philosophy to be the true vehicle and life-long driving force of *paideia*. Plutarch's perspectives on the question of *aretè*, and the sort of listening that belongs to it are inseparable from the Greek ideal of *paideia*, which developed over the course of the centuries before him. He shares with his predecessors an understanding of ethical formation that centres on the continuous effort of improving one's conduct and character (ἦθος), according to a certain moral ideal (ἠθικὴ ἀρετή).

The view that human character can be moulded according to an ideal, implies that all humans have the ability to become virtuous. But just as much, they are prone to vice to a degree depending on their innate nature and the quality of their formation. In other words, a good character is not only a matter of nature as the ancient aristocrats believed, but of nurture – i.e. spiritual exercise – as well.¹⁷⁷

We can appreciate that listening itself can refer to a wide range of meanings, including obeying and perceiving sound. With Plutarch it encompasses these layers of meaning, but deeper ones as well, such as the receptivity of experiencing the world, and the potential to improve one's character. For Plutarch, knowing how to listen is at least as important as knowing how to speak, and it should be learned even before speaking is taught.

Listening, just like speaking, requires practice. It is precisely here that we may find Plutarch's unique contribution: the explicit idea that listening is something to be exercised in the first place. This does not mean, however, that Plutarch's philosophy can be reduced to the application of a few instructions, like those that one would typically find in a cookbook.

We have seen that spiritual exercises are an effort to modify, improve and transform the self as part of a philosophical way of life.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Plato's theory of "great natures", *Republic*, 491e-492a and *Gorgias*, 525e-526b. According to Xenophon, the theory 'assumes that naturally well attuned men can turn to the bad if they do not get the proper kind of education that will rectify their flawed passions' (2016, p. 27).

According to Hadot, the intellectual category of spiritual exercises serves to “nourish” the category of exercises that include meditation and the memorisation of maxims that enable one to think and act philosophically. It is in this category that we could understand Plutarch’s work on listening.

However, in Plutarch’s pedagogical contexts, a proper listening attitude is both presupposed and exercised at the same time. In this sense, it is more than an intellectual exercise. Care for the self is the way to self-rule, and at the same time, care for the self is only possible when one rules over oneself. It is similar with listening: one learns to listen and cultivate attention, but to learn, one needs to listen and be attentive as well (Eckholdt 2007, p. 159). In other words, to live philosophically and engage in spiritual practices that include listening to poets and philosophers, one needs to listen.

The question that remains for the final chapter is whether Plutarch’s conception of spiritual exercise, as part of practising philosophy, could potentially still transform our lives today. I will attempt to work with Plutarch’s philosophy of listening by relating it to the practice of dialogue. First, however, we will have to address the question of continuity between the ancients and ourselves, which is what the next chapter aims to achieve.

CHAPTER V

(Dis)continuities and openings for revitalisation

Wenn wir von den Griechen reden, reden wir unwillkürlich zugleich von Heute und Gestern: ihre allbekannte Geschichte ist ein blanker Spiegel, der immer Etwas wiederstrahlt, das nicht im Spiegel selbst ist. Wir benützen die Freiheit, von ihnen zu reden, um von Anderen schweigen zu dürfen, — damit jene nun selber dem sinnenden Leser Etwas in's Ohr sagen. So erleichtern die Griechen dem modernen Menschen das Mittheilen von mancherlei schwer Mittheilbarem und Bedenklichem. (Nietzsche, *Menschliches Allzumenschliches* II, I-218)¹⁷⁸

Introduction

According to Hadot, it is especially the ancient attitude towards philosophy that can be revitalised today. To find something of value in ancient philosophy for us today, we must seek an opening by determining what remains more or less intact, despite all the ruptures and differences. For this reason, ancient texts and callings must first be understood and interpreted within their own context, to the best of our ability (Hadot 2011, pp. 68 & 74). Although we cannot completely rid ourselves of our own context, in previous chapters, this has been my aim.

We cannot deny that the ancient Greek categories clearly assumed a radically different cosmology. As a result, the ancients saw themselves confronted with different problems than the problems we are faced with today. As Koopman puts it, our way of being and doing ‘travels along radically different vectors than those

¹⁷⁸ All German Nietzsche quotations are from Nietzsche Source (2021).

that sustained them in former millennia' (Koopman 2013, p. 205). Therefore, the question that needs to be addressed at this point is: given the crucial differences between the ancients and ourselves, how can ancient philosophy still be credibly revived? Put differently, given the radical differences between the ancient meaning of philosophy and the various changes it underwent in history, how is it possible to speak of continuity?

In Chapter I, based on a reconstruction of a discussion between Foucault and Hadot, we have already surveyed some of the most important differences between “(post-)modern” philosophy and ancient philosophy. This section opens with a reflection on the earlier (dis)continuities of ancient philosophy. During the Middle Ages, philosophy, and even its practical arm, lost its initial vocation of guidance towards happiness, and became strictly theoretical (Thijssen 2016, p. 12). Later, with Descartes and the scientific turn, philosophy became more oriented towards natural science.¹⁷⁹

The theoretical aspect of philosophy that involved logical inquiry and abstract thinking was always there. Hence, one could argue, as Cottingham (2013, pp. 172 & 178) does, that the institutions of the Middle Ages did not necessarily shift the conception of philosophy itself; they instead decided to exclusively focus on one particular aspect.¹⁸⁰ However, given the reciprocal definition of philosophy as a way of life accompanied by an inseparable discourse, philosophy arguably *did* become something new in the Middle Ages, because the lived practice, the philosophical life itself, was conclusively separated from the philosophical discourse, expressing itself in the Christian life of monks – at least until the Renaissance.

Therefore, I start with a very brief discussion of scholastic philosophy, before moving my way to the Renaissance, Descartes, and the Scientific Revolution, in which we also encounter moments of continuity. I also pay special attention to the Enlightenment, as it may

¹⁷⁹ Although philosophers such as Hume, Kant and Hegel were always more than mere scientists.

¹⁸⁰ This is particularly true for the Anglo-Saxon world, where scientific philosophy (philosophy as a conceptual service to natural, technical, biological – science) is dominant.

very well be the most significant period for understanding who we are, what we think, and what we do today. Specifically, I offer a brief overview of some of the most important aspects of modernity based on Foucault's instructive essay "What is Enlightenment?" (1997).

Ruptures and continuity in philosophy: Academisation of philosophy

According to Hadot, there are three interrelated aspects that underlie our modern representation of philosophy. The first is the tendency, which already existed in the ancient world, to reduce philosophy to a discourse, without any practical obligations or commitments, such as increasing one's self-awareness, and changing one's conduct based on that increased awareness. Indeed, Plato already warned his addressees: philosophical discourses are not independent and cannot be understood without considering the philosophical life, manifested in an existential choice (*Seventh Letter*, 328c).

The second of the interrelated aspects is due to contingent and historical factors; specifically, the rise of Christianity, whose theology, methods, and principles were initially taken from pagan philosophy.¹⁸¹ From the second century CE, Christianity presented itself as a philosophy: a specific way of life according to (divine) reason (Hadot 1995, p. 269). However, as Christianity assimilated many elements of traditional Greek and Roman philosophy, it began to gradually separate philosophical discourse from practice in the Middle Ages. Epicureanism disappeared fully until its rediscovery in the Renaissance,¹⁸² and schools such as Stoicism and Platonism were adapted to fit into a Christian way of life. Monks in the Middle Ages were still called "philosophers," and they still practised spiritual exercises, but their way of life was separated from the philosophical discourse with which it was traditionally intertwined.

The third aspect that was decisive and further transformed phi-

¹⁸¹ A process often labelled as "contamination". See Davidson (1995, pp. 4-5).

¹⁸² Montaigne famously tried out different schools of thought (Scepticism, Stoicism) before finally settling for Epicureanism.

losophy from a living practice to an exclusively theoretical enterprise, is sociological, in that it can be traced back to the origins of the university (see Davidson 1995, p. 32; Thijssen 2016).¹⁸³ During the Middle Ages, Aristotle's work reached European universities through Latin translations. Interestingly, Aristotle saw the philosophical endeavour as a formative task aimed at human flourishing, but his work was not read in formative terms, as I will proceed to explain.

One of the most important translators of Greek philosophers from the twelfth century was Gerard of Cremona, who belonged to the cathedral of Toledo which was then considered an important hub for systematically translating the work of Greek and Arabic authors into Latin. Among the philosophers whose writings were translated from Arabic¹⁸⁴ to Latin by Gerard of Cremona was Aristotle. Translators in this era did not limit themselves to translating, however. They appropriated and assimilated Greek ideas, but the Christian culture to which Greek thought had to be adapted was a radically different one.

New translations emerged in the middle of the thirteenth century, this time based on the Greek texts. But Western scholars kept reading Aristotle in Latin, even after the complete work in Greek was made available in 1470. After all, Latin had the reputation of being the language of the intellect (Thijssen 2016, pp. 91-92).

The University of Paris was founded somewhere around the year 1150. From approximately the fourteenth century, the *Quartier Latin* in Paris became the intellectual centre of Europe. In this medieval university, students from the age of fourteen were educated to be-

¹⁸³ The first to introduce a scientific approach to philosophy was probably Aristotle. In a combination of his philosophy and certain cultural and historical influences, the object of philosophy – happiness – was lost out of sight and put into a new context (Thijssen 2016, p. 14). This is not Aristotle's shortcoming, after all, he was the first western philosopher to leave a more or less coherent oeuvre that deals with the question of what the best life for humans would be. Not surprisingly, his conclusion is that the activity of philosophising is what makes humans the happiest (Thijssen 2016, p. 57).

¹⁸⁴ Aristotle's work was translated from Greek to Arabic by the philosopher Al-Farabi (c. 872-950).

come Bachelors (*baccalaureate*) of *artes* through studying the seven liberal arts: the *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music). After this seven-year study, one could continue one's education (*magistri* of *artes*) at the faculty of law, medicine, or theology (Thijssen 2016, pp. 95-96).

Philosophy in the Middle Ages acquired the name "scholasticism"¹⁸⁵ and was taught almost exclusively based on Aristotle's ideas. The form in which it was taught was very particular: famous dialecticians and theologians provided their interpretation and explication of a text, which was then further discussed with and by students. Aristotle's works were read as self-contained theoretical discourses about such topics as cosmology, physics, and metaphysics. Students were trained to read them with the tools provided by formal logic and scientific reasoning. In other words, philosophy was considered as useful material to start theological discussions, but the entire existential dimension of philosophy as a lived practice was absent.

As Thijssen argues, this is how philosophy became "academic" (2016, pp. 96-98). Philosophy was taken out of the context of a living praxis, and put into the confinement of Christian universities. The emergence of universities increased the difference between philosophy as a way of life and academic philosophy. This process gained further momentum in virtue of Christian guidelines for studying philosophy, which prohibited, for instance, the view that happiness was obtainable in this life. The point is not necessarily that ancient views about happiness were not discussed; rather, such views were not being considered as potentially valuable.

And so, philosophy as a way of life was exchanged for academic philosophy, which differed from the ancient conception of philosophy foremost in its lack of practical relevance. The next important development in the history of philosophy is arguably Descartes' effort to produce a complete philosophical system.

¹⁸⁵ From Latin *scholasticus* 'of a school' and Greek *σχολαστικός*, 'devoting one's leisure to learning.'

Descartes' mechanisation of philosophy

On the one hand, Descartes continues the practice of spiritual exercises and the quest for a better way of living, which becomes most evident in his metaphysical writings – i.e. *Meditations On First Philosophy* (see Cottingham, 2013, p. 181; Kobusch 2013, p. 190). The *Meditations* clearly depart from a spiritual quest for God, goodness, and truth. Following early Church Fathers such as Augustine, and medieval theologians such as Bonaventure – who both argued that one should find God in oneself – Descartes in the third meditation turns his mind's eye on himself.

On the other hand, however, Descartes breaks with the tradition in a significant way. Not unlike his scholastic ancestors, Descartes saw philosophy as a theoretical discipline, that involved systematic and rigorous arguments. Yet, being a child of the scientific age, he was an innovator as well, and one of his projects was to mathematicise science and replace scholasticism with quantifiable knowledge. The most important philosophical shift initiated by Descartes is possibly located in the scope of philosophy, which he saw as a new power for mankind to change the world. Where his forebears attempted to connect to the overarching *Logos* (Λόγος) or universal Nature, Descartes wanted to make mankind 'masters and possessors of nature,' meaning that ethics would adopt a new meaning (Cottingham 2013, p. 183).

These developments also caused Descartes to see mankind as part of the controllable nature. Consequently, instead of attempting to transform emotions and passions from within with the help of cognition and spiritual training, Descartes proposes to "reprogram" physical human mechanisms in a way that emotions and the conduct that follows can be modified externally. Why bother with an entire educational program of virtue, when behaviour can be modified by reprogramming and reconditioning the patterns of response that cause attraction to bad objects?

As Cottingham notes, the problem with such an instrumental

and “behaviouristic” approach is that it does not necessarily advance one morally; it only focuses on the outcome of a desired change by modification of certain emotional and behavioural patterns, as opposed to the pursuit of wisdom as a process that is intrinsically valuable. Focusing on effectiveness rather than intrinsic value, Descartes offers a mechanical and technological means instead – ‘an easy fix for the good life,’ far removed from the practice of spiritual exercises (2013, pp. 184-186).

After discussing some important elements of discontinuity in the history of philosophy, let us now turn to the earliest signs of continuity. After all, to attempt a meeting between both the ancient and present “horizons,” a certain degree of continuity needs to be assumed. Depending on the theoretical perspective one adopts, there is reason to assume that this is indeed possible.

Philosophical continuity in early Christianity

Hadot’s notion of philosophy as a lived experience and a way of life assumes a certain continuity, without being blind to the many contrasts between ancient times and now. In order to address the question of continuity, it is helpful to realise that self-care (which is always accompanied by the commitment to know oneself), the quest for imperturbability, the tranquillity of the soul, and in particular the flight from the body, were all decisive for early Christian spirituality and practice, and remained so all through the Middle Ages and into modern times.

Consider, for instance, the notion of “attending to oneself” or “taking care of oneself” (ἐπιμέλεια ἑαυτοῦ), which plays an important role with the third century bishop Gregory of Nyssa (Foucault 1997, p. 94). The idea of self-care, which was much more complex than the modern interpretation might imply, emerged and endured under the influence of ancient Greek philosophy. According to Hadot, Socratic self-care consisted in becoming conscious of what one is in relation to others, and he quotes Seneca to substantiate this

claim: ‘Live for others if you want to live for yourself’ (2009, pp. 107-108).

As much as the assimilation of ancient thought by Christian philosophy may have led to various alterations (and misinterpretations), it also made room for a certain evolution of thought (Davidson 1995, p. 5). Although Christianity offered a completely new message that was quite alien to the ancient Greek world, it is possible to trace some relations, and therefore, continuity between Greek philosophy and Judaism, according to Hadot (see also Sharpe & Ure 2021, p. 22).

In the tradition of Philo of Alexandria, for example, one finds *logos* to be the “Word of God” that created the world, as well as the principle that bridges the gap between the Kingdom of God and the tangible world. What is more, the ambiguity of the Greek word *logos*, which can mean “word”, “discourse” or “reason”, and had become central to philosophy since Heraclitus (see Chapter II), allowed for a Christian philosophy to emerge in the first place (see also Hadot 2004, pp. 237-238).

So far as philosophising means living according to reason, Christians can be said to be philosophers. They pursue a way of life according to the divine *logos*. In Hadotian terms, Christian philosophy simultaneously presented itself as discourse and a way of life. Reading philosophical discourses such as those of Philo, Clement of Alexandria and Origenes, constituted a “spiritual” process that was closely related to progress in the soul: *paideia*. Spiritual progress was a philosophical and educational notion, but it became the foundation of Christian teaching as well (Hadot 2004, p. 239).

Although there were differences between Christian exegesis on the one hand – which was based on the *logos* as a divine revelation and manifestation – and the interpretation of Greek philosophical texts on the other, there was a tradition of systematic theology in Greek philosophy as well. This started with Plato’s *Timaeus*, and metaphysical passages in *The Republic* and *Laws*. These works could

be seen as an example for Christian philosophy (Hadot 2004, p. 240). In ancient times, however, philosophy did not compete with religious life the way it would in Christianity, since religion did not yet have the same meaning it acquired later in history.¹⁸⁶

Further driving this point home, it is interesting to consider that Christian philosophers relied on a vocabulary and style that was strongly influenced by ancient philosophy. However, Christians read the ancients in a way that fitted their beliefs, without considering the intentions of the author, nor the context and the intended audience. Augustine of Hippo even argued that the essence of Platonism and Christian doctrine overlapped. The core of both Platonism and Christianity for Augustine was that ethics could enable us to discover that only the rational and intellectual soul is able to contemplate Godly eternity, and find eternal life itself.

The main practical difference between Christianity and Platonism is found in the fact that Platonism never attracted the masses, and never succeeded in converting them from worldly interests towards the cultivation of the soul, whereas Christianity persuaded people from all societal layers to adopt Christian life, thereby transforming humanity as a whole (Hadot 2004, pp. 249-251; see also Thijssen 2016, pp. 75-88).

Above all, Christian philosophy could present itself as a philosophy because it was a way of life, a mode of being, a lived wisdom in accordance with reason. When believers of Christian philosophy became practitioners of monasticism, their philosophy (as a way of life) remained closely connected to terms and categories such as peace of mind, absence of passions (*ἀπάθεια*), and living in accordance with nature and reason. This way of life had typical Christian elements, but many of these elements, especially those that cultivated self-care, were adopted from pagan philosophy (particularly Stoicism

¹⁸⁶ See Kapstein (2013, pp. 119-135) for a detailed discussion on the subject of religion versus philosophy. According to Kapstein, the strength of Hadot's vision of spiritual exercises is that it does not fall victim to the typical philosophy/religion dichotomy from the Enlightenment, which thwarts 'traversing more distant worlds' (p. 119).

and Neoplatonism). In this sense, in so far that it refers to a way of life, Christianity adopted the Greek concept of *philosophia* into their monastic life (Hadot 2004, pp. 241-242).

From the Middle Ages onwards, virtually all philosophies came under the auspices of Christianity, either by integrating philosophical doctrines into the divine realm, or by combating them in one way or another. Already in the fourteenth century one finds reactions against the dominant view of philosophy we face today.

Philosophical continuity from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment

According to Hadot, thirteenth-century philosophers such as Siger of Brabant, Boetius of Dacia, and Aubrey of Reims already became interested in the idea that Aristotelian philosophy could be a mode of life, and as such, bring happiness through contemplation (Hadot 2011, p. 114). Shortly thereafter Petrarch rejected the idea of a theoretical and descriptive ethics, claiming that reading and commenting on Aristotle had not made him into a better human being. This led Petrarch to refuse to call those who teach philosophy “philosophers” – only those who substantiate their teachings by their acts were worthy of that title.

A similar attitude is found with Erasmus. In “A Declamation on the Subject of Early Liberal Education for Children” (1541),¹⁸⁷ Erasmus asserts that the prescriptions of philosophy are like the eyes of the soul that shed light (*praelucet*) in order for us to see (*ut videas*) what is (*quid facto sit opus*), and what can be done differently (*quid secus*). However, although they did recognise pagan philosophers were able to realise the ideal of the philosopher, both Petrarch and Erasmus have the *Christian philosophical way of life* in mind when they refer to the practice of philosophy (Hadot 2004, pp. 262-263).

During the Enlightenment, the conception of philosophy as

¹⁸⁷ The original Latin title is: *De Pueris statim ac liberaliter instituendis*.

longing, love and exercise in wisdom resonated for Kant too. The following comment from the *Lectures* attests to this:

If we take the ancient Greek philosophers – such as Epicurus, Zeno, Socrates – we discover that the principal object of their science has been the destination of man, and the means to achieve it. They thus remained much more faithful to the true Idea of the philosopher than has been the case in modern times, when we encounter the philosopher only as an artist of reason. (Kant, as quoted in Hadot 2004, p. 267).

In addition, we find a characteristic trait of the ancient philosophical way of life in Kant's practical philosophy. Even his theoretical works (the *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781 and *Critique of Judgement*, 1790) were ultimately meant to serve his practical philosophy. To take the most palpable example: the categorical imperative prescribes that we act only on that maxim whereby we can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.¹⁸⁸ Not unlike the ancient pedagogical formula, conduct is based on a transcendent ideal of a sage here, who acts as the 'legislator of reason' that humans try to emulate, but never fully reach (Hadot 2004, pp. 267-269; 2009, pp. 116-117 & 120).

Taking Kant's brief essay on the meaning of Enlightenment as an example, Foucault, in his essay "What is Enlightenment?" (1997), attempts to answer the question: what is modern philosophy? As a philosopher of difference, Foucault follows Kant in looking for differences between his time and the period in history that precedes it. In doing so, Kant raises a philosophical question about the present (Foucault 1997, p. 305). Put differently, one problematises the present and man's relation to it.

Most commentators, including Kant, suggest that the most significant characteristic of the Enlightenment was the free use of

¹⁸⁸ See also Kant's distinction (at the end of his *Critique of Pure Reason*) between philosophy as 'Schul-' and 'Weltbegriff': it is the *Weltbegriff* that finally matters.

autonomous reason, both in the private and in the public sphere. Obviously, there is much more to say about the political, economic, social, institutional, and cultural transformations of the period in which Kant wrote his essay, but as expected, focusing on the essences of such characteristics is not what Foucault is trying to do. Nor is he confusing the Enlightenment with the theme of humanism. Foucault is mainly interested in the text because he proposes that it is located ‘at the crossroads of critical reflection and reflection on history’ (p. 309), which he thinks offers an outline of the attitude of modernity.

As referred to earlier (in Chapter I), Foucault is not interested in seeking origins, as that would presuppose a linear understanding of history in which different epochs are separated by different historical eras. Following his genealogic approach, Foucault is more interested in finding out how the attitude of modernity has struggled against attitudes of what he calls “countermodernity”, by which he refers to attitudes before and after the nineteenth century (1997, p. 310).

As with Baudelaire, Foucault characterises modernity as consciousness of the various discontinuities in time, which leads to a certain awareness of the fleeting and contingent, and as a response on this awareness, a desire for ‘recapturing something eternal that is not beyond the present instant, nor behind it, but within it’ (*ibid.*).

According to Baudelaire, this attitude seeks to relate to the present, and to oneself, which he thinks is embodied by the term *dandyisme*. I have already touched on the meaning of Baudelarian dandyism in Chapter I, but let us emphasise again that it is the act of inventing and producing oneself as a work of art that characterises modernity (Foucault, 1997, p. 312).

Indeed, Foucault characterises modernity not as a historical period but as an attitude, by which he refers to

a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. (1997, p. 309)

Interestingly, Foucault immediately draws a parallel which suggests continuity. He compares the modern attitude to what the Greeks called *èthos*, a person or community's traits which are constituted by external forces such as *paideia* (Xenophontos 2016, p. 34). He drives this point home by characterising the philosophical ethos as a 'permanent critique of our historical era' (1997, p. 312). Foucault describes this ethos both negatively and positively. In the negative sense, the critique serves as a refusal to be either in favour or against the Enlightenment, given the authoritarian form in which such choices are presented.¹⁸⁹ By the same token, intellectual movements that express themselves in positive terms in relation to the Enlightenment are often found in more conservative and neo-Kantian contexts.

Foucault is not interested to follow in the steps of either of these 'dialectical nuances' (1997, p. 313). Instead of articulating a good/bad judgement of the Enlightenment, he invites us to reflect on ourselves as historically determined beings. One can be in favour or against certain Enlightenment values such as rationality, but this does not change the fact that we, and more specifically, our attitudes, have all been shaped by the Enlightenment to some extent. What Foucault wants to know is what of the Enlightenment – which he understands as a complex event or process – is indispensable for us as autonomous subjects, and what is no longer (p. 313).

The positive aspect of the modern ethos as critique focuses through a historical ontology of ourselves on the limits of what we

¹⁸⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno express themselves in negative terms, for instance, when linking the Enlightenment to the rise of fascism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). Contemporary examples of intellectual movements that often express themselves in negative terms in relation to the Enlightenment are found in postmodern movements such as "postcolonial theory".

say, think and do. As discussed in Chapter I, Foucault's approach to uncovering the events that have constituted ourselves as subjects is genealogy, which he contrasts in this case with transcendental and metaphysical endeavours. Foucault characterises this positive approach as a "historico-critical attitude" or "historical ontology" of ourselves (1997, p. 316). Like his genealogical approach, this approach focuses on transformations and processes of subjectification, which were omnipresent in the past, and continue into the present.

This essay had a somewhat surprising effect on many of his readers, because Foucault seems to locate himself in the philosophical tradition of the Enlightenment by following Kant. According to Oksala, he did so for theoretical reasons, but also because he wanted to distance himself from 'ultra-relativist, neoconservative and post-modernist labels' (2004, pp. 182-183).

What interests us here is that Foucault shows that there is reason to assume a certain degree of continuity between the people of the Enlightenment and us, and between us and the ancients. We encounter continuity in three instances: (1) according to Foucault, continuity is found in both the comparison of the modern attitude to the Greek *èthos*; and (2) in the presence of technologies of subjectivation in the different epochs. In line with Hadot, Foucault suggests that philosophical modernity consists in an attitude, *èthos* or way of life

in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them. (1997, p. 319)

In other words, the modern attitude is aware of itself as a process that is constantly shaped by external and internal forces. At the same time, it is an attitude that inquires into the mechanisms that are responsible for shaping us, using the genealogical method. Ultimately, this inquiry serves to free us from power structures to the degree that it is possible. In these final characterisations, we see the third

aspect of continuity, and that is between us and the Enlightenment in the sense that we attempt to free ourselves, by inquiring into ourselves. This will be further expounded in the next chapter.

Conclusion

I have discussed the degree to which we can still speak of a certain continuity in the history of philosophy, understood as a way of life. With the arrival of Christianity and academia, philosophy partly lost its original purpose. However, figures such as Augustin of Hippo, Boethius of Dacia, Petrarch, Erasmus, Montaigne and Justus Lipsius brought back to life the ancient conception of philosophy, albeit mostly still in the service of religion.

These philosophers are just a few examples of those who contributed to keeping ancient philosophy alive. But there are many more. It would be impossible to discuss all of them in detail, so it should suffice to mention a few such as Descartes, Voltaire, Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Thoreau, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dewey, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Sartre, Hadot and *nolens volens*, Foucault (for a more comprehensive list, see Sharpe & Ure 2021, pp. 317-320). What these thinkers all have in common is that they saw philosophy as a concrete and practical activity associated with a way of living, although one could wonder to what extent they applied philosophical insights to their own lives.

Nevertheless, it is thanks to these philosophers and the works of many others, that we can speak of a certain permanence of a concrete attitude and practical conception of ancient philosophy – with a “modernist” turn, but without entirely throwing truth overboard – that may help us navigate the ancient quest and exercise for wisdom and happiness, and liberate ourselves from the challenges posed by everyday worries, passions, and irrational desires.

Initially, we see an apparent difference in the conception of philosophy in our times compared to the ancient conception. After all, being a philosopher today usually refers to a profession; one becomes

a teacher in schools or professor in an academic context, using highly specialised technical language, but without any requirements or obligations to live and act according to a certain standard or ideal of living outside of the profession. One could argue that mastering intellectual techniques has implications for one's way of living, but these would be relatively inconsequential (see Cottingham 2013, p. 171).

Modern philosophy has been relegated to a mainly abstract and theoretical activity that has little to do with its original transformative purpose in antiquity (Cottingham 2013, p. 170). This makes the ancient mode of philosophising seem very alien compared to today's meaning of philosophy, which does not mean philosophy can still have legitimate goals when not practised as a way of life.

Philosophy can still mean something else today, something more akin to the ancient conception, without simply attempting to go back to it and ignoring the changed context. Both Hadot and Foucault attest to this. My attempt in the remainder of this dissertation is to take a few steps towards revitalising the ancient act of listening as a spiritual exercise that forms part of the practice of philosophy.

CHAPTER VI

Listening as a contemporary spiritual exercise

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 to which the sight of the injustices, sufferings, and misery of mankind cannot help but give rise. Wisdom, however, consists in precisely such an equilibrium, and inner peace is indispensable for efficacious action. Such is the lesson of ancient philosophy: an invitation to each human being to transform himself. (Hadot 1995, p. 274)

Introduction

The present chapter is an attempt to revitalise certain aspects of ancient philosophy – particularly the practical and lived aspects – for the purpose of providing some orientation for contemporary practices of philosophy. To consider the possibilities of revitalising some of the insights from previous chapters, we need to know what our present context is. Taking our context as the point of departure will allow us to determine to what extent it still makes sense to engage with the ancient idea and practice of spiritual listening, while always bearing in mind that there are no definitive answers and that philosophy as a quest for wisdom is a never-ending pursuit.

With the above in mind, I choose to limit the following discussion to three related instances of philosophical and paideutic activities in which I see opportunities to reconnect to the protagonists of the previous chapters – Heraclitus, Sophocles, Plato, and Plutarch

– and revitalise listening as a spiritual exercise. The activities are listening to (1) texts, (2) interlocutors, and (3) nature. The first two will speak for themselves. The latter is based on a philosophical movement in the Netherlands led by Henk Oosterling. While I do not always concur with his approach – for instance, his heavy reliance on French post-modernist philosophers¹⁹⁰ – and while I believe that no single philosophy can solve all the ecological crises that we are facing today, I do think that due to his ecosophical work (see further) and the concrete actions he is taking with his educational initiatives in the city of Rotterdam, Oosterling is a philosopher who is able to offer a philosophy that bears a much needed transformative power when truly listened to. I will supplement Oosterling’s ecosophy with the work of educational and environmental philosopher Michael Bonnett, who recently published a book containing a chapter aptly titled “Listening to Nature: Ecological Truth and Systemic Wisdom” (Bonnett 2021, pp. 104-128).

The three activities I will discuss in this chapter by no means capture all interpretations of what “doing” philosophy means today, but they are examples of contemporary practices where I believe it is valuable to consider revitalising listening as a spiritual exercise. Let us begin with a very brief discussion of the general question of what “doing philosophy” means.

A brief and general exploration of the meaning of “doing” philosophy

Many philosophers (and non-philosophers) will claim that questions and problems are at the heart of doing philosophy. The act of philosophising is often associated with thinking and questioning truth (Mostert 2021, p. 88). However, philosophical literature is not always constructed around a question, and quite often, especially

¹⁹⁰ Some of the reasons for this have been articulated in Chapter I. I think the idea of truth – undetermined and negated in many post-modern writings – is especially important here, as it presupposes defensible notions of well-being both in relation to humans and the earth itself (Bonnett 2021, p. 115; see also Abram 1997, p. 264).

when it comes to ancient literature, what question a particular work is trying to answer is precisely the question (van der Leeuw & Mostert 1988, pp. 18-19).

In fact, there is no such thing as a universal method of doing philosophy that is applicable to all areas of interest and is valid for all people who do philosophy in one way or another. Philosophical methods are generally related to a certain conception or tradition which defines the context. Methods cause certain problems to be transformed into philosophical problems, and the questions that arise from there only become philosophical questions within a particular context (van der Leeuw & Mostert 1988, pp. 85 & 168).

Let us therefore assume that a philosopher typically tries to find answers to specific questions determined by specific problems emerging from consensually agreed upon philosophical branches such as ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics, and epistemology. After all, and as noted in Chapter I, in order for these answers to be of any value, they need to have some kind of truth value that makes a meaning or thesis true for more than one person. Concepts and concept-development within a larger conceptual network have a central place and meaning in philosophy. As such, philosophical concepts – as opposed to simplified and operational definitions found in other sciences – form the core of philosophical knowledge.

This difference between philosophy and the other sciences, however, does not mean that philosophical problems are limited to conceptual problems only (van der Leeuw & Mostert 1988, p. 67). In fact, any one-sided answer to the question of what characterises doing philosophy always risks excluding other practices that might deserve the predicate “philosophical” as well. As van der Leeuw and Mostert aptly put it, ‘philosophers have a problematic relationship with problems’, which includes the problem of what “doing philosophy” means (1988, p. 55). In other words, there is no such thing as a universal approach to doing philosophy, yet there is clearly a need for a criterion of truth to judge philosophical claims,

which is applicable to the statements in this very sentence too.

As I pointed out in the previous chapter, with the emergence of Christianity, philosophy gradually became disconnected from its original purpose: forming a certain way of life (*paideia*) based on rational thinking and spiritual exercises. *Rational logos* was substituted for *divine logos*, and philosophy gradually became scholastic. Reading a text became a formal activity with little to no implications for the way one lived life. Present-day academic philosophy for a large part is the result of this change in character.

Academic philosophy – altered orientations

And all can agree that a precise, logically rigorous argument that is not well suited to the needs of its hearers, an argument that is simply and entirely academic and unable to engage its audience in a practical way, is to that extent a defective philosophical argument. (Nussbaum 2009, p. 15)

The philosophy taught in universities today is largely based on the modern scientific approach, and generally avoids any kind of speculation. Philosophy is most typically delivered in the form of lectures: a professor or lecturer – an ‘artist of reason’ (Kant) – speaks, and students listen and try to comprehend what they are hearing. Before or after the lecture, students are required to read and interpret a text from the philosophical canon, depending on the specific subject of the course. Texts are studied to accumulate knowledge and deepen one’s understanding, but since this knowledge and understanding is often not readily available in the text, the literature needs to be commented on and discussed in seminars with a teacher.

The philosophical activity of academic philosophers predominantly consists in reading and writing philosophical articles and books and participating in discussions about these texts with other scholars, mostly experts who have read a lot of philosophical texts in

a specific field. Some academics take on the additional task of running a department and organising reading groups and conferences.

On the surface, all this is not necessarily irreconcilable with PWL. However, the crucial difference is found in the ambition of philosophy professors and students alike. According to Hadot, a philosophy professor is a civil servant charged with educating students to become civil servants themselves:

The goal is no longer, as it was in antiquity, to train people for careers as human beings,¹⁹¹ but to train them for careers as clerks or professors – that is to say, as specialists, theoreticians, and retainers of specific items of more or less esoteric knowledge. Such knowledge, however, no longer involves the whole of life, as ancient philosophy demanded. (Hadot 2004, p. 260)

Given the lack of attention to the formative aspect of human beings, it is of little surprise that the moral behaviour of ethics professors is not “measurably better” than that of other professors across normative topics such as charity, voting, blood donation, and staying in touch with one’s mother (Schwitzgebel & Rust 2014, p. 293; Schönegger & Wagner 2019, p. 535).¹⁹² Indeed, as a consequence of favouring highly technical specialisations over the actual cultivation of wisdom, particularly in the analytic tradition, it would be hard to argue that philosophers live better in any way than other scholars do (Cottingham 2013, p. 171). As Sharpe and Ure have observed: ‘If a philosopher chooses to live according to some *ethos*, this will usually be an *ethos* unrelated to his professional work’ (2021, p. 8).

In this sense, Hadot argues, philosophy as a university discipline is still a servant of a higher power – ranging from theology to science – and its content is subject to “objectifiable” political and financial

¹⁹¹ Cf. Montaigne, *Essais*, II.6.

¹⁹² The only issue on which a significant difference was found between ethicists and non-philosophers in both normative attitude and corresponding behaviour was on the subject of vegetarianism. See Schönegger and Wagner (2019, p. 544).

criteria that often have little to do with philosophy in the ancient sense. Whereas ancient Greek and Roman philosophy proposed a mode of living, academic philosophy has become a ‘construction of a technical jargon reserved for specialists’ (Hadot 1995, pp. 107, 269 & 272; cf. Nussbaum 2009, p. 330).

Contrasting the modern academic perspective with Platonic times, we see that philosophy encompassed the whole universe and the place humans occupied within the greater scheme of things. As Nussbaum writes, ‘asking how to live is never, in the Greek traditions, a merely academic exercise, nor philosophy a merely academic subject’ (2009, p. 486). The most important goal of human life was happiness on both the individual and collective level.

Although collective happiness is still relevant to modern philosophers (e.g. Rawls, Nussbaum, and Singer), personal happiness and questions concerning one’s personal life are typically outsourced to therapeutic, “spiritual” (i.e. new-age) or commercial enterprises – practices which often overlap. Without necessarily condemning these developments in modern philosophy, or criticising modernity as such, it is clear that philosophy, which in an academic sense mostly means reading and interpreting texts, has become professionalised to such a degree that ethical reflection and moral behaviour have become two entirely separate things.

As van der Leeuw and Mostert argue, the ability to interpret a text need not inevitably be seen as the appropriate characterization of a philosophical activity and the cultivation of philosophical competence. However, this does not mean that engaging in the act of interpretation cannot be a legitimate part of doing philosophy; it ultimately depends on how a text is read (1988, pp. 26-31). Most philosophers, especially those in the analytic tradition, look at the text from a meta-perspective and ask such questions as: How is a text constructed? What is its intention? Which arguments does the text present and what are the arguments based on? What are the logical and cultural presuppositions or premises? This approach differs lit-

tle from the way scholastic philosophy has been practised through the ages, in that interest in transforming one's character as part of the philosophical activity is generally very scarce.

One could argue a student of philosophy in today's universities will learn to internalise a hypothetical perspective on the world. Since this is an "internalisation", it could be interpreted as a transformative act. However, as far as this counts as a transformative act, it remains strongly intellectually focused. As I have shown, spiritual exercises as manifestations of philosophical practice address much more than the intellect alone, which is why, following Hadot, I have used the adjective "spiritual" throughout this dissertation (see Preface).

As a consequence of a tradition that originated in the Middle Ages, which considers philosophy as an entirely abstract and theoretical occupation, historians of philosophy and academic philosophers in general fail to reflect and hearken to the fact that philosophy was a lived practice in ancient times, and instead focus more on the theoretical contents of discourses.

In ancient times, the systematic structure of Stoic and Epicurean discourse was reserved for specialists. Yet the core of the school's doctrines always remained accessible to a wider audience (Hadot 2004, p. 177). Similarly, it seems to me that it is still valuable to have both today: (1) "reliable" – i.e. academically rigorous – and historically, philologically consistent interpretations of texts (i.e. discourse); and following from this, (2) access to the core contents and principles of ancient texts,¹⁹³ so that readers – students and the philosophically interested general public – can study and exercise more carefully the transition from theory to (spiritual) practice.

One may object that this is what philosophers are already doing today in academic contexts on the one hand, and on the other in

¹⁹³ I limit myself to the example of ancient texts as these are conceived and meant to be read in a certain way (see Chapter I), as opposed to modern literature that has fused with the scholastic tradition of reading.

a popular and or political manner by offering ideas to the broader public in newspapers, radio, television, blogs, on Twitter, and so on. Outside the realm of ethics, philosophers also take part in other public and political discussions. However, the main activities of today's scholars still largely consist in developing arguments and theories and writing research proposals. By contrast,

the ancient philosophers didn't undertake or write down [spiritual] exercises to discover new knowledge, publicize arguments or advertise conclusions. They prescribed and practised them in order to transform themselves with a view to approaching the wisdom and virtues of the sage. (Sharpe & Ure 2021, p. 5)

This emphasis on philosophy as a way of living as the most specific feature of ancient texts is often overlooked or neglected by academics, which makes it difficult for the wider audience to have access to the more practical dimension of philosophy.

The question remains as to what is actually needed for letting a text speak to us, both inside and outside of academia, in a way that bridges the gap between a kind of prevalent “detached” intellectualism, and actual spiritual exercise. For philosophy to leave ‘a bite mark’,¹⁹⁴ we need to reclaim the art of listening, which, following Plato, begins with a desire to listen.

The desire to listen – letting a text speak to us (again)

On the surface, we can hear a text speak to us by following certain linguistic and grammatical rules. But a text is not a subject that can speak for itself, or that can defend itself against false interpretations. As soon as we allow a text to prove its distinctive value for the interpreter, the act of listening to ancient texts can still be practised in the sense of a spiritual exercise (Davidson & Lorenzini 2020, p. viii). After all, in trying to properly understand ancient source material

¹⁹⁴ Plato as quoted in Hadot (2011, p. 89).

and its specific features which directly approach the reader as ethical beings who want (and have) to live their lives, one is almost inevitably invited to reflect on the human meaning of its content to oneself (Hadot 2011, p. 68).

As noted, in today's universities, philosophical texts are written, read and discussed in a very specific way and with a very different attitude. The pursuit of wisdom is hardly, if ever, considered a serious objective in studying philosophy. To allow for a practice that takes the pursuit of wisdom seriously, we have to read and discuss ancient texts through another lens: with the desire to listen of a *philekoon*.

Let us re-summon the eros of philosophising in Plato's writings. As I showed in my analysis of *The Republic* and *Lysis* (Chapter III), philosophising may very well begin with a desire to listen. The Greek term *philekoos* refers to those of a certain disposition or willingness to not only listen to (philosophical) discussions, but to learn from them as well, which always implies a willingness to change oneself in light of a certain ideal.

Learning in the context of *paideia* means something else than what learning is typically thought to mean in today's context: taking note of a certain point of view, understanding and accumulating knowledge, and being able to reproduce it in one's own words. The sort of learning Plato and others were addressing, was a more profound, transformative, and thus consequential kind of learning.

I characterised the true *philekoon* as a person who realises there are things he has not already heard, and therefore turns a friendly ear to someone with the aim of learning something new. In Plato's case, this is typically a person who is eager to learn and desires to become wise: a philosopher, which in the classical Greek sense refers to someone with an attitude and way of life of not knowing the truth, but seeking for it, over and over again. There is no reason why we could not read and discuss a text in a similar way today.

In relation to learning how to read spiritually, Hadot writes:

Philosophy then appears in its original aspect: not as a theoretical construct, but as a method for training people to live and to look at the world in a new way. It is an attempt to transform mankind. (1995, p. 107)

Could present-day academics take on such a task in similar terms? That is, engage in highly specialised readings and discussions with fellow specialists and students, while also attempting to “valorise” their work for colleagues and others whose main interest is not to become highly specialised theorists themselves, but practitioners of philosophy who aim to transform themselves? I think they can, and some arguably already do, including Nussbaum, Singer, Sandel, Davidson, Chase, and Sharpe.

Of course, it would be difficult and undesirable to *demand* from academic philosophers that they engage in self-transformation in their approach to reading, interpreting, and writing texts. Equally awkward would be to task teachers with the assessment of the spiritual progress of their students. However, these examples do not exclude other options that allow room for posing the question of how to live.

What this looks like in practice is ultimately up to philosophy practitioners themselves. After all, there is not one or “correct” way of reading a text spiritually. What is key is that a text is not treated as some relic or curiosity from the past, or as an object to be studied with the exclusive interest for technical language and form, but as something that is addressing us directly and personally in the here and now. Within universities, I imagine one promising avenue would be the formation of specialised reading groups where texts are read and discussed in dialogue (see further) with the socio-historical context in the background – to avoid anachronisms and oversimplifications – and the existential dimension of what it means to live philosophically in the foreground. This existential framing and

emphasis could help push others to critically reflect on their own way of reading – and potentially, living.

Outside academia, I imagine academics could contribute with well-researched books that emphasise the existential dimension in ancient philosophy, while also offering reflections on ways to revitalise some of the ideals for us today. Subsequently, they could lead courses in private and public institutions that leave more room than universities usually do for concrete and practical exercises. For instance, through summer schools and other courses, the “Internationale School voor Wijsbegeerte” (ISVW) in the Netherlands, founded in 1916, makes for an adequate space for a different and more spiritual approach to philosophy.

Here too, it would be detrimental if professors would take the role of a therapist, evaluating one’s spiritual progress, but there is no reason why they could not offer guidance and invite students and those outside of academia to reflect and engage in spiritual exercises – i.e. truly “listen” to ancient sources and exploring avenues for acting upon its contents. As such, philosophising becomes a different activity; one that van der Leeuw and Mostert characterised as a personal-based style of philosophising, instead of the traditional hermeneutic approach one typically finds in university contexts. Here, philosophy becomes a more creative activity in the sense that practitioners study their own questions and convictions and “create” their own insights and perspectives for action (van der Leeuw & Mostert, 1991, pp. 47-48; Mostert 2021, p. 102).

In what follows I introduce the second (and related) philosophical and paideutic activities in which I see opportunities to revitalise listening as a spiritual exercise, which is listening to interlocutors through dialogue. I do this by examining the neo-Socratic paradigm of Leonard Nelson and Gustav Heckmann, in which I have personal and professional experience, in more detail.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁵ Other fairly well-known approaches to philosophical dialogue include, for example, Matthew

Dialogue-based philosophy: The Socratic Method¹⁹⁶

According to Hadot, Socrates was the first figure to introduce spiritual exercises as part of a lived practice (1995, p. 89). The form in which he did that was the dialogue; his “method” was dialectic (see Chapter III). Following Plato’s account of his friend and mentor, Socrates emerges as a master of dialogue: a master of self-examination through the examination of others in dialogue, and therefore, a master of the practice of spiritual exercises.

Plato’s dialogues were not meant to teach or convey any premeditated truths. Instead, Socrates acts as a midwife – a maieutic listener – to help his interlocutors give birth to their own thoughts. Dialogues served to encourage participants to examine their conscience and take care of themselves.¹⁹⁷ This vital dimension

prevents the dialogue from being a theoretical and dogmatic account and forces it to be a concrete and practical exercise, because, to be precise, it is not concerned with the exposition of a doctrine, but with guiding an interlocutor to a certain settled mental attitude: it is a combat, amicable but real. We should note that this is what takes place in every spiritual exercise; it is necessary to make oneself change one’s own point of view, attitude, set of convictions, therefore to dialogue with oneself, therefore to struggle with oneself. (Hadot 1997, p. 196)

Although it is hard to separate the Socratic from the Platonic dialogue, it is quite clear that Platonic dialogue is always Socratic in the sense that it can be qualified as a spiritual exercise in itself: one that can serve as a model exercise of what an ideal dialogue would look like.

Lipman and Ann Sharp’s approach, which emphasises the process of ‘acting dialogically’ and assumes education to be a form of inquiry (Lipman 2003, p. 19).

¹⁹⁶ A small part of this section is taken from my article (2019).

¹⁹⁷ Cf. Alcibiades’ description of the effect of participating in a dialogue with Socrates in the *Symposium*, 215e-216a.

In the spirit of Plato's writings, the goal of a Socratic dialogue was to question a certain proposition or issue, or to find answers to a certain question that all participants agree upon of their own accord. Its driving force was dialectic, understood as building on the responses and the explicit consent of the interlocutor. Put differently, as far as dialogue is an 'itinerary of thought,' its route can be traced by dialectic, as 'the constantly maintained accord between questioner and respondent' (Hadot 1995, p. 91).

Dialectic reveals inconsistencies and contradictions in one's positions, by forcing participants to be concrete and coherent, and guiding the other into a change of attitude and character. The interlocutor on his or her behalf is required to allow for change in him/herself, and this willingness in its turn requires a serious internal dialogue. Indeed, according to Hadot, the ability to enter into dialogue with the other, be it by listening to a text or an interlocutor, is a necessary precondition for an authentic encounter with oneself. Dialogue in this sense is as a 'communal spiritual exercise' aimed at establishing a relationship of the self to the self (Hadot 1995, pp. 90-91; see also Chapter I).

Philosophising after the Socratic method cannot be taken to represent the whole palette of philosophical activity, but it is a well-established practice in schools across the globe, in institutes such as the German *Philosophisch-Politische Akademie* (PPA), the British *Society for the Furtherance of Critical Philosophy* (SFCP), and in both private and public organisations. Due to the movement and community that grew out of the Socratic method in the first half of the twentieth century, some have compared the phenomenon to Hadot's idea of philosophy as a way of life (see Leal 2013, pp. 211 & 221-222).

After all, in contrast with his contemporary philosophy professors, Nelson was actually bidding to put the ethical demands of personal and societal change into practice. He even insisted that he was trying to realise Plato's Republic (Leal 2013, p. 232). In a letter written to fellow members of the Fries society he founded in 1903,

Nelson wrote:

We have to build a philosophical school in the old Greek sense. It is only when the fear to act shall yield to a view of life that rejoices in action that we will claim the right to be called a philosophical school... (2013, p. 214)

According to Nelson, who himself as an academic was quite disappointed with the withdrawn nature of academic philosophy, the task of philosophy is to find universal philosophical principles or truths by means of reason. These principles are not argued for or proven by philosophy, but gradually “experienced” as a necessary condition of seeking truth in the course of the dialogue.

The Socratic method is a complex and dynamic activity that is not at all easy to practice. This may account for the fact that there are very few theories or accounts that explain exactly what it is and how it should be practised.¹⁹⁸ Since universal philosophical principles are mixed up with everyday use of language, we find a so-called “regressive abstraction” at the core of this method. Regressive abstraction does not produce new forms of knowledge but, by searching for the assumption behind all assertions that come up during a dialogue, it seeks to produce clearly defined terms. As van der Leeuw and Mostert put it, the Socratic method stimulates participants to think and argue for themselves, and serves to clarify relationships between concepts and problems (1988, pp. 31-32 & 35).¹⁹⁹

To Nelson, the Socratic method is an approach to philosophising, not so much to teaching about philosophy. Although the Socratic practice presupposes and promotes certain “crafts”, it is not a technique. Rather, it implies an attentive and thorough investigation of thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours, and it starts from an intention to collaborate philosophically (Raupach-Strey 2013, pp. 15-16).

¹⁹⁸ See Leal’s nine core features to describe Socratic Dialogue (2013, pp. 224-225).

¹⁹⁹ Cf. the old and general description of Enlightenment: *sapere aude!*

Quite often, a Socratic dialogue will have an open ending (*aporia*): there is no direct answer to the question the dialogue started with. This does not render the dialogue useless, however. According to Raupach-Strey, who is an active representative of the neo-Socratic paradigm and an affiliate of the PPA, one may become, with greater clarity, aware of the existence of a certain philosophical problem, enabling one to at least approximate the truth somewhat more than before. This process of truth-finding unfolds by determining which assertions remain valid, and which become invalid in relation to the question(s) asked at the beginning of the dialogue. In other words, one does not necessarily solve problems, but learns an approach for raising questions and addressing certain problems.

As we can see on the surface, the neo-Socratic tradition has much in common with Plato's dialectics, but there are important differences as well. First, the foundation for a theory of knowledge, as well as the conditions for it to develop, are different. Plato's Socrates held a different perspective on the possibility for objective and universal truth than Nelson did, who stood in a neo-Kantian tradition that problematised this perspective (Raupach-Strey 2013, pp. 30 & 69).

Another difference is found in the number of participants. In contrast to Socrates, who would usually have only one interlocutor, the neo-Socratic paradigm allows for larger groups to take part in the dialogue. In the ancient form, and in addition to taking a leading position by determining the course of the dialogue with questions and other contributions, it was Socrates who would usually speak most of the time, and in the Academy no doubt teachers did much of the questioning.

In the new paradigm, however, the facilitator of the dialogue has a *facilitating* role and is required to stay in the background as much as possible. He or she is interested in the understanding of the participants and lays out or explains the procedure of the dialogue. The other participants are equal in their role as speakers, and together they take part in the dialogic process (Raupach-Strey 2013, p. 30).

Let us now look more closely at the role of listening in this process, before suggesting how it may become (more) spiritual in nature.

Dialogic listening as a spiritual exercise²⁰⁰

Dialogue-based philosophising in the Neo-Socratic paradigm is sometimes mistaken for a questioning style of conversing. The problem is that asking questions, even philosophical ones, does not automatically result in a dialogue, let alone a philosophical dialogue. Conversely, one can use a philosophical question to explain something in a non-dialogic form, and one can use a non-philosophical question in a dialogue just as well. One of the distinguishing variables of a Socratic dialogue is that it is a collaborative thinking process.

When we listen to someone who is philosophising, we try to determine what it is he or she is talking about. In a Socratic dialogue, it is not only speaking subjects who play a role in the collaborative effort, but listening subjects that exchange and develop each other's utterances as well; it is a process that unfolds between listening and speaking subjects. Listening to another's utterance is equally active compared to speaking.

As Plutarch maintained, considering certain aspects of etiquette, including remaining silent and allowing others to speak, is part of the active endeavour of listening. As such, the classic dichotomy between speaking and listening is misleading in this context. What is more, speaking can even be understood as a form of listening.²⁰¹

In the lived practice of Socratic dialogue, we find a reciprocal relation that allows the speaker to speak through the effort of listening. A key aspect of listening in the context of philosophical dialogue is that it is a collaborative activity in so far that it creates the possibilities for

²⁰⁰ A small part of this section is taken from my article (2019), the aforementioned book chapter (2020), and the following blogpost: <https://www.philosophy-foundation.org/blog/apprentices-of-listening>

²⁰¹ Cf. Heidegger: 'It is the custom to put speaking and listening in opposition: one man speaks, the other listens (...). Speaking is itself a listening. Speaking is listening to the language we speak. Thus, it is listening not while but before we are speaking' (1982, p. 123).

all participants of the dialogue to contribute to the thinking process. It works as a “catalyser” for advancing a dialogue by bringing to the surface what is most relevant within what is being said or asked.

Dialogic listening then, becomes a kind of listening where all participants try to listen to all that is being said. The starting point for this kind of listening is that it will contribute to better speaking as well. The rhetorical technique of *ruminatio*, hearing the same again in order to think about it, is interesting to note here. In *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1885), Nietzsche referred to this technique as *wiederkauen* (505). Or as he put it in the foreword of *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, it is what we should learn from the cow:

Freilich thut, um dergestalt das Lesen als Kunst zu üben, Eins vor Al-
lem noth, was heutzutage gerade am Besten verlernt worden ist —
und darum hat es noch Zeit bis zur „Lesbarkeit“ meiner Schriften
—, zu dem man beinahe Kuh und jedenfalls nicht „moderner
Mensch“ sein muss: das Wiederkauen...

Although Nietzsche refers to the art of reading here, which can be understood through the aforementioned parallels between reading and listening (see Introduction and previous section), the same can be said of the art of dialogue. In the Socratic dialogue, the relation between speaker and listener becomes a reciprocal one by allowing the other to speak through the effort of listening and resonating to what is said. Listening is clearly more than just hearing here. It should be understood as an active quality, a precondition to the co-creation of meaning.

A philosophical dialogue can be seen as a spiritual exercise when it generates insight and perspectives into practical approaches existential situations and things. In this sense, it is not an exercise for coming to new theoretical knowledge, but as a meeting of minds, bodies, experiences, and lives which may help to navigate real-life issues wisely and help one’s self-knowledge to grow in the process.

When a listener ruminates outside of the dialogue on what was said, and starts seeking for ways to change and improve things for the benefit of his/her life and his/her community on the basis thereof, listening could be said to be spiritual. The question remains: what could listening as a spiritual exercise look like in contexts where philosophy is practised in dialogue-form? Given that there is relatively little attention for listening in the literature regarding Socratic dialogue,²⁰² I suggest consulting Plutarch and Sophocles once more to seek inspiration for cultivating a listening attitude in today's philosophical dialogues.

In dialogue with Plutarch and Sophocles

Although Plutarch mainly frames his philosophy of listening in the context of lectures, I think that some of his insights may still be instructive to those who engage in spiritual listening within the context of dialogic practices. Let us recall the emphasis that Plutarch places on the cultivation of silence and self-restraint. According to Plutarch, once a student is ready for the study of philosophy, one of the first things he will have to exercise is minimising speech and remaining silent while listening to another. The importance of silence was already noted in *On reading the poets*, where we saw that silence as part of listening amounts to exercising the virtue of self-restraint (σωφροσύνη), which is trained by not getting carried away (by the falsehoods) when hearing poetry. During philosophy lectures and dialogues, silence becomes even more important. Self-restraint now amounts to suppressing passions such as fear, arrogance and the love of honour (*De aud.*, 39c-d; Xenophontos 2016, p. 86).²⁰³

Is silence and self-restraint as part of exercising listening spiritually not equally important for those who engage in philosophical

²⁰² Having said that, van Rossem (2020) recently published a guide which dedicates a fair amount of attention to the subject of listening, see pp. 31-36.

²⁰³ Here we can see how listening relates to the spiritual exercise of meditation: listening complements meditation to the extent that it is about controlling one's inner discourse and steering memory in a way that brings about calmness (Hadot 1995, p. 85).

dialogues today? Clearly, it is difficult if not impossible to listen in a noisy environment. Apart from such sounds as construction activities or music, another palpable (major) contributing factor to a noisy environment which impedes listening is simultaneous speakers. To avoid speaking while an interlocutor is in the middle of making a potentially philosophical point, self-restraint needs to be employed.

This does not mean that a listener will always have to restrain him/herself from interrupting, however. Sometimes, an interruption is helpful to both the speaker – who may have digressed without noticing – and the listeners in the dialogue. This is why a facilitator may intervene to ensure that only fundamental questions are being addressed (Raupach-Strey 2013, pp. 26-27; Heckmann 1981, p. 69). But it is ultimately up to the listener to carefully deliberate the motivation of interrupting in each instance, and wisely control impulses to interrupt.

After all, as Plutarch writes, a listener should act as a fellow-worker with the speaker, by allowing him or her to speak and abiding by certain behavioural codes. In this sense, listening is also a matter of good behaviour. But proper listening behaviour is not only a question of good manners; it is also a matter of self-interest according to Plutarch. One would miss out on the opportunity of detecting what is useful and what is not in light of one's love and desire for truth. The example of Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone* is a most striking example of missing out on this opportunity.

One way to allow a speaker to speak is by practising silence, but from being silent and practising self-restraint, it does not necessarily follow that one is also listening. Therefore, *willingness to listen* should be included as part of the spiritual nature of the listening exercise: one should wish to hear the other for the sole motive of learning and making philosophical progress – i.e. self-improvement.

Whether an utterance is useful and beneficial depends on the attitude with which one enters a dialogue. Plutarch maintains that willingness to listen is not a form of obeying what others say, but

rather closely paying heed to their words (and actions). Again, we are reminded of Creon, who eventually obeys to Tiresias. However, a willingness to listening to Haemon and Antigone is what could have prevented the unfortunate course of events in the tragedy.

The willingness to listen is related to the willingness to be good, expressed in admiration for good human beings, which is why those who are in the company of such persons should take advantage of that situation by carefully listening and paying attention to what they say and how they behave (*De prof. in virt.*, 84e-f). Similarly, it stands to reason that spiritual listening today still requires showing goodwill (εὐνοία) to hear, and willingness to self-improve. After all, it is hard to imagine someone deliberately transforming and improving one's character without desiring to change. Wisdom does not come without effort and an existential choice to transform.

Another aspect of listening that forms part of cooperating with the speaker is related to the spiritual exercise of attention: what to focus on when listening to a philosophy lecture or an interlocutor, and what not to? Listening requires attention, and attention should be guided by the practice of critically focusing on the content of what is being said, not so much the character of the speaker, or the style of speaking, although such aspects should not necessarily be ignored either.

Put differently, learning to listen serves to know what to 'fill the ears' with, and what not to. In this manner, a good listener can be expected to say things of substance during a present-day dialogue as well, because he or she not only knows what to fill his/her ears with and what not, but knows what to fill others' ears with as well. It follows that a listener should also be able to speak, as Plutarch shows, particularly about what he or she has listened to, so as to facilitate his own comprehension. In this sense, listening is enriched by speaking and vice versa. Critically focussing on the content of what is being said, is what Plutarch calls seeking the fruits of a lecture: that which has the potential to make them into a better person.

Listening patiently is so important in both poetry and philosophy to Plutarch because it is what comes before forming one's own perspective (Xenophontos 2016, pp. 88-89).²⁰⁴ Nussbaum's plea for the involvement of drama in the act of philosophy corresponds to Plutarch's vision on what might be beneficial to aspiring students of philosophy. For Plutarch, the practice of listening begins with the exposure to poetry, which prepares one for the study of philosophy. Early on, listening is best practised by hearing things that are pleasant to hear. In this way, one develops a certain fondness of hearing which, based on Plato, we identified as a philosophical quality. Learning to correctly understand poetry lays the foundation for the correct attention and listening a student is required to employ during philosophy lectures, and interactions with philosophers.

To Plutarch, contemplative and reflective subjects such as poetry, which are strongly reliant on verbal ingenuity and imitation, are more suitable for moulding one's character than so-called "exact" subjects such as mathematics, which were high on Plato's list. Poetry should implant in the young man a feeling of sympathy and keenness for noble words and actions on the one hand, and aversion and loathing for the mean and shameful on the other. This is something which the art of numbers is incapable of. Poetry and philosophy meet in Plutarch's *paideia*, because poetry can already be a philosophical activity in itself, so far as subtle differences in meanings and contexts are examined and discussed with the question of improving oneself and one's own moral health in the background.

Reaching back to Sophocles, one way of cultivating *phronēin* is to focus on – i.e. listen to – as many nuances of situations as possible, so that we can value situations for their complexity and ultimately make a decision that does justice to the good life. Listening to tragedies such as *Antigone* helps us to engage philosophically and dialogically with the most pressing issues humans are confronted

²⁰⁴ Young students were also trained in listening to other opinions as part of their rhetorical education, see Xenophontos (2016, p. 89).

with. After all, as Nussbaum argues, by encouraging the testing of one's ethical experiences and intuitions, tragedy aids an individual's philosophical quest for truth and the good life. Furthermore, tragedy centres on human stories that are conceived with the intention of bringing certain themes to the fore. These themes lend themselves to further collaborative reflection and the promotion of self-inquiry, based on questions such as: what would I have done in this situation? What would be just and unjust? What is the role of chance or fate in this particular story? (Nussbaum 2001, pp. 14-15). It will remain important to understand the particular context of tragedy and realise it is very different from our modern context, but themes such as contingency, hubris, loss and death never cease to play a role in life.

The step of seeking the fruit of a lecture, or of poetry, tragedy or a dialogue for that matter, is followed up by determining what of the content was useful to oneself, and checking the effect a lecture had on one's own condition. This is, after all, how true philosophers, at least from Socrates onward but arguably already since the tragedians, are recognised: by asking questions about their progress and examining their own way of life. Although Plutarch offers the vague and difficult to verify criterion of "feeling cleansed", one can still reflect today on the question whether the listening effort had any sort of effect.

After all, listening is useless if it is not intended to "kindle the mind". Philosophy is meant to kindle the illumination within; getting the opinions of others and being concerned with acquiring mere information and words, does not expel the 'darkness of the inner mind' (*De aud.*, 48d). It is not enough to listen to thoughts, articulated in lectures, courses, and dialogues. One also needs to cultivate what is heard into independent and creative thinking of one's own, and more importantly: into actions on the basis thereof.

The fire metaphor in "*De Audiendo*" attests to this: philosophy

offers the warm glow of a fire, but it is ultimately up to the listener to ignite his own kindle. Listening is always one aspect of a wider range of interrelated exercises. So, catching the spark of philosophy by listening, resonating to, and ruminating presupposes continuous engagement in various spiritual exercises as part of a philosophical way of life:

The teaching of philosophy is not, if I may use the words of Pindar, ‘a sculptor to carve statues doomed to stand idly on their pedestals and no more’; no, it strives to make everything that it touches active and efficient and alive, it inspires men with impulses which urge to action, with judgements that lead them towards what is useful, with preferences for things that are honourable, with wisdom and greatness of mind joined to gentleness (...). (Plutarch, *Max. cum princip.*, I, 776c)

In a similar fashion, dialogic listening as a spiritual exercise should be done as part of a particular attitude towards life, and not just as part of the study of philosophy.

We have discussed the practice of listening to a text and an interlocutor, or a group of interlocutors, as instances of a present-day philosophical practice that could be orientated around spiritual listening. There is one final activity that I will now introduce: listening to nature, which I base on the work of Dutch philosopher Henk Oosterling.

Ecosophy – Networks of *inter-esse*

In *Verzet in ecopanische tijden* (2020), which translates to *Resistance in Times of Eco-panic*, Oosterling describes and analyses the different scales through which “resistance” can be shaped in the face of the different climate crises we see ourselves confronted with. It is not a work that fuels panic or cynicism, but rather one that employs philosophy – or rather, ecosophy – to differentiate, scale-up and up-

grade the concept of sustainability, and to encourage a pro-active attitude to discover the force to transform oneself, the social networks one is embedded in, *and* society.

The book centres on the following question: how can individuals and groups combine practices of resistance to function as interconnected nodes within local, regional, and global sustainable networks? In what Oosterling refers to as “circular valorisation,”²⁰⁵ – which, philosophically speaking, refers to ontological relationism²⁰⁶ – individuals are no longer “islands” or fixed positions.²⁰⁷ On the premise that individuals doing individual things to address these crises is not enough, resistance in this sense is a counterforce that works in, in between and with other people, and is found on the level of what Oosterling refers to as “inter-being”.

The socio-political context of *Resistance* is situated in the Anthropocene – today’s (unofficial) geological epoch, in which human beings and their behaviour are the determining factor of our planet’s development.²⁰⁸ Among the earliest anthropocentric philosophers, we find Aristotle’s teleology, in which it is believed all things in nature exist to cater to human beings, specifically men: ‘If therefore

²⁰⁵ The dynamic interrelatedness of networks in which individuals find their particular strengths to add value on different scales. Examples include organisations that contribute to geo-political change through (online) activist networks (e.g. Avaaz, Greenpeace) or crowdfunding platforms (e.g. GoFundMe, Kickstarter, Chuffed).

²⁰⁶ Everything that is, exists in connection to something that is (exists) connected to something else, and so on. Only in the final analysis everything is connected to everything else.

²⁰⁷ Although Nussbaum’s ethics are more individualistically oriented than ecological, I touched on this idea earlier with Nussbaum’s focus on social interrelatedness and the idea that our individual wellbeing cannot be seen as separate and independent relative to the wellbeing of others (see Chapter I).

²⁰⁸ Oosterling claims we arrived at the Anthropocene condition through “linear-progressive” Hegelian and Marxist dialectics, which do not consider interrelatedness as an articulation of irreconcilable differences. Instead, every opposition can be sublated into a new “identity”, which is ultimately supposed to result in a utopia or world-scale revolution. The problem is, however, that the dialectic discourse which relies on catastrophes on the one hand, and progress on the other remains in place, inspiring little to no change because it got stuck in itself: there is no spot on the horizon where we should move to (Oosterling 2020, p. 160). Our condition in the Anthropocene is ultimately not one of oppositional exclusion, but supplementary inclusion of all tensions – expressed as paradoxes, antinomies, contradictions, dilemma, aporia – according to Oosterling: we cannot completely cancel out all contradictions or return to an earlier and often romanticised state. Abandoning or bluntly opposing technology, for instance, is not an option.

nature makes nothing without purpose or in vain, it follows that nature has made all the animals for the sake of men' (*Politics*, I, 1256b).

This instrumental value attributed to nature, and the exclusive intrinsic value attributed to human beings, is popular to this very day. However, sparked by the sense of environmental crisis exhibited by Rachel Carson in her seminal book *Silent Spring* (1963), and *The Limits to Growth* (1972) by Dennis and Donella Meadows *et al.*, new environmental movements and philosophies emerged in the seventies of the previous century.²⁰⁹ What these movements and philosophies had in common was that they sought to radically rethink the relationships human beings bear to nature.

One of the most prominent environmental ethical movements that was born in the 1970s was the deep ecology movement, spearheaded by the Norwegian professor and mountaineer Arne Naess (1912-2009). The central characteristic of deep ecology – articulated in a set of eight principles, called the Platform Principles²¹⁰ – is the intrinsic value it attributes to all living things, independent of their instrumental value.²¹¹

Naess is also known to introduce the term “ecosophy”, or rather “Ecosophy T”, which refers to his cabin on the Tvergastein mountain in mid-southern Norway. Naess defines ecosophy as

a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium. A philosophy as a kind of *sofia* (or) wisdom, is openly normative, it contains both norms, rules, postulates, value priority announcements and hypotheses concerning the state of affairs in our universe. Wisdom is policy wisdom, prescription, not only scientific description and prediction. The details of an ecosophy will show many variations

²⁰⁹ Some of the better-known figures who contributed to environmental ethics are Holmes Rolston III, Val Plumwood, Paul Taylor and Warwick Fox. For a more complete overview of contributions, see Brennan *et al.* (2021), and Attfield (2014).

²¹⁰ See Drengson & Devall (2008, p. 28).

²¹¹ On a critical note, the movement never made clear why all living things are supposed to have an equal and similar right to live and flourish. This critique also stretches to the presupposed value of non-animate things, such as mountains and rivers (Brennan *et al.* 2021).

due to significant differences concerning not only the ‘facts’ of pollution, resources, population, etc. but also value priorities. (Drengson & Inoue 1995, p. 8)

In other words, ecosophy designates a practical life philosophy with a strong sense of responsibility towards nature, whose aim is “ecological harmony”, a condition where human beings live in harmony with nature and each other. Naess considered himself to be a teacher whose objective it was to encourage his students to find their own ecosophies. His writings, ranging in genre from academic to mythopoetic, were meant to inspire a transformative and cross-cultural understanding of ecosophy (Drengson & Devall 2008, vii).

In Oosterling’s ecosophical account, which, to a certain extent builds on Naess,²¹² every individual is relationally situated in networks: from the nuclear family via school peer groups to professional and leisure networks. These are all “interconnected nodes”. As such, our way of life and mental sustainability is determined by our *inter-esse*, literally our being (*esse*) in between (*inter*). *Inter-esse*, as the driving force of ecosophy, for Oosterling is a receptive, open, and alert mentality that enhances interconnectedness through concrete practices that connect thinking and acting, reflection and action – abbreviated in the neologism “reflaction”²¹³ (Oosterling 2020a, p. 89).

As a consequence of the increasing impact on our daily lives, climate change and biodiversity now belong to the realm of polit-

²¹² Apart from Naess, he also draws from Deleuze and Guattari who gave the term “ecosophy” a physical basis in what they call “milieu” or the middle (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p. 25), and connects it to a social ecology inspired by Murray Bookchin and an ecology of mind after the work of English anthropologist Gregory Bateson (Oosterling 2020a, p. 194). For a critique of Bateson’s cybernetic model see Bonnett (2021, pp. 120-123). Timothy Morton’s *Ecology without Nature* also played a role in Oosterling’s thinking about our unreflective use of technology, see Oosterling (2014, p. 285), and his earlier work *Radicale middelmatigheid* (2000), which translates to “Radical mediocrity”, and is simply defined as ‘an uncritical consumption of technological comfort that consumes its users, blocking the view on how dependent they are upon their media’ (Oosterling 2014, p. 287). See also Bonnett (2021, p. 114) who argues ICT insulates ‘from the full sensory reality of nature’, which in turn normalises an unsustainable frame of mind in relation to our natural surroundings.

²¹³ In Dutch: “doendenken”.

ical problems in the broad sense, presupposing a differentiation of the concept “political”. Oosterling distinguishes four interrelated – non-hierarchically – organised political scales: micro, meso, macro and eco, which I proceed to explain now.

***Eco-inter-esse* and eco-emancipation**

From a systematic point of view on the geopolitical or macro-level, we find sovereign nation states, multinational corporations, and banks; personalised as politicians, CEOs, shareholders, investors, and voters. On the socio-political or meso-level, we find actors who operate on the level of civil society: consumers, professionals, and all citizens that gain subjectivity in participating in the political-historical progression of nation states. On the affective/physical or micro-level, we find everything related to the human self-consciousness, including individual needs, desires, and preferences. However, every individual is always directly or indirectly acting or counter-acting on all scales.

In between, the different scales have “spaces of transition”. These transitions are inspired, motivated or driven by scaled *inter-esse*, or acting and thinking to trigger changes of perspective that always presuppose a change of being as well. For instance, through *ego-inter-esse*, an ego can become an “authentic” meso-political individual by scaling up one’s choices to live in a certain way and integrate this practice into one’s professional life. Through *subject-inter-esse*, cooperating individuals on a meso-political scale can become subjects that on the macro-political scale can participate and actively shape society.²¹⁴

The fourth scale, which Oosterling refers to as the “eco-political scale”, is the scale that one arrives at through integrated *eco-inter-esse*. Central to the eco-political sphere are sustainable connections that do not depart from individual identities, but from relational

²¹⁴ See <https://henkoosterlingnl.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/vet-eng-hc-2020-h4-2.pdf> for a discussion (in English) of concrete examples.

arrangements, i.e. human beings who communicate, cooperate, and critically and creatively participate. *Eco-inter-esse* invites people to care for the planet, for the benefit of our physical and social environment (literally: “that which surrounds us and others”), and for ourselves.

To implement a circularity-based ecosophy, Oosterling argues that philosophy needs to be “recalibrated” with the planet as the central focal point. In his own words:

The ecopolitical diagnosis needed to map our present global and local situation is very simple, the cure however is immensely hard: We have to redesign our daily lives on a mesopolitical scale – in schools, neighborhoods, community centers, on a local level – inspired by a less egocentred ecopolitics. This asks for both an institutional and an existential transition. (2014, p. 274)

This so-called eco-emancipation is a transitional phase that requires a lifelong “reflective” effort. Eco-emancipation is trained through eco-literacy, which coincides with one of the 21st century skills introduced by UNESCO in 2000, and is defined as ‘social responsibility, and cultural, global and environmental awareness’ (Oosterling 2020b, pp. 164-165). Hence, eco-literacy is a prominent part of the educational project Rotterdam Vakmanstad (RVS), initiated by Oosterling in 2008.

The educational curriculum consists of five key components: martial arts (Judo and Aikido), health, nature, technique, and philosophy with Socratic dialogue. During these classes, children learn (by doing) about a healthy and sustainable lifestyle. Examples of educational activities that lead to skills to make sustainable choices in life, both for one’s own good, as well as that of the other, are growing and preparing one’s own food, knowledge of technique and nature, knowing how to use media, and physical and mental sparring through martial arts and philosophy. The various classes

within the curriculum are all interrelated:

All these different activities empower each other: in order to do judo one needs to eat, that demands preparing and growing food with a knowledge of sustainable processes. Philosophy provides basic communicative and argumentative skills that are needed to discuss environmental topics and handle conflicts. (Oosterling 2014, p. 295)²¹⁵

What does this have to do with spiritual exercises? Interestingly, the Icelandic philosopher Páll Skúlason argues that humans need a “spiritual understanding” of nature, gained by developing ‘our capacity to receive and understand the messages that nature is sending us’ so that we may form a life in agreement with the actual meaning of nature itself (see Bonnett 2021, p. 105). However, as long as we try to understand these messages in the language of the natural sciences, this line of thought can be problematic because it may presuppose an anthropocentric notion of intrinsic value. Nature in that case is *attributed* intrinsic value. This value does not necessarily emanate from nature itself; there is still an element of human subjectivity.

To escape this anthropocentric pitfall in which nature is only heard as a resource, and to pay heed to the ‘instantiations of nature’s normative address,’ a practice needs to be found that resonates with what Bonnett has called nature’s *inherent* intrinsic value, which at the same time does not entirely dismiss or reject personal elements²¹⁶ (Bonnett 2021, pp. 105-106 & 110-111; see also Bonnett, 2004, p. 93):

²¹⁵ For English sources see Oosterling (2014, pp. 291-298) and Griffioen (2015). The RVS curriculum was scientifically monitored between 2008 and 2012. The research team concluded that ‘1) physically, there is no significant change yet, but 2) on a socio-emotional scale, a highly significant change is evident, and 3) the final scores of the CITO tests – indications for entrance to secondary education – have improved from far below neighborhood and local average (527 and 532, respectively) to the national average (535)’. See Oosterling (2014, p. 294 n18). For more recent scientific findings, see Stichting De Verre Bergen (2022).

²¹⁶ After all, the scientific account that is at the root of the ‘disenchantment of nature’ is characterised by the removal of more subjective and affective language because it cannot be verified in empirical language. According to Bonnett, ‘[personal experiences of the full reality of nature]

Only by listening for the call of what is other can we begin to receive the norms that imbue the places (...) we inhabit and so receive intimations of how our existence is in interplay with all else. In this way, a sensing of a greater whole that is neither totalizing nor atomizing (...) can occur. (Bonnett 2021, p. 128)

Oosterling also employs the adjective “spiritual”, but does not qualify it anthropocentrically. Rather, he uses it to relationally address the problem of anthropocentrism. The aim of Oosterling’s eco-emanicipation – triggered by eco-literacy – is something he refers to as “physical spirituality”. This is where the mental, physical, and social are integrated and valorised with one another into an integral interconnected awareness.

Physical spirituality is practised through transitional techniques that transform our views on life and our modern lifestyle into proportional and scalable – not puritanical – lifestyles that can be sustained by the planet. On the micro-political level, spirituality becomes physical and concrete in the form of secular self-care, which integrally connects physical, social, and mental sustainability. On the macro-political level, physical spirituality is embodied in a critical awareness of our policy-driven handling of the planet and our global footprint. Could listening as a spiritual exercise be conceptualised and practised as a transitional technique on the eco-political level?

Heraclitus and listening as an eco-emanicipatory exercise

Like Hadot’s spiritual exercises, physical spirituality implies an integral approach to self-care that includes often separated physical, social, and mental aspects. Eco-emanicipation requires a lifelong (Herculean, or as it turns out, Heraclitean) effort that transforms

need to be protected against the onslaught of the metaphysics of mastery and celebrated as a valid participation in, and insight into, the primordial enchantment of nature. They instantiate what a genuine encounter with nature in its wholeness involves, one that powerfully reconnects to it’ (2021, p. 111).

the way we relate to nature, so as to realise any sort of long-lasting collective health in the broadest sense of the term.

In an attempt to work with Oosterling's concepts and offer some orientation for "ecosophic" practice based on listening, we could differentiate between two kinds of listening: ego-listening on the one hand, and eco-listening on the other. Ego-listening, as the term suggests, is what we encounter when we listen on the micro-level to our ego – the self-centred perspective that presents us with all kinds of contradictions. These can be implicit and will be experienced as tensions, frictions, hopes, and fears articulated in thoughts and emotions. By contrast, eco-listening overrules the ego by focusing on a larger scheme of things: our planetary condition.

We have discussed the need to emancipate ourselves ecologically, which to Oosterling means philosophy needs to be *reoriented relationally*, that is, as a node within a network that embeds – not excludes – divisions and tensions as part of a greater whole. To relate to others, we listen as an *inter-vidual*, giving other interlocutors a voice through the words and phrases in our conversations: not only animals and plants, but also landscapes and the elements. As such, eco-listening, driven by *inter-esse*, connects one to one's environment as that which not only surrounds us, but also raises its voice in us. We become inter-vidual listeners when we cease to exclusively listen to ourselves in projecting our needs and convictions on our conversation partners, and instead allow for dialogues in which the "interests" of non-humans and ecosystems are weighed and represented as well.

As a likely consequence of his experiences of being in nature, Naess believed strongly in the responsive ability of nature. However, this idea presents us with some problems. First, whether we perceive nature as Naess did, ultimately depends on our upbringing, our disposition in relation to nature, and how we act (Drengson & Devall 2008, p. 9). Second, as with literary works, it is epistemologically difficult to argue that nature or the planet is trying to "say" something. In addition, who and how do we decide whose interpretation of

nature's voice is to be heeded? (Bonnett 2021, p. 106).

We cannot simply regard the planet as a book that we can read; there is a difference between listening to a person, a text, and a thing. In the last case, we enter the sphere of classical metaphysics, mysticism, Christianity – or aesthetics.²¹⁷ An alternative scenario – albeit a scattered one – that takes circularity and “wholeness”²¹⁸ into account, is found with Heraclitus.²¹⁹

Heraclitus was one of the founding fathers of the dialectical tension that cannot be sublated. There is unity in things such as day and night, summer and winter, beginning and ending, and life and death. These opposites do not cancel each other out, but continuously alternate (M. Lamberti 2021, p. 14; cf. footnote 208 about Hegel and Marx). Practical wisdom for Heraclitus consists in speaking about and listening to what is true and acting in accordance with it. Listening and acting are inseparable for Heraclitus, both presupposing a certain alertness that requires more than just hearing. Indeed, living and acting should be conducted by the realisation of wisdom

²¹⁷ Anyone interested in navigating the issue of listening to a thing aesthetically, might connect to Adorno for a theoretical approach that offers the “beauty of nature” as an option to lend our voice to nature. In his sense, aesthetics is the area that can make sense of “the language of nature”. Interestingly, the paradigmatic metaphor that Oosterling deconstructs – the pyramid – and the one he offers for our transition – networks – also presuppose an aesthetics. In his redefinition of philosophy as ecosophy, next to intercultural philosophy, political philosophy, and ecology, he explicitly refers to aesthetics: it is aesthetics that feeds our imagination and helps us see coherence while simultaneously serving as a last base for communication in case reason should fail us. Aesthetic imagination envelops an interested listening in this sense. See Oosterling *et al.* (2011), and Oosterling (2014, p. 284).

²¹⁸ With respect to the wholeness, or “greater whole”, Bonnett offers two caveats (2021, p. 119): (1) Some metaphors used to characterise the greater whole are inadequate. For instance, Bonnett has issues with Bateson’s cybernetic model which, as an information feedback system, represents ‘highly *discursive* forms of structure’. Due to ‘the primary character of the native occurring of things (and in particular, the “self-arising” quality of natural things), [accounts of this kind] unavoidably do violence to the phenomena that they purport to describe’ (see pp. 120-123 & 127). (2) It remains difficult to determine the degree of inclusiveness when speaking in universal terms (see also my discussion of Nussbaum’s philosophy of universal ethics in chapter I). Bonnett proposes an alternative route via Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (Bonnett 2021, pp. 124-126).

²¹⁹ Another promising avenue for philosophically exploring the meaning of nature’s (reticent) voice and the possibility of listening to nature may be found through the eco-phenomenological approach of James Magrini’s *Ethical Responses to Nature’s Call: Reticent Imperatives* (2019). Bonnett further expands on this (2021).

through listening to the philosophical *logos*, which he called, in the strongest metaphysical terms, “the real constitution of things”²²⁰ For Heraclitus, the cosmological principle of the world – the *logos* – is what nourishes humans, which is why they need to follow *logos* by listening to it to finally come to understand what is true.

Living in the Anthropocene condition, what can be a more “real”, and in this case, “tangible” principle than the planet? The planet nourishes us: it houses us, provides us with oxygen, it feeds us, but it nourishes us just as well with what Heraclitus refers to as the *logos*. We may understand this *logos* as ecosophy, joining and connecting political and intercultural philosophy with ecology. Heraclitus refers to the rational principle of the universe as ‘that which is wise’ (το σοφόν). This is not the *logos* itself, but *that which utters the logos*. Following Oosterling, we could interpret that which utters the *logos* to be the planet itself.

Nature has its own wisdom, and ecosystems reveal that all things are one (cf. Heraclitus, fragment 50). Nature may not speak, but it would be hard to deny that it “communicates” physically, for instance, in the form of rising temperatures, severe weather conditions, heat stress, mud slides, desertification, tornados, and extinguishing species, with all related social and mental implications.²²¹

Although the language of natural sciences – or “scientific naturalism” – translates natural phenomena into words and numbers, the *logos* of nature does not speak in everyday words. Therefore, we need to learn to understand the language it expresses itself in within the social context and the mental fictions that it engenders. Eco-listening as a spiritual exercise is not only trying to decipher the language spoken by the planet, but also, compassionately, to experi-

²²⁰ The word *logos* from *legein* as Heidegger, Fiumara and later Latour argued, also means “gathering”. We recognize this characterization in Oosterling’s rephrasing of the individual as a “node” in networks. See also Oosterling 2020a, pp. 111-113.

²²¹ As Magrini and Bonnett show, nature can also communicate through silence (Bonnett 2021, p. 109). Cf. James Lovelock’s “Gaia hypothesis”, in which living organisms are suggested to (often unknowingly) interact with their surroundings to regulate environmental systems so as to make life possible. For a critical discussion of the Gaia hypothesis, see Attfield (2014, p. 3).

ence and embody this language in actions.

According to Heraclitus, people fail to listen to the *logos* because of their unfamiliarity with it. With Oosterling, we could argue that we have become unfamiliar with it, because we are too obsessed and preoccupied with listening to our divided egos – ego-listening – in a language fuelled by greed, personal desires and affects:

In producing scarcity capitalism forces choices upon individuals, defining their needs through producing desire as a result of which the individual is fixated as an undivided being: an in-dividual, i.e. a subject. (Oosterling, 2014 p. 281)

Many before have expressed the concern of egoism and consumerism driven by capitalism, probably to the extent that it has become a cliché. Clearly, we cannot hope to solve the climate crisis from one day to the other, simply by listening differently. Yet, it is hard to imagine any ecosophical way of life without surpassing the focus on individual identities and consumptive lifestyles, and transforming the self relationally. Therefore, as a transformative exercise, eco-listening is less interested in individual wishes and desires, and more *inter-ested* in finding activating guidance through the question: What does the earth require of us if we want to live on it? Posing this question requires a (relational) “view from above”.

Eco-listening as a spiritual exercise:

The view from above (*le regard d'en haut*)

We have defined spiritual exercises as an effort to modify, improve and transform the self, which entails a complete transformation of one's point of view, attitudes, and convictions, as well as one's actions. This transformation does not just suggest a change of view, it implies a change of being.

Hadot's spiritual exercises are not meant as a mere historical

study, but as an attempt to ‘offer contemporary mankind a model of life’ (1995, p. 208). In his critique of Foucault’s conception of aesthetics of existence, Hadot accuses Foucault of focusing too much on the relationship to one’s self. Hadot emphasises the feeling of belonging to a Whole (both a human community and greater totality of the world, or “cosmic” Whole) as a fundamental element of spiritual exercises (see also Hadot 2011, p. 117).

Such a view may make us realise that our passions and worries are quite insignificant in the greater scheme of things, which is why this aspect of spiritual exercise cannot be left out of a discussion of philosophy as a way of life (Hadot 1995, pp. 208, 211 & 284). Hadot’s cosmic or universal perspective seems to centre on the same themes as Oosterling’s planetary, eco-political interesse that argues planetary health should not be considered as something wholly different than health on the micro-political level.

Paideia, or transformation then – the object of exercise – does not occur on the individual level only, but transcends individuality to something greater, something Hadot refers to as “universality”. After all, for Hadot, spiritual exercises universalize the self. Writing, for instance, is often carried out in solitude. At the same time, writing in solitude is what allowed the monk Antony to look through other people’s eyes, and take the ‘silently present human community’ into account (Hadot 1995, pp. 210-211).²²²

In the case of eco-listening as a spiritual exercise, the move outward implies an attempt to identify with something outside of oneself, without dismissing the personal. What Foucault seems to have paid little attention to in his description and analysis of technologies of the self, according to Hadot, is the ancient concern for life in service of the human community. With Oosterling, we might add to that a concern for “a life in accord with the planet” itself, an eco-wisdom which is in the interest of the human community as well, and by implication for

²²² Cf. ‘For my part – if I examine myself writing – I never come to write the slightest phrase without my writing being accompanied by a mental speaking and listening’ (Nancy 2007, p. 35).

all participants within that community.²²³ As Bonnett puts it:

[T]he truths of nature elicit kinds of knowing that are dialogical and intuitive. (...) they involve a sensing of things in their particularity that embody and express agency and value, motion and mystery. Hence, they require modes of attentiveness that are open, multi-sensory, bodied and affective as well as cerebral. (2021, p. 114)

Bonnett's phenomenologically-orientated language does not seem far from what Heraclitus proposed: what is needed to learn the language of the *logos* is open-mindedness, perseverance, inquisitiveness, and a willingness to inquire into the real. All these aspects can be incorporated into the act of eco-listening: one is open-minded – interested – in the sense that one allows for other, even non-anthropocentric perspectives, to exist alongside each other; one is inquisitive and willing in the sense that one inquires into oneself in relation to the environment around us; and one perseveres in exercising continuously, in the never-ending quest for (eco-) wisdom.

An example of a spiritual exercise that I believe would fit in the category of eco-listening, and may provide inspiration for a contemporary approach, is found in Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*:

Observe the movement of the stars as if you were running their courses with them, and let your mind constantly dwell on the changes of the elements into each other. Such imaginings wash away the filth of life on the ground. (Marcus Aurelius, Book VII, 47)

²²³ In a recent podcast, Oosterling defines eco-wisdom in threefold (Rotterdamsch leeskabinet 2022). Following Naess, who strived for cross-cultural harmony, we need to be sensitive to the fact that each culture has its own way of thinking and that there may be irreconcilable tensions between different cultures. These tensions do not need to be "solved" but should be included and even embraced in an ecosophy. In addition, ecosophy is also concerned with granting non-human creatures, as well as landscapes and rivers certain rights that need to be respected, so that living in harmony with the planet becomes possible again. Finally, it means that we, as relational beings, fundamentally think in terms of (proportional) relationships instead of identities.

Which is followed by:

Further, when your talk is about mankind, view earthly things as if looking down on them from some point high above - flocks, armies, farms, weddings, divorces, births, deaths, the hubbub of the law-courts, desert places, various foreign nations, festivals, funerals, markets; all the medley of the world and the ordered conjunction of opposites. (Marcus Aurelius, Book VII, 48)

As Hadot explains in his book on Marcus Aurelius, this “view from above” or “cosmic flight of the soul”²²⁴ serves to make one aware of the larger scheme of things both outside and inside oneself, without losing the *inter-esse* from sight. This “circular valorisation” was meant to exercise temperance and discipline in relation to all sorts of desires, fears, and other human affairs which we identified with the act of ego-listening.

Again, we cannot expect to solve the problems of climate change from one day to another; there are no easy fixes for a problem of this magnitude. However, as climate scientist Carl Folke recently said in an interview, apart from new laws, there is also a need for a narrative of hope that intrinsically motivates people to transform to more sustainable, and therefore, relational lifestyles (see Mulder 2022). Perhaps we can allow this new and transformative narrative to emerge, not by speaking, but by (eco-)listening.

I have discussed three examples of contemporary philosophical and paideutic activities in which I see opportunities to revitalise listening as a spiritual exercise. The activities were listening to (1) texts, (2) interlocutors, and (3) nature. I also showed how I believe the different philosophies I discussed in the forgoing chapters could serve

²²⁴ This is not to be confused with a pyramidal or hierarchical image. Reaching out to a view above should rather be thought of as an immense feedback loop (Norbert Wiener) that serves to make one aware of the larger scheme of things both outside and inside oneself.

as orientation for us today. Let us now summarise and conclude this chapter and the findings of this project in a final chapter, before closing with a few points for discussion.

Conclusion

When I listened to Pericles and other skilled orators I thought them eloquent, but I never felt anything like this; my spirit was not left in a tumult and had not to complain of my being in the condition of a common slave: whereas the influence of our Marsyas²²⁵ here has often thrown me into such a state that I thought my life not worth living on these terms. In all this, Socrates, there is nothing that you can call untrue. Even now I am still conscious that if I consented to lend him my ear, I could not resist him, but would have the same feeling again. For he compels me to admit that, sorely deficient as I am, I neglect myself while I attend to the affairs of Athens. So I withhold my ears perforce as from the Sirens, and make off as fast as I can, for fear I should go on sitting beside him till old age was upon me. (Plato, *Symposium*, 215e-216a)

In the foregoing chapters, I discussed listening in several ancient contexts to deepen an understanding of what the phenomenon of listening as a spiritual exercise in ancient philosophy may have entailed, and to contribute to the creation of an overview of the history of philosophy of listening in Western thought. I also examined some contemporary philosophical practices where listening as a spiritual exercise might be credibly revitalised, so as to offer some orientation for those who aim to live philosophically.

Today, our personal, societal, economic, and ecological well-being is under threat, and one of the reasons may very well be that we have forgotten how to listen in a way that contributes to our ability to navigate life wisely. We have a great amount of technological means to address today's most pressing problems, but what is lacking is the wisdom to use technology and intelligence in a sustainable and peaceful way.

²²⁵ Alcibiades is comparing Socrates to the wise satyr Marsyas.

Aiming to live wisely is precisely the end ancient philosophy called on its listeners to pursue, so to determine whether paying heed to the ancients can inspire a change toward a more listening-friendly attitude – a move toward befriending the ears – we need to know what listening as a spiritual exercise means in the first place.

To this end, the first research question I posed was:

How are we to understand listening as a spiritual exercise in ancient cultural-philosophical contexts?

Let us now briefly summarise the findings that emerged after posing this question.

As we have seen, the goal of *paideia* is the attainment of wisdom (Hadot 1995, pp. 101-102). In Chapters II and III, I described the development of the ancient paideutic ideal of moral excellence (*aretè*) and related it to listening. Although Plutarch arguably dedicated the most effort to studying listening, he was certainly not the first to consider the importance of listening as part of *paideia*. Plato was his predecessor here, but in a certain sense, albeit implicitly, Heraclitus and Sophocles also contributed to the body of knowledge concerning spiritual listening and *paideia*.

Heraclitus was the first to consider listening, as part of sound thinking, to be the highest virtue of all. As such, Heraclitus was the first to relate listening to the *logos*, showing that listening is more than just hearing: it involves a process of understanding and reasoning, and for this one must learn the language of the *logos*. “Spiritual” in the Heraclitean sense refers to the idea that listening is a choice to commit to changing one’s entire life and soul. Heraclitus contributed to the change of meaning of *aretè* from courage and prowess to something more akin to philosophical wisdom. This wisdom is ultimately recognised in those who speak truth, listen to what is true, and act in accordance with truth.

Sophocles considers the desire for practical wisdom to be the

first principle of happiness, because it is the highest thing we may possess. With the emphasis in Sophocles' work on the formation of human character, Sophocles educated spectators (and listeners!) to reach self-knowledge and, in the case of *Antigone*, to include the willingness to listen as a trait closely related to *aretè*.

Sophocles made a more explicit connection between listening and practical wisdom in his tragedy *Antigone*. As a result of his unwillingness and inability to listen, Creon demonstrates an attitude of mind that does not achieve *phronèsis* and thereby sabotages the way to happiness. Sophocles showed that an attitude of mind that includes listening is key to the process of achieving *phronèsis*; the desire for practical wisdom, in turn, is the first principle of happiness because it is the highest thing we may possess. Heraclitus and Sophocles share the vision that listening is a potential contributor towards living a philosophical life, because it allows one to cultivate virtue and wisdom.

These were relevant issues to the ancient Athenians as spectators of *Antigone*, but in a certain sense, these are issues that are relevant in any given point in time, which is what makes Athenian tragedy so significant. An attitude of mind that includes listening as a basic element is crucial in moving the effort of philosophising forward, as well as the more general process of achieving *phronèsis*. As such, learning to listen may prevent one from thinking too easily about complex situations, and help one avoid thinking in dogmas, or thinking without listening.

With Plato, the object of *paideia* became the philosophical life itself. Socrates' idea of the aim of life was arguably the most crucial moment in the history of *paideia*, because it encouraged students to attain *phronèsis*, which now meant knowledge of the good, and had implications for everything one did. The way of life proposed by Plato consists in the ethics of dialogue, based on the transcendence of oneself and a submission to reason. A healthy soul for Plato was a just soul, and an unhealthy soul is the consequence of poor edu-

cation. Indeed, the antidote to injustice is *paideia*, for it prevents us from choosing the wrong pattern and ideal of life.

We have seen that Plato's Academy was a community of people, bound by the love of wisdom. The students and teachers at the Academy lived together and apart from listening to texts, they also practised living dialogue together. Although such communities no longer exist, living dialogue in friendly cooperation can still be practised today. Based on Plato's writings, I suggested that philosophers should be *philekooi*: lovers of listening. Listening emerges as the catalyser of dialogue. Befriending the ears in this sense means to engage in the art of dialectics, the art Plato prioritises throughout his entire oeuvre.

Finally, Plutarch's unique contribution consisted in attributing more explicit significance to listening as part of *paideia*. What Plutarch's pedagogy of listening shows is that philosophical learning can only develop and progress when one listens to certain positions before assimilating them into one's own. But it is not just a change of thinking that Plutarch promotes. Truthful to Plato, the philosophical activity of listening is meant to instil change in one's character.

Plutarch makes the insightful observation that listening requires practice, which is why it can be understood as an exercise that forms part of the lived practice of philosophy. This is what Plutarch shares with his predecessors: the fact that the ancients practised philosophy as a mode of living. The spiritual exercise of listening was much more than everyday hearing or listening. It was meant to shape and transform human character, orientated towards wisdom.

Reviewing the literature, it became clear that listening was conducted as part of a particular attitude towards life – the never-ending quest for wisdom – and not just as part of the study of philosophy. Philosophy as the cultivation of wisdom and the pursuit of happiness required exercise. Transformation takes continuous time and effort, which is why listening is not done just once. Although there are no guarantees for success, spiritual exercises are done to

eliminate suffering and change one's inner self gradually, in order to brace for future events and the emotions that accompany them. As far as doing spiritual exercises is the same as attempting to live philosophically, we have seen that it concentrates on self-transformation (*paideia*). It follows that the goal of listening as a spiritual exercise is *paideia*, understood as self-transformation to live in conformity with reason: to live philosophically, the ideal of which was *aretè*.

Hadot classified listening as an intellectual exercise, but based on the writings of Heraclitus, Sophocles, Plato, Plutarch, and the contemporary practices I discussed in this dissertation, I would suggest that listening is the basis of all spiritual exercises; it is what sparks the beginning of a life lived philosophically, and as a fundamentally dialogic activity, it is the motor behind the continued and never-ending quest for wisdom. After all, Hadot explained that at the basis of spiritual exercises we find a choice of whether to live according to a certain principle, often associated with a certain school of thought, such as Platonism, Aristotelianism, Epicureanism, or Stoicism. What sparked the choice if not a call that resonated, inspired an existential choice, and set someone on a path to self-transformation?

We may conclude that listening as a spiritual exercise is always intertwined with the attempt to internalise and appropriate discourse into one's everyday life. Listening in this sense is not merely about acquiring intellectual knowledge, but about an attempt at forming oneself. Creating the philosophical habits of mind to ultimately live the right life presupposes proper *paideia* in listening (Larsen 2016, p. 456).

Spiritual exercises came in many varieties and degrees of profundity. Following Hadot, the unity of all these exercises existed in both the means and the pursued ends. The means consisted in the employment of rhetorical and dialectical techniques of persuasion, meditation, and self-examination. The ends consisted in self-realisation and improvement to live a "genuine" life, that is, a life in conformity with human nature – i.e. reason. As Hadot explains:

[A]ll spiritual exercises are, fundamentally, a return to the self, in which the self is liberated from the state of alienation into which it has been plunged by worries, passions, and desires. The “self” liberated in this way is no longer merely our egoistic, passionate individuality: it is our *moral* person, open to universality and objectivity, and participating in universal nature or thought. (Hadot 1995, p. 103)

In the course of history, philosophy lost this general orientation towards daily life and gradually withdrew behind university walls, focusing on isolated and predominantly theoretical subdisciplines such as metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, without truly listening in the spiritual and transformative sense. Consequently, contemporary scholars in the departments of philosophy at universities are unlikely to be of much help when it comes to questions of how one may become wise.

The ancient conception and practice of philosophy changed drastically over the centuries. In Chapter V, I explained that with the arrival of Christianity, exegesis gradually became one of the most important spiritual exercises (Hadot 1995, p. 114 n53), eventually entirely overshadowing the practical aspect of philosophy and becoming a kind of detached, non-spiritual exegesis. When modern academic philosophy became autonomous again in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, it still had the inclination to reduce philosophy to theoretical discourse (Hadot 2004, pp. 253-254). As a result, historical continuity in philosophy is not very likely to be found in today’s universities.

Some may think that present-day philosophers still engage in self-transformation as a result of a change in their way of thinking. But with its empathetically intellectual focus, this is merely a small and narrow part of spiritual practice. The message to which the ancients call their listeners is much more consequential, and knows much more variety in practice (physical, cognitive, emotional, etc.).

A mere cognitive change is not what listening calls for; it calls for a complete change of our being-in-the-world.

In addition to reading spiritually and engaging in Socratic dialogue, I believe Oosterling's ecosophy is an example of a philosophical practice that demands spiritual transformation. The power lies in the potential antidote he offers to today's cynicism and apocalyptic *thinking* that stifles an urgently needed *doing*. As we have seen, this antidote is embedded in the term reflection, to which we added eco-listening as a relational spiritual exercise.

Given its broadness and complexity, the topic of environmental philosophy and ethics far outruns the scope of this study. Nevertheless, I discussed Oosterling because I think he is one of the few present-day examples of an academic philosopher who works to convert philosophy into a concrete practice that offers philosophical tools, which can be enhanced with listening, for "designing" a sustainable future.

Today, philosophy as a way of life is not seriously considered very often, let alone practised. In academic circles, such ambitions are likely to be met with scepticism in the best cases, and condescension in the worst. When contemplating the meaning of doing exercise and the relation it bears to a practice, however, we might see room for an opening to reconnect with the ancient practices by listening to their calls for transformation. Let us therefore look at the meaning of exercise, before moving on to some final remarks.

Doing exercise as part of a practice

According to Hadot, ancient philosophy is a mode of "existing-in-the-world". Its goal is to elevate individual life to a state of wisdom. But this type of self-transformation or self-mastery, not unlike any other type of mastery, cannot come about without practice and constant exercise.

Although our understanding of exercise today is much narrower

and, one might add, more “transactional” (in the sense that we are inclined to think of pre-fixed input/outcome relationships), we still engage in exercises as part of certain practices. After all, to become an expert at anything, one will have to practice one way or another.

Exercises often serve to divide a certain practice into “sub-practices”, because the entire practice is too complex to exercise or learn as a whole. If one wants to become an expert martial artist, one will have to practise all sorts of qualities such as stamina, technique, modesty, strength, and mental stability. One engages in *exercises* to *practise* something as thoroughly as possible, on the road to overall mastery.

In this dissertation, listening as a spiritual exercise coincides both with a call for a practice we call philosophy – and thus a choice to live in a certain way – while at the same time forming part of a programme of exercise. In the case of Plato, *askesis* can be defined as ‘a comprehensive discipline of the soul, to fit it, morally, spiritually, and intellectually, for the pursuit of wisdom’ (Cottingham 2013, p. 175).

Although it will always remain problematic to “measure” philosophical or moral progress, it seems evident that today’s practitioner would benefit from exercises to be able to philosophise. In the case of philosophical dialogues, for instance, one could choose to practise all sorts of different aspects such as arguing, speaking, relating, and listening. In a certain sense, the fact that poetry in ancient Greece is so full of “heavy” figures that are easier to remember, helps us to better understand the meaning of listening as a spiritual exercise; something must be practised recurrently, and figures such as Achilles and Ajax aided practitioners in an ever-renewed effort.

As far as listening means perceiving sounds and immediate meanings, however, one can hardly speak of a philosophical activity. At best, such an activity could perhaps be characterised as a warm-up exercise consisting of simple routines, similar to the stretches one would do before a sports event.

When practising listening as a spiritual exercise, however, the exercise coincides with the actual practice of philosophy. Consider the following fragment from Plato's *Statesman*:

Stranger

Suppose we were asked the following question about a group of pupils learning their letters: “When a pupil is asked of what letters some word or other [is] composed, is the question asked for the sake of the one particular word before him or rather to make him more learned about all words in the lesson?”

Younger Socrates

Clearly to make him more learned about them all.

Stranger

And how about our own investigation of the statesman? Has it been undertaken for the sake of [t]his particular subject or rather to make us better thinkers [διαλεκτικωτέρους] about all subjects?

Younger Socrates

Clearly this also is done with a view to them all. (Plato, *Statesman*, 285c-d)

The ultimate aim of the exercise of investigating (ζήτησις) is not to become better thinkers on particular subjects, but to transform and become better thinkers in general, or, we might argue, better dialecticians, i.e. philosophers.

The Stoic *praemeditatio malorum*, for example, was an exercise anticipating a possible “evil” or harm that could manifest in the future. This was a spiritual exercise, in so far that it required one to philosophically investigate the meaning of “evil” and ask oneself whether it should really be feared as such. Here, the emphasis shifts to the meditation itself, which becomes a philosophical practice

with intrinsic value, as opposed to merely something external to it. It is an occasion to practise a philosophical theory by doing exercises. These examples can have side effects, such as a calmer mind and a clearer idea of what a statesman is or is not, but the ultimate goal of the exercise is to transform the self.

Plato's most famous spiritual exercise of apprenticeship for death illustrates this point further. Socrates' philosophical choice, his choice to die, is the ultimate Platonic spiritual exercise according to Hadot. Interpreted metaphorically, it is the training to part from one's individuality, biases, and passions; change one's point of view, and ultimately elevate to a universal perspective (Hadot 1995, pp. 94-96; 2009, p. xii).

It is not difficult to understand theoretically that death is natural and belongs to all forms of life, but one may well wonder if that is sufficient to cease fearing it (Hadot 1995, p. 22). However, logically speaking, learning how to die cannot be exercised directly: there is only one moment in which one has the opportunity to "practice" death. In such a scenario, it would make little sense to speak of exercise,²²⁶ which is why Plato meant it paradoxically: as an exercise, it served to separate the soul from the body to find another kind of knowledge than the sensible (Hadot 2011, p. 105).

One could, in this sense, reflect on crucial life experiences such as the loss of a family member or loved one as part of the preparation of one's own death.²²⁷ Here too, the practice is broken down into sub-practices. One could reflect on sadness, finitude, and the meaning and purpose of one's own life in the face of death. Such approaches could be conceptualised as exercises that form part of a practice – they are done as part of a certain life path.

The Stoic *praemeditatio mortis* was a preparation for one's own death, which could have certain benefits while one was still alive. As

²²⁶ In South-Korea, however, there is an interesting service where people are offered to fake their funerals in order to draw life-lessons from the experience.

²²⁷ For a detailed discussion of why preparing oneself for one's death may be seen as a philosophical act, see Costica Bradatan's *Dying for Ideas: The Dangerous Lives of the Philosophers* (2015).

Epictetus is believed to have said:

Day by day you must keep before your eyes death and exile and everything else that seems frightening, but most especially death; and then you'll never harbour any mean thought, nor will you desire anything beyond due measure. (Epictetus, *Handbook*, 21)

Such an approach is what makes exercises spiritual, as they are an attempt to separate oneself from the body, the passions, and desires, and to return to one's own "true nature".

Indeed, doing exercise in antiquity meant detaching oneself from one's bodily passions and desires in an attempt to return to an authentic or natural state of being. Words cannot describe what this state is supposed to "feel" like, but perhaps it is not so much about understanding, as it is about experiencing. As Hadot attempted to convey – and in a certain sense, before him, Schopenhauer²²⁸ – it is a state where one is completely liberated from oneself, and all that remains is an alert state of consciousness, no longer clouded with thoughts and worries.

In this sense, learning how to die is ultimately learning how to live; it is something integrated into one's way of life, which is what makes it into a philosophical practice as well.²²⁹ In the last analysis, this is true for listening as a spiritual exercise as well, as I will now proceed to explain.

Listening as a contemporary spiritual exercise

According to Hadot, philosophy remains an *act* of conversion or transformation, more so than a *theory* of conversion. Considering Descartes' meditations, Spinoza's *amor intellectualis*, and Bergson's intuition of duration, we can still recognise something of an act in

²²⁸ E.g. 'My body and my will are one; – or: what (as intuitive representation) I call my body, I call my will to the extent that I am aware of it in an entirely different and utterly incomparable manner' (Schopenhauer 2010, p. 127).

²²⁹ See also Foucault (1997, pp. 104-105).

so far that philosophy is an attempt to move away from the familiar and return to the “originary” or “essential”.

Foucault objects to these ambitions by emphasising that there is no such thing as an essence to return to. Foucault’s closest attempt to answer the question of whether spiritual practices of self-transformation can be revitalised today, is found in his idea that philosophy can be an act-centred theory that is meant to serve the process of self-transformation. However, as Koopman notes,

it is not clear how the normative commitments that Foucault dug out of antiquity can be made suitable for modern moral living insofar as they form a kind of reliquary of curiosities that to us moderns look very curious indeed but also curiously lacking in currency. (Koopman 2013, p. 201)

To be fair, Hadot does not exactly show us how we are supposed to make ancient philosophy suitable today, and I am not certain that I can either. But my aim was to accomplish more than digging up a “reliquary of curiosities”: I offered orientation for contemporary practices of philosophy, and showed how several perspectives on listening as a spiritual exercise can be considered relevant to those practices.

Some of the caveats Foucault was focusing on – i.e. contrasts, differences, discontinuity, etc. – do not disregard the idea that there is still much to learn from past philosophers. Hadot is eager to show this to his readers (and listeners) – the fact that there are many aspects of ancient thought that we can connect to in the present.

The discontinuities Foucault made us aware of do not imply that there are no good reasons to assume that we can understand what the ancients meant by “virtue” and the good life in a certain context. More importantly, it does not mean that we cannot study how their moral recommendations, instructions, and clues in relation to the good life can be of value for us in the here and now.

Which brings me to the second research question I raised in the introduction:

How can the ancient philosophical ideals provide orientation for listening as a contemporary spiritual exercise?

Clearly, this question will never have *one* satisfactory answer, let alone a short one. But let me attempt to summarise my findings. In opposition to the tendency of reducing philosophy to theory – as is customary today – in the historical contexts I discussed, we find the inclination of the philosophical mind to examine itself and ask what needs to be done to become free from worries, anxiety, and suffering. It is in the desire for living the philosophical life, and actually living that life, that we find the true philosophical way of life (Davidson 1995, pp. 31-32). Hadot firmly believes it is still possible to live not as a sage, but as a practitioner of the exercise of wisdom.

I discussed three examples of contemporary philosophical practices, the first being listening to texts. We noted that in the oral context of ancient culture, reading and listening were much more intertwined than they are today. Reading meant pausing and letting a text speak to the listener – letting it resonate – in a way that would inspire a change in one’s way of life. I explained that in ancient times, listening as a spiritual exercise could mean attending a philosophy lecture, an activity which included reading the text with a commentary by the “master”. After the reading, a discussion (διατριβή) with the audience or with individual students would follow, which was aimed at putting insights into practice, and showing one had changed for the better as a result of reading.

There is no reason why this kind of listening, the listening of a *philekoon*, could not be exercised today. However, it would require today’s “masters” – professional philosophers – to offer a reading and potentially lead a discussion (be it in written or oral form) in which students and those interested in philosophy have the oppor-

tunity to listen to the text spiritually, both in the sense that their interest becomes one of integrating (a set of) philosophical ideas into their day-to-day behaviour, and actually making them a natural, organic part of their lives (Chase 2013, p. 313).

Understandably, Hadot considered it to be ‘extremely difficult’ to resurrect the existential character of ancient philosophy in universities, since dialogue truly reaches its full potential in philosophical communities resembling ancient schools (2009, p. 56). It seems to me, however, that both academic philosophy and non-academic philosophy could benefit from already existing practices, such as the Socratic method, without becoming artificial, and still get a taste of the dialogical and spiritual form of teaching. After all, as Hadot remarks himself, philosophical discourse aims ‘to make the minds of his readers or listeners work, in order to improve their disposition’ (2009, p. 59). What happens outside the dialogue in relation to philosophical commitments is ultimately up to the individual.

From the perspective of spirituality, a text, an interlocutor, or the planet itself should not be treated as a mere theoretical construct, but needs to be treated as a partner in dialogue that can only transmit something if one listens and resonates to what it has to say in full earnestness. In more precise terms, to initiate the possibility of finding ‘spiritual nourishment’ in all these activities, one first starts with trying to comprehend the contents of what is heard by subjecting oneself to the laws of dialogue, before determining the specific value for one’s life (Hadot 2011, p. 68). Following the Stoics, a maximally objective discussion of what has been said or written is subsequently succeeded by a ‘return to subjectivity’, that simultaneously tries to transcend subjectivity in search of a universal perspective.

According to Hadot, this return to subjectivity can be divided into four steps. First, it means recognising the right of “the other” to express themselves – in Buberian terms, the *Du*, which can be non-human as well. We are only capable of comprehending a text, an interlocutor, or the planet when we presuppose that the other is

“wiser” (in the words of Gadamer, *vollkommener*) than we are. Put differently, we need a *philo-sophical* attitude; an attitude of desiring to become wise by listening and learning, which suggests that we do not already possess what we look for. This includes the assumption that what we are listening to has something to say and teach us.

Second, one welcomes the obvious, even when it conflicts with what one previously thought. In other words, we would have to attempt to suspend bias as much as possible. If, for instance, we feel aversion to a certain school of thought such as Epicureanism, it would be difficult to let the *Letter to Menoeceus* truly speak to us. Conversely, if we feel attracted to Stoicism, we might approach Seneca insufficiently critically, and run the risk of hearing only that which matches already present biases and preferences.

Third, this also suggests that one must recognise the call of what the Greeks termed the *logos*, by aiming for objectivity and accepting reason as the norm that transcends subjectivity. Here we also recognise the attempt to elevate one’s perspective to what we referred to as “a view from above” (Chapter I and II).

Fourth, the listener will have to make an inner effort to transform. If contemporary philosophy wants to revitalise its practical and ethical dimension, the “fruits” of a lecture, a text, an interpretation, an interlocutor, or our daily decisions that impact life on planet earth will have to be sought, harvested, ingested and ultimately: *digested*. As Montaigne states in his essay “On the Education of Children”:

It is a sign of rawness and indigestion to disgorge our meat the moment we have swallowed it. The stomach has not performed its function if it has not changed the condition and character of what it was given to digest. (Montaigne 1993, p. 55)

As such, listening as a spiritual exercise is not just a part of the study or profession of philosophy: it presupposes an existential choice

and a subsequent attitude towards life in general that takes shape in practice.

Whether philosophical or moral progress can be made as a result of such exercise, and if so, how it is supposed to be measured, is difficult to answer, even for someone like Plutarch. But perhaps it is less relevant than engaging in the exercise itself. What listening will always bring is an “answer” in the form of a new question that lends itself to further philosophical reflection, based on self-examination, and therefore, further opportunities for self-transformation.

When taking a view from above, one can put things into a particular perspective and come to see that our individual worries and desires are rather miniscule and meaningless when considered as part of the greater picture. In Stoic contexts, such an exercise was meant to cultivate the virtue of indifference (Hadot 2001, p. 173), yet it can also effectuate a sensibility for respecting differences.

Relating Marcus Aurelius’ meditation to listening, instead of observing, one could choose to cultivate a certain cosmic awareness by listening to the wind, the leaves of trees and plants, birds, rainfall, thunder and waves of the ocean to come to the similar realisation that we are but nodes in a network of interrelatedness, and that we cannot see ourselves as separate from all that we hear.

As Hadot puts it, when referring to Marcus Aurelius’ physical definitions of nature, earth, and human beings,

[t]his lived physics also consists in becoming aware of the fact that we are a part of the Whole and must accept the necessary unfolding of this Whole with which we identify, because we are one of its parts. (Hadot 2011, p. 95)

One aims for objectivity and impartiality, while at the same time undoing oneself from oneself, and opening up – becoming aware – from an attitude of *inter-esse* to something greater than serving one’s

own interest.²³⁰ This calls one to become aware of one's place in and part of the universe, and to consider the perspective of all living beings and all of nature that are part of the same planet, and to adapt our behaviour to live with more care for it. As such, we can come to the realisation that what we hear, is what we are.

A philosopher may never reach the absolute serenity of the sage, especially not in the face of the idolatry of money and the suffering of millions of fellow (human) beings:

To do philosophy will therefore also mean to suffer from this isolation and this impotence. But ancient philosophy also teaches us not to resign ourselves, but to continue to act reasonably and try to live according to the norm constituted by the Idea of wisdom, whatever happens, and even if our action seems very limited to us. (Hadot 2004, p. 281)

There is no fundamental and compelling reason why philosophy and listening could not be practised as a spiritual exercise today. As soon as we understand and listen to philosophy as an invitation to transform ourselves and our way of being and living in a never-ending quest for wisdom, it makes sense to revitalise ancient philosophy as a practice. Besides, as Hadot points out in an interview (1995, p. 282), spiritual exercises do not necessarily correspond to specific social structures or material conditions. They can be practised by anyone who chooses to, regardless of cultural background, sex, political orientation and so on.

Whether or not we engage in spiritual exercises in the same way as the ancients is ultimately not so relevant. After all, in discussing listening as a spiritual exercise, the purpose was clearly not to learn one way of listening. Just like there are different approaches to “doing philosophy”, there are different approaches to listening and for

²³⁰ Oosterling also refers to this act of opening up as “mental sustainability”. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kvy563a-uNY>

resonating with philosophical insights. There is no “transactional logic” here that guarantees a certain philosophical outcome after a particular input. Listening is not just something that needs to be done at a particular moment when reading or discussing a text, participating in a dialogue, or listening ecologically; and it is certainly not guaranteed to initiate any kind of transformation. It is always related to a way of life in search of wisdom.

Although Plutarch may seem to limit himself to offering practical guidelines, he was rather in the process of doing something more comprehensive: shaping human beings according to a certain ideal, that ideal being the transcendent norm of wisdom which guides action. What becomes clear is that Plutarch was not simply teaching us how to listen; his goal was to educate or convert his audience to become virtuous human beings through listening. This intention and practice is what makes listening spiritual. The task for us moderns is to find and try out different ways of listening which allow us to do something meaningful. I have discussed three instances of listening as a modern spiritual exercise, but the possibilities are certainly not exhausted.

When it comes to learning how to listen spiritually, one may well wonder whether listening can be taught in the first place. For instance, can teachers teach listening, or do students learn to listen by themselves? And are the interventions of a teacher meant to aid them in this process?

Plutarch compared attending philosophical lectures to playing a game of throwing and catching a ball. To be able to participate in the game of speaking and listening, an intricate set of rules – i.e. etiquette – had to be observed, including nodding one’s head, moving one’s hands, rising to the feet at appropriate moments, making a suitable number of compliments and comments, and asking the right questions at the right time. These are the rules and conditions for listening to take shape, not what constitutes listening in itself. Put differently, an artist will not create a work of art by only apply-

ing certain rules, much the same way that a philosopher aspiring to become wise does not become so by simply observing etiquette and rules.

Consequently, a step-by-step guideline of how to listen cannot be the outcome of this project. Just as Gadamer shows that there is no method of learning to ask questions and of learning to see what is questioned, there is no one “method” of learning to listen. What I hope to offer instead, is an interpretation of listening as an ancient spiritual exercise, based on ancient Greek culture that aims for self-transformation. Indeed, the different aspects and in some cases techniques (Plutarch) I discussed in this study may serve as signposts to inspire and enrich different contemporary philosophical practices.

The ancients show us that there is something to learn about listening; that listening itself is worth exercising as part of an attempt to live according to a chosen ideal. However, as Oosterling embeds in his notion of resistance, changing oneself will require a willingness to fight on the micro-level and learn to live with paradoxes and tensions. As Fiumara puts it, listening as part of that struggle ‘demands a strength and rigour that are difficult to subjugate and that deserve constant exercise’ (1990, p. 60).

The incorporation of listening as a way of life means to exercise listening in a way that motivates the practice of philosophy – i.e. the interminable search for wisdom. To ultimately understand the meaning of spiritual exercises in the examples I have discussed in this chapter and throughout this dissertation, they must be practised and constantly experienced. To practice them, means to live them.

Discussion²³¹

I give much credit to the judgment of great men; but I claim something also for my own. For these men, too, have left to us, not positive discoveries, but problems whose solution is still to be sought. They might perhaps have discovered the essentials, had they not sought the superfluous also. They lost much time in quibbling about words and in sophistical argumentation; all that sort of thing exercises the wit to no purpose. We tie knots and bind up words in double meanings, and then try to untie them. Have we leisure enough for this? Do we already know how to live, or die? (Seneca 1925, p. 293)

Let us close this project with a brief discussion through which I hope to inspire future improvements and further studies in PWL research and the relation with listening. By offering different perspectives on listening as a spiritual exercise in ancient cultural-philosophical practices, I have attempted to contribute to the creation of an overview of the history of philosophy on listening in Western thought and discerned what we may refer to as the earliest philosophies of listening in the ancient Greek world. I have also touched on the continuities that exist among them by tracing the roles of *logos*, *aretè* and *paideia* in the respective philosophies.

Given the multidisciplinary nature of this project and based on the philosophical approach to my research questions, I have offered arguments and conjectures that might cause some confusion or disagreement among historians, philologists, classicists, and – naturally – other philosophers. This may especially be the case in relation to my intention to draw lessons for the present from the ancients. Because of the endless number of differences between now and then, one may still be sceptical about the yields of such an endeavour.

However, I tend to agree with other scholars such as Chase,

²³¹ A small part of this section is taken from my blogpost <https://www.philosophy-foundation.org/blog/apprentices-of-listening>

Sharpe, and Reid (2011), that the academy sometimes interferes rather than helps with the attempt to make scholarly work socially relevant. Despite the difficulties my approach presents, I always attempted to grasp the author's intention, mindful of the historic context and our present context, and never forgetting about the possibility of offering other interpretations of a literary work. With this dissertation, I situate myself between the popular – which has the tendency to be oversimplified and anachronistic – and the narrower ambitions of the academy, without giving up on academic rigour, logic, and methodological consistency.

Clearly, the proposed overview is still far from complete, and there are still many philosophers and perspectives one could include. One could argue that my selection of writers and philosophers is somewhat selective and biased. For instance, I could have opted for a more detailed discussion of the Sophists and rhetors, including the works of Isocrates and perhaps Cicero and Quintilian. After all, they too attributed great importance to the subject of listening, although I would add that their intentions were probably a bit more “transactional” than those of my main figures. The kind of listening they were interested in was arguably more instrumental and served to become better debaters and rhetors, not necessarily better human beings. It remains debatable whether such accounts of listening would have deserved the adjective “spiritual”.

In addition, I could have studied Aristotle's *Poetica*, *Rethorica* and *Nicomachean Ethics* in more depth, as Aristotle also discusses listening, although he did not provide an analysis of listening (Rice 2011, p. 141). Apart from the obvious temporal and spatial restrictions, Aristotle has already been discussed in relation to listening fairly comprehensively (see Haroutunian-Gordon & Laverty 2011, p. 118; Rice 2011, pp. 141-153).

For some time, I also considered adopting an intercultural approach, meaning I would not only focus on the Western tradition (as I end-

ed up doing), but include Eastern philosophies as well. The wish for an intercultural study was partly inspired by the fact that listening as part of the philosophical endeavour is not exclusive to the Western tradition, and I have been studying and practising non-western philosophies such as Buddhism for several years.

Evidently, people of different times and cultures are confronted with similar challenges in mastering the good life, and they have to achieve this on the basis of similar human abilities. Through my main protagonists, I presented a basic orientation on listening as part of the ancient ideal of *paideia* and the good life, before reconciling it with present-day philosophical practices.

The ideals from Greek antiquity cannot be readily reconciled with a present-day conception of philosophy, and since Greek and Roman versions of ideas on cultivating humanity can also be found in other traditions, the purpose of a further project would be to supplement ancient Greek and Roman perspectives on listening and philosophical formation with ancient and modern “Eastern” perspectives in a historical and cross-cultural philosophical investigation. If I were to undertake such a project in the future, I would investigate the ways in which different philosophical perspectives on the topic of listening can be productively supplemented to provide new insights about how philosophy can be practised in different contexts.

Moreover, Socratic dialogue is a growing practice in eastern countries such as Japan as well, particularly in educational contexts (for an interesting overview, see Kono 2018, and for recent examples Kono, Morioka & Hirohata, 2020). As part of a future post-doctoral fellowship in Japan, I hope to continue my interest in philosophical exercises by studying cross-cultural perspectives on listening and engaging with Japanese philosophical texts and philosophical practices associated with character formation. Promising entrances to philosophical texts associated with listening and character formation include the writings of philosophers such as Dōgen, Musō

Soseki and Takuan Sōhō, the writings of Japanese warrior-philosophers such as Yagyū Munenori and Miyamoto Musashi, and Nō theatre playwrights such as Zeami Motokiyo and Konparu Zenchiku, who all share an interest in the human senses and the importance of clear perception in relation to character formation. Also, the emphasis laid in warrior-philosophy literature could greatly enrich insights on the meaning of doing exercise in the West.

Lastly, on the subject of non-Western philosophy, there are also promising non-Western philosophical contributions in the area of ecology. In this sense, the work of David Loy – particularly his book *Ecodharma: Buddhist Teachings for the Ecological Crisis* (2019) deserves to be mentioned. It bears many similarities to Oosterling's approach, especially when it comes to emphasising the relational in Buddhist teachings. It is not a surprise, however, given Oosterling's intercultural professional background and approach which I have not discussed here, but which to my mind, makes the summoning of the French thinkers of difference ultimately redundant.

In relation to education, which largely inspired the subject for this dissertation, I think there are promising avenues for both theory building and empirical research. Based on some of the aspects of exercises I uncovered, models for educational practice can be created and tested for effectiveness. Although there is reason to be cautious when it comes to interpreting the results of empirical research, I do think we are fortunate to have capable scholars who offer strong studies in the area of, for instance, dialogic education and the effects on children's language and social abilities (e.g. van der Veen 2017; van der Wilt *et al.* 2022).

Finally, there are many more questions that can be investigated from a Hadotian approach to history and philosophy. In addition to the list of questions offered by Sharpe and Ure (2021, p. 12), one could study in more depth how listening as a spiritual exercise has changed from pagan to early and later Christian history. Given the

importance it had for Plato and Aristotle, the role of music in listening as a spiritual exercise also offers interesting opportunities for future (empirical) research.

Since listening is so prominently apparent in music, it would certainly be interesting to study the role of listening in music, before considering the possible similarities in features between musical listening and philosophical listening. Undoubtedly, there are significant differences between what one actually does when listening to music on the one hand and listening to an interlocutor on the other hand. In the former, one may direct special attention to aesthetic qualities of what is being played, whereas the latter may be more hermeneutical in nature. Yet, there are noticeable similarities as well, since both the aesthetic as well as the hermeneutical activity revolve around making specific kinds of judgements based on interpretation.

One approach could be to look at long-established and acknowledged methods for listening to music. There exist several methods for improving listening as a skill in this context. Apart from the practice of Solfeggio for example, perspectives and methods such as *Music, Ways of Listening* by Elliot Schwartz (1982) and *Listening to Western Music* by Craig Wright (2008) could prove to be helpful in finding the “valid” ways of listening as a musical skill. The questions driving a further analysis could be: What and how does listening contribute to the depth and quality of dialogic inquiries (in educational contexts), and can listening to music help to achieve a higher level of listening (in classroom dialogues)?

It is helpful to note that there have been several studies about the positive cognitive effects of listening to music, famously referred to as the Mozart Effect (ME). Although the effects of musical listening are still contested, the associations between music training and speech perception could nevertheless be plausible, as musical training programmes have shown to improve the brain’s ability to encode sound and improve different listening skills as a result (e.g.

Hyde *et al.* 2009; Pantev *et al.* 2001; Patel & Iverson 2007; Tallal & Gaab 2006).

In relation to the second part of this project, there are several more things to note. Undoubtedly, not everyone will agree with my methodological decisions. In the first chapter I attempted to explain why my philosophical choice fell on Hadot, instead of Foucault. I thought it necessary to make a choice instead of opting for a combination, because I considered the epistemological frameworks in both thinkers to be incommensurable – not the fact that there was common ground between Hadot and Foucault, particularly in relation to ancient philosophy and its inspiration for the present.

However, while Foucauldian genealogy and critical inquiry may help us pose ethical questions in new ways, it was and remains unclear to me how it can help us live and be in new ways. Foucault primarily proves his worth to this study in offering novel perspectives for reflecting on approaches for reading and relating to ancient philosophy.

But perhaps Sellars is right in stating that Hadot and Foucault can ultimately be connected fruitfully.²³² The insights from the work of Hadot can be studied with a Foucauldian lens, driven by the question of whether they can be integrated in the contemporary *condition humaine*. After all, this question is only meagrely touched on by Hadot, and Foucault offers more diagnostic capacities for ‘children of modernity’ in that sense, which is why I have not entirely left Foucault in this project (see Chapter V in particular).

Koopman further suggests that we could turn to others in those instances where Foucault falls short (Koopman 2013, pp. 210-211). Evidently, Foucault and Hadot were not the only modern thinkers that took an interest in ancient history and philosophy. I consulted Nussbaum in several instances, but I could also have considered oth-

²³² In that sense, it is worth noting Sharpe and Ure even suggest Foucault’s genealogy is a spiritual exercise (2021, pp. 303-310).

er authors and thinkers, such as Habermas, Derrida or Rorty. Perhaps Habermasian critical theory or American pragmatism (e.g. Dewey, Rorty) can supplement Foucault where he is found wanting. However, it would have been impossible for me to discuss all avenues; such an endeavour could easily result in several more dissertations.

In addition, as Sharpe and Ure have recently noted, Hadot has been accused of flirting with relativism, because he considered the ancient existential choice to live in a certain way as prior to the theoretical discourses that rationalise the specific choice (2021, p. 325). Indeed, Hadot argues that philosophical discourse originates in a choice of life and not vice versa (2004, p. 3). However, Hadot also stresses the reciprocal relationship between existential choice and discourse. It is not a one-way street; discourse and life reciprocally affect each other. Ancient philosophy is both discourse and a way of life simultaneously. Therefore, we should not ‘oppose discourse and a way of life, as though they corresponded to theory and practice, respectively’ (Hadot 2004, p. 4).

What is more, discourse itself can have a practical aspect; one only needs to consider the act of writing to see why this is the case. According to Hadot, it influences listener and reader, and I would add to that: the writer as well. One must do it – one must listen, read, write in a certain way – to experience the effects.

More promising avenues for future research lie in the institutional options for philosophy as a way of life. I briefly touched on this in the previous chapter. Although this was not the occasion to discuss these options in more detail, it would certainly be interesting to investigate routes to encourage students to adopt a certain philosophical *ethos* (Sharpe & Ure 2021, p. 335). Perhaps some of the original ideas of a gymnasium, as a place where people gather to train and participate in dialogue, could be meaningfully revitalised somehow, as I did in the summer of 2022 at the International School of Philosophy in Leusden (The Netherlands).

At the same time, Sharpe and Ure also suggest that perhaps aca-

demia is not the appropriate place to revitalise philosophy as a way of life (2021, pp. 335-337). They rightly point at the growing popularity of “modern Stoicism” outside of academic circles. I discussed some of the risks that exist in “popular philosophy”, including anachronisms and all sorts of misappropriations. But this does not mean that it can “work”, as long as it is done in good faith – not with profit as the principal drive – and without intellectual carelessness. Authors such as Massimo Pigliucci, Donald Robertson and Catherine Wilson have already demonstrated that this is indeed possible.

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Annexes

English Summary: Befriending the Ears – The Transformative Power of Listening

According to the French historian and philosopher Pierre Hadot, ancient philosophy was a living practice based on spiritual exercises and a corresponding discourse. Spiritual exercises can be defined as a ‘voluntary, personal [practice] meant to bring about a transformation of the self’ (Hadot 2011, p. 87). This dissertation investigates one such exercise – the exercise of listening.

Unfortunately, we possess little detail of the technical aspects of listening as a spiritual exercise in antiquity. However, what can be said with certainty is that simply hearing what someone was saying is not enough to speak of listening as a spiritual exercise; it had to be internalised in the soul. As such, listening formed part of an ancient and rich cultural-philosophical and pedagogical effort of self-(trans)formation, commonly referred to as *paideia*.

Despite the importance attributed to it by the ancients, listening as an acknowledged practice in ancient philosophy today has not received the attention it deserves. This is the first problem I focus on in this project. In addressing this problem, I seek to contribute to the creation of an overview of the history of philosophy on listening in Western thought, which to this day does not exist.

Accordingly, the first aim of the present study is to partly fill this gap, by addressing the following research question:

How are we to understand listening as a spiritual exercise in ancient cultural-philosophical contexts?

I approach this question by trying to discern what we may refer to as the earliest philosophies of listening in the ancient world (more specifically: Archaic and Classical Greece, and Republican and ear-

ly Imperial Rome), and identifying any continuities that may exist among them.

The second issue that I am interested in studying follows from the first but is orientated toward the present. The research question driving this part is:

How can the ancient philosophical ideals provide orientation for listening as a contemporary spiritual exercise?

My aim here is to revitalise some of the existential dimensions of spiritual listening for us today and provide some – not exhaustive – orientation for present-day Philosophy as a Way of Life (PWL) practices oriented towards listening. Based on three contemporary instances of philosophical, and thus, paideutic activities – listening to (1) texts, (2) interlocutors, and (3) nature – I shall argue that listening as a spiritual activity in certain contexts can (and perhaps should) be revitalised today.

Ultimately, it will turn out that listening should be understood as something more than a mere (intellectual) skill or proficiency, both in ancient and contemporary practices of philosophy. After all, a skill is instrumental in the sense that it can be learned without provoking any profound effects on one's character. The sort of listening I focus on does not fit into the categories of so-called motor skills, nor in the category of cognitive skills, since it is not a kind of procedural knowledge but rather a way of being and living that is constantly exercised; it should rather be understood as something more akin to virtue.

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. In the first chapter, I offer a reflection on my methodological commitments. To study listening in the ancient world, and to subsequently revitalise a contemporary meaning of listening as a spiritual exercise, I contrast Foucault, who emphasised the cultural (historical, social, political)

differences between “the moderns” and “the ancients”; and Hadot, who emphasised the universal and cosmic dimension that connects us to the past. To make the universal aspect of Hadot’s work more plausible and to provide an example of a universalist inspired ethics, I discuss Nussbaum’s work on ethics as an example. The difference in approach and epistemology between Foucault and Hadot will ultimately serve to sketch my own conceptual understanding of listening as a spiritual exercise – both in the ancient world and today.

In Chapter II, I further explain the notion of spiritual exercise and discuss my methodological approach based on Hadot. I formulate four interrelated methodological imperatives that could be summarised as follows: (1) philosophy as a way of life should always be discussed from its formative intentions, that is, with *paideia* in the background; (2) one must situate the text in a historical context and specific school of thought; (3) one must consider the literary and oral form in which a text was presented; and (4) in the revitalisation process, one must consider the plurality of the different schools, as well as the elements that no longer fit our present-day context.

In Chapter II, I begin my analysis by describing the ancient ideal of *aretè* and the philosophical-educational context in which it emerged, which is embodied in the term *paideia*. My aim is to show that listening, which was embedded in the Greek oral culture, has been a part of some of the earliest efforts to shape humans according to a certain ideal (*aretè*). Based on Heraclitus and Sophocles, I attempt to articulate and conjecture the earliest building blocks of listening as a spiritual exercise.

With Socrates and Plato, the main protagonists of Chapter III, listening for the first time becomes part of a philosophical practice in the spirit of classical Greece. I examine Plato’s *paideia* – ‘the first among the finest gifts to the best among men’ (*Laws*, 644b) – and the historical context in which his philosophy emerged, to finally fully appreciate and evaluate his and Socrates’ teachings in relation to listening.

Chapter IV is dedicated to Plutarch's philosophical-educational work. I investigate the role of listening in Plutarch's work as part of attaining excellence of character (*aretè*). The outcome of this analysis and that of his predecessors will serve to help me sketch my own understanding of what listening as a spiritual exercise was, and what it might look like in today's practice of philosophy.

In Chapter V, I address the question of to what degree we can still speak of a certain continuity in the practice of philosophy. Given the countless differences between the ancients and us, and more specifically, between the ancient meaning of philosophy and the different changes it underwent in history, how is it possible to speak of continuity? This is related to the much larger question: whether philosophy as a living practice can be revitalised after the natural-scientific turn with Descartes and Locke, the epistemological turn with Hume and Kant, the metaphysical turn with German idealism and Romanticism, the linguistic turn with Wittgenstein, and finally, the deconstructivist turn of French thinkers of difference like Derrida, Lyotard and Deleuze. Due to space and time restrictions, I cannot go into every philosophical turn in detail, but I briefly address what I believe are the most relevant aspects to this study, which are Christian and scholastic philosophy, the Renaissance, Descartes and the Scientific Revolution, and finally, the Enlightenment.

In the final chapter, Chapter VI, I investigate to what extent it is possible for modern humans to "do philosophy" (see Hadot 1995, pp. 211-212), and discuss three concrete examples of philosophical-paideutic activities where I see opportunities to reconnect to the protagonists of the different chapters – Heraclitus, Sophocles, Plato, and Plutarch – and revitalise listening as a spiritual exercise. The activities are listening to (1) texts, (2) interlocutors, and (3) nature.

Nederlandse samenvatting: De oren als bondgenoot – De transformatieve kracht van luisteren

Volgens de Frans historicus en filosoof Pierre Hadot, was filosofie in de oudheid een levenspraktijk gebaseerd op spirituele oefeningen en een bijpassend vertoog. Spirituele oefeningen kunnen gedefinieerd worden als een ‘vrijwillige, persoonlijke praktijk, bedoeld om het zelf te transformeren’ (Hadot 2011, p. 87). Dit proefschrift onderzoekt de spirituele oefening van het luisteren.

Helaas zijn de technische details over luisteren als spirituele oefening door de eeuwen heen grotendeels verloren gegaan. Wat echter met zekerheid beweerd kan worden is dat simpelweg horen wat iemand zei niet genoeg is om te spreken van luisteren als een spirituele oefening; het horen moest geïnternaliseerd worden in de ziel. Als zodanig vormde luisteren als spirituele oefening een onderdeel van een antieke en rijke cultureel-filosofische en pedagogische poging tot zelf-(trans)formatie (Gr. *paideia*).

Hoewel de antieke filosofen ontegenzeggelijk belang toekenden aan het luisteren, en het zelfs als onderdeel van een filosofische praktijk beoefenden, heeft luisteren binnen de eigentijdse filosofie niet de aandacht gekregen die het verdient. Dit is dan ook het eerste probleem dat ik centraal stel in dit proefschrift. Hiermee hoop ik een bijdrage te leveren aan de totstandkoming van een overzicht van de geschiedenis van de filosofie van luisteren in het Westen, dat tot op de dag van vandaag niet bestaat.

Bovengenoemde lacune wil ik ten dele aanvullen door de volgende vraag te onderzoeken:

Hoe kunnen we luisteren als spirituele oefening duiden in antieke cultureel-filosofische contexten?

Ik benader deze vraag door de vroegste filosofieën van luisteren in de antieke wereld (specifiek archaisch- en klassiek Griekenland, en de Romeinse Republiek en het vroege Romeinse Keizerrijk) in kaart

te brengen, en te bepalen welke continuïteiten er tussen deze bijdragen bestaan.

De tweede kwestie die ik onderzoek volgt uit het eerste probleem, maar is georiënteerd op het heden. De leidende onderzoeksvraag voor dit deel is:

Hoe kunnen antieke filosofische idealen oriëntatie bieden voor luisteren als een eigentijdse spirituele oefening?

Mijn doel is om enkele existentiële dimensies van spiritueel luisteren te revitaliseren ter oriëntatie voor een hedendaagse filosofische levenshouding gebaseerd op luisteren. Op basis van drie hedendaagse filosofische- en dus “paideutische” praktijken – luisteren naar (1) teksten, (2) gesprekspartners, en (3) de natuur – zal ik beargmenteren dat luisteren als een spirituele activiteit vandaag in bepaalde contexten gerevitaliseerd kan (en wellicht moet) worden.

Uiteindelijk zal blijken dat luisteren als meer dan een (intellectuele) vaardigheid of bekwaamheid begrepen moet worden. Een vaardigheid is per slot van rekening instrumenteel in de zin dat het geleerd kan worden zonder diepgaande uitwerkingen te hebben op iemands persoonlijkheid. Het soort luisteren dat ik centraal stel past daarom niet in de categorie van motorische vaardigheden, noch in de categorie van cognitieve vaardigheden, aangezien het geen procedurele kennis betreft, maar wijst op een zijns- en levenshouding die gepaard gaat met voortdurende oefening. Zowel in antieke- als hedendaagse filosofische contexten komt het veeleer in de buurt van een deugd.

Dit proefschrift is onderverdeeld in zes hoofdstukken. Het eerste hoofdstuk bestaat uit een reflectie over mijn methodologische uitgangspunten. Om luisteren als spirituele oefening in de oudheid te bestuderen, en om het in het heden te kunnen revitaliseren, plaats ik Foucault – die de culturele (historische, sociale, politieke) ver-

schillen tussen “de modernen” en “de ouden” benadrukt, tegenover Hadot, die juist de nadruk legt op de universele dimensie die ons verbindt met het verleden. Om het werk van Hadot in relatie tot het universele nog plausibeler te maken bespreek ik enkele werken van Nussbaum. Uiteindelijk zal het verschil in benadering en epistemologie tussen Foucault en Hadot als uitgangspunt dienen om mijn eigen conceptuele kaders te schetsen, en luisteren als spirituele oefening in de oudheid en in het heden te onderzoeken.

In Hoofdstuk II wijd ik verder uit over de notie van spirituele oefening en bespreek ik mijn methodologische benadering gebaseerd op Hadot. Ik formuleer vier samenhangende methodologische imperatieven die als volgt kunnen worden samengevat: (1) filosofie als levenshouding dient altijd vanuit haar formatieve intenties te worden besproken, dat wil zeggen, met *paideia* in het achterhoofd; (2) een antieke tekst moet in de historische context en specifieke filosofische school gesitueerd worden; (3) de literaire en orale vorm waarin een tekst werd gepresenteerd moet eveneens worden overdacht; en (4) in het revitalisatieproces moet uitgegaan worden van de pluraliteit van de filosofische scholen uit de oudheid, en moeten die elementen die niet langer in onze context passen worden heroverwogen.

In Hoofdstuk III begin ik mijn analyse met een beschrijving van het antieke *aretè*-ideaal en de filosofisch-pedagogische context, uitgedrukt in het begrip *paideia*. Mijn bedoeling is om te laten zien dat luisteren, binnen de Griekse orale cultuur, een onderdeel vormde van de vroegste pogingen om mensen volgens een bepaald ideaal (*aretè*) te vormen. Op basis van Heraclitus en Sophocles probeer ik te achterhalen waaruit de vroegste bouwstenen van luisteren als spirituele oefening zouden kunnen bestaan.

Bij Socrates en Plato, de hoofdrolspelers in Hoofdstuk III, wordt luisteren voor het eerst onderdeel van de filosofische praktijk. Ik onderzoek Plato's *paideia* – ‘de belangrijkste weldaad die de beste mannen ten deel valt’ (*Wetten*, 644b) – en de historische context

waarbinnen zijn filosofie ontstaat, om deze tenslotte aan luisteren te relateren.

Hoofdstuk IV is gewijd aan Plutarchus' filosofisch-pedagogische werk. Ik onderzoek de rol van luisteren als onderdeel van het streven naar voortreffelijkheid van karakter (*aretè*) in zijn werk. De uitkomsten van deze analyse en die van zijn voorgangers zal mij helpen om mijn eigen begrip te vormen van wat luisteren als spirituele oefening was, en wat het kan zijn in hedendaagse filosofische praktijken.

In Hoofdstuk V ga ik na in hoeverre we nog steeds kunnen spreken van continuïteit in filosofie als levenshouding. Hoe is het mogelijk om te spreken van continuïteit, gegeven de ontelbare verschillen tussen de antieken en moderne mensen, en specifiek, tussen de antieke betekenis van filosofie en de veranderingen die de filosofie heeft ondergaan in de geschiedenis? Deze vraag is gerelateerd aan de fundamentele vraag: hoe filosofie als levende praktijk gerevitaliseerd kan worden na de wetenschappelijke revolutie en het werk van Descartes en Locke, de epistemologische wending van Hume en Kant, de metafysische wending als gevolg van Duits Idealisme en Romanticisme, de linguïstische wending van Wittgenstein, en tenslotte de deconstructivistische wending van Franse differentie-denkers zoals Derrida, Lyotard en Deleuze. Omdat ik niet op alle afzonderlijke windingen in kan gaan, zal ik de relevantste aspecten voor deze studie in dit hoofdstuk behandelen. Daaronder schaar ik de Christelijke- en scholastieke filosofie, de Renaissance, Descartes en de wetenschappelijke revolutie, en tenslotte, de Verlichting.

Tenslotte onderzoek ik in Hoofdstuk VI in hoeverre het mogelijk is voor moderne mensen om filosofie te "beoefenen", en bespreek ik drie concrete voorbeelden van filosofisch-pedagogische activiteiten waarin ik het plausibel acht om aan te sluiten bij de hoofdrolspelers uit de verschillende hoofdstukken – Heraclitus, Sophocles, Plato, en Plutarchus – en mogelijkheden zie om luisteren als spirituele oefening te revitaliseren. De activiteiten zijn luisteren naar (1) teksten, (2) gesprekspartners, en (3) de natuur.