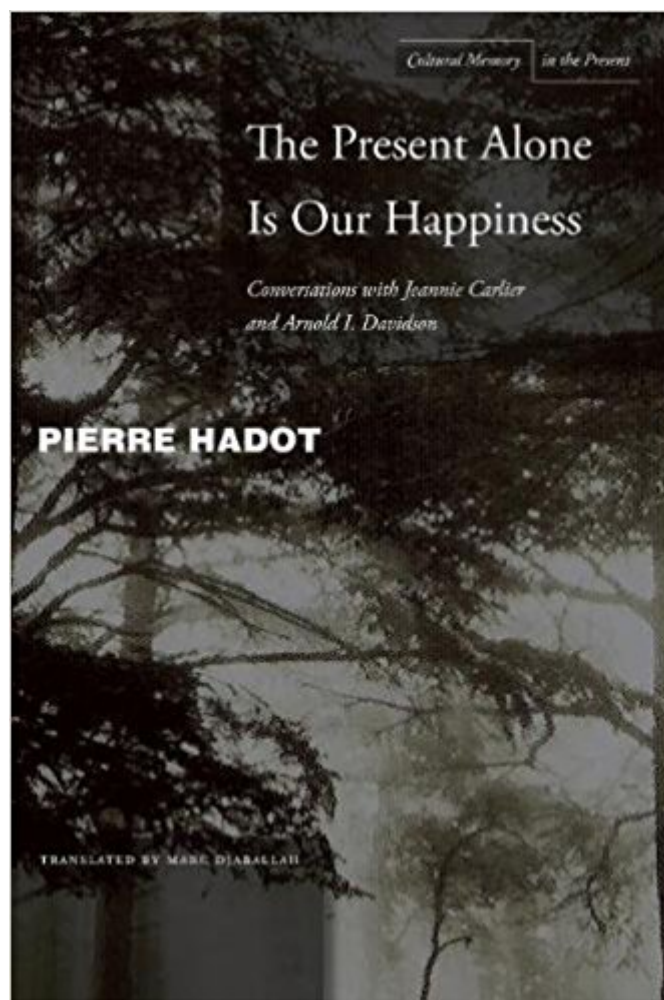




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# The Present Alone Is Our Happiness: Conversations With Jeannie Carlier And Arnold I. Davidson (Cultural Memory In The Present)



## Synopsis

In this book of brilliantly erudite and precise discussions, Pierre Hadot explains that for the Ancients philosophy was not reducible to the building of a theoretical system: it was above all a choice about how to live one's life. One of the most influential historians of ancient philosophy in the world today, Hadot is adept at using ancient philosophers to illuminate the relevance of their ideas to contemporary life. In this book, which is an ideal introduction to Hadot's more scholarly *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, we learn that to be an Epicurean is not merely to think like one; it is to adopt a way of living where limiting desires is the condition for happiness. Being an Aristotelian, similarly, is to choose a life that involves contemplation, and being a Cynic is to follow Diogenes in his refusal of quotidian convention and the mentality of ordinary people. If so many Ancient philosophers founded schools, Hadot explains, it was precisely because they were proposing how to live life on a daily basis. We learn here that the history of philosophy has been something more than just that of a discourse. The founding texts of Greek philosophy, after all, were notes taken from oral exercises undertaken in concrete circumstances and contexts, most often a dialogue between students and specific interlocutors who meant to shed light on their students' real existence. The immense contribution of this book, which also traces Hadot's own personal itinerary in a touching manner, is to remind us, through direct language and numerous examples, what the theoretical aspect of philosophy often masks: its vital and existential dimensions.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"If your own experience of 'Philosophy 101' way back when was just shy of miserable, disconnected from the daily or generally incoherent— it's gridlocked, for instance, in self-serving terms— here, in *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, a good-souled man— Hadot himself— winks. He seems to say, 'Here's what happened, and here's why philosophy really is for you.' And if you are a teacher or a pedagogue, it's for you all the more." (*Teachers College Record*) "Hadot's refreshing efforts to free philosophy and its history from the sterile constraints of abstract theorizing and academic specialization find a lively and productive outlet in the interviews collected here. Introduced by Jeannie Carlier, a French scholar of Neo-platonic religious thought and friend of Hadot, and conducted in turns by Carlier and Arnold Davidson, the American philosopher and intellectual historian most responsible for the introduction and dissemination of Hadot's work in English-speaking contexts, these conversations explore in depth and varied detail both the personal and the intellectual development of a scholar whose own work insists above all that the personal or existential cannot rightly or fruitfully be separated from the intellectual or philosophical. Enacting the kind of dialogue that Hadot believes essential to any philosophy that would constitute a living relation between persons rather than an abstract relation to ideas, these interviews could not find a more suitable subject." (Thomas A. Carlson, University of California Santa Barbara) "There is much here that could affirm and inform a philosophical counseling practice, both in attitude and content. There is much here to remind ourselves of the importance of spiritual or philosophical exercises in our own trying times." (Helen Douglas *Philosophical Practice*)

Pierre Hadot is Professor Emeritus at the Collège de France, where he held the Chair of the History of Hellenistic and Roman Thought. Most of his major works have been translated into English, including *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (1995), and *The Veil of Isis* (2006). His most recent book is *N'oubliez pas de vivre. Goethe et la tradition des exercices spirituels* (2008). Arnold I. Davidson is Robert O. Anderson Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago and Professor of the History of Political Philosophy at the University of Pisa. He has written widely on contemporary French philosophy, is the English language series editor of Michel Foucault's courses at the Collège de France, and is the author of *The Emergence of Sexuality* (2001). Jeannie Carlier is Professor at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. She has published essays on philosophy and religious practices in late antiquity and is a specialist in Neoplatonism.

Pierre Hadot is maybe one of the smartest people I've ever read. This is my third book of his. I wouldn't start with it though. So if you haven't read *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* or *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, ignore everything else and get them both. Hadot's point has always been this: the concept of philosophy as an overarching system that explains our world is a fundamental misinterpretation of what ancient philosophers did and set out to do. Yet it's through this lens that we attempt to decipher Aristotle or Plato and the like. It's how we can say foolish things like, "Epicureanism is full of contradictions." The reality is that almost all of philosophy was articulated through dialog or correspondence, through human beings interacting with each other to address the basic problems of everyday life. Of course they contradicted themselves, as situations often call for. Instead of trying to explain and systemize the world, philosophy has been about the practical pursuit of the good life (being free from fear, anxiety, unnecessary pain, being happy, excelling). *Philosophy as a Way of Life* is essentially a book about the wisdom these men cumulatively acquired and how we can use the same exercises in our struggles. *The Inner Citadel* is mostly about Marcus Aurelius and the stoic concept of the self as a fortress. This book is a series of interviews with Hadot. A better way to describe it would be watching a master at work. See if you can't sprint to keep up with him by reading it--doing it for just a few pages is worth the whole thing.

I have just recently come across the work of Pierre Hadot and I must say it has been a treat for my soul. I am not expert across the breadth of contemporary writings in philosophy in English but I know of no one like Hadot in our language. He is an academic who is astonishingly learned yet he argues forcefully for a need to engage in philosophical practice. Hadot argues that philosophy is something that we do, that we live as a result of an existential choice that we make. Before I explain that a little, let me explain the format of this book. It contains a series of ten interviews with Hadot conducted by Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson. They are friends of Hadot's and fine scholars in their own right. The first two interviews are by Carlier and serve as an intellectual biography. The book takes off in the third interview where Davidson starts to question Hadot about his ideas on discourse in philosophy. The remaining interviews are all focused on particular ideas that Hadot has about the philosophical tradition. So what is so impressive about all this? The previous reviewer mentioned that Hadot started off fascinated with Plotinus and has increasingly come to revere Marcus Aurelius (MA). That is true as far as it goes. Really, Hadot started off working on the writings of Marius Victorinus who is a relatively unknown philosopher from the early Christian/late antiquity

period. The extant writings of Victorinus contain textual issues that lead Hadot to Porphyry and Plotinus and indeed to the whole of ancient philosophy. The previous reviewer wants to emphasize Hadot's interest in the Stoics. I think that is his major influence but he knows his Platonists, his sceptics, his peripatetics, his Epicureans as well as Epictetus, Seneca and MA. But Hadot's learning is far greater than just that. Remember these are interviews. He weaves into his conversations quotes from all the schools of antiquity, from Augustine, Petrarch, Montaigne, Goethe, Kant, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty with ease. And Hadot is a door to whole worlds of learning in the French/German academic tradition of which we are ignorant in English. Will someone please translate for me Ruedi Imbach's work on Dante? Groethuysen on Philosophical Anthropology? Georges Friedmann, Raymond Ruyer? I have no idea if those guys have anything to teach us but Hadot makes them all sound fascinating and insightful. So what does Hadot want us to do? Hadot wants us to realize that at one time philosophy was a practice, a way of life. We choose to become Stoics and then we tried to live as a Stoic. Marcus Aurelius' Meditations are the personal writings of a man reminding himself of his beliefs so that he is more likely to actually live those beliefs at all times. Which leads me to one of the ways that I differ from the previous reviewer. I read Hadot as wanting us to read the ancients to learn of the different possibilities, of the different types of life that philosophy has to offer. Hadot might lean toward Stoicism but I might prefer the practice of the sceptics or of the school of Aristotle or (doG forbid) the life of a cynic. We might even do the thing that Cicero did and pick and choose from all the schools. For Hadot, however, the thing is that we actually try to live our choice. Hadot suggests that the different schools of philosophy may turn out to be fundamental human choices that are expressed in all cultures and all times with variations. And he sees certain experiences as part of all the philosophical paths. Hadot feels that all of the schools tried to free us from the ties of our individual selves and to raise us to a "view from above"- to give us insight into an objective world view that is not based on our personal limits. At the same time, philosophy demands of us a constant concern for our neighbor and our city. And a sinking into the present where we come to be focused solely on what we are doing now. I will leave for you to read this volume and find out how he ties all these themes together. If you are not inclined toward interviews, go to What is Ancient Philosophy? for a more traditional presentation by Hadot. But here is the main thought I want to leave with you. To read Hadot, for me, is to be inspired to try to do the exercises that he talks about. I now find that when I dip into the Meditations, or Cicero or Plato that I read what they are doing differently. I find myself wondering now how to apply what I am reading, how it could impact my life. Somewhere in the Meditations, Marcus Aurelius suggests this amazing goal- to act with justice and compassion toward everyone who is here with

me right now. To read Hadot is to realize that MA was asking himself to live that way at all times- that was his ideal. To read Hadot is to realize that you could try to make that your ideal as well. Pretty darn inspiring and challenging, no?

A highly recommended book especially for those who are disinterested in learning more about the construction of philosophical systems (in a strictly academic sense) but who are existentially ready to begin thinking seriously about the merits of the Stoic philosophy as a way of life. Pierre Hadot, professor emeritus at the College de France, reflects on a lifetime's worth of thinking and scholarship, which began with a passion for Plotinus and culminated with an abiding reverence for Marcus Aurelius. This book is a wonderful introduction to the writings of Pierre Hadot as well as a genuinely provocative exploration of Goethe's sage advice (from 'Faust II'), "The present alone is our happiness." *The Present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson* (Cultural Memory in the Present)

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