

## *Philosophy As a Way of Life in Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

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Life is a succession of lessons which must be lived to be understood.  
All is riddle, and the key to a riddle is another riddle.

Emerson

From the beginning of his career Nietzsche is engaged in a search for philosophy, and he asks a number of fundamental questions: What is philosophy? What type is the philosopher? What is philosophy's relation to culture and to a people? Just what can the philosopher as a solitary, even aloof, figure offer to others? Nietzsche is especially concerned with the fate of philosophy under conditions of modernity. If we take cognizance of his Basel lectures on the future of educational institutions, for example, it becomes clear that Nietzsche is attempting to save philosophy from the threats posed to it by modern educational developments in which philosophy is becoming increasingly professionalized and, in Nietzsche's words, "policed," being "limited by governments, churches, academies, customs, and human cowardice to scholarly pretence" (*HL* 5). Does philosophy have any rights, he asks, if it is little more than "inwardly restrained knowledge without effect?" (*HL* 5) Even though modern universities have reduced philosophy to an empty "critique of words by means of other words," Nietzsche believes that the touchstone of true philosophy is "whether one can live in accordance with it" (*SE* 8).

Much of what Nietzsche says in his writings about the modern condition of philosophy is in accord with the more recent insights developed by Pierre Hadot (1922–2010). Hadot has lamented the decline of philosophy from being a total way of life, as it was for the ancients, to becoming a purely theoretical discipline, an academic specialism with its own technical jargon, circulating only among scholars in the university, without any fundamental relation to the life and character of those who practice it. Against current academic practice, Hadot argues that at its origins, and for a good part of its history, philosophy was not a mere body of theoretical

and abstract knowledge, but an eminently practical activity with a strong existential orientation, the aim of which was the transformation of the individual in order to reach the good or flourishing life. In his famous formulations, philosophy was an “art of living” or a “way of life,” that is “a mode of existing-in-the-world . . . the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual’s life” (Hadot 1995: 265). For real wisdom, Hadot writes, does not merely cause us to know: it makes us *be* in a different way (Hadot 1995: 265).

Even though Hadot’s focus is mainly on ancient philosophy, he cites Nietzsche, among other figures such as Schopenhauer, as an example of a modern thinker who was influenced by the model of ancient philosophy and reacted against the university (Hadot 2002: 261). According to Hadot, Nietzsche conceived of philosophy “not only as a concrete, practical activity, but also as a transformation of our way of inhabiting and perceiving the world” (Hadot 2002: 270). At present we are witnessing a resurgence of interest in this idea of philosophy as a way of life. John Sellars has recently characterized it as a “metaphilosophical option that . . . can still be taken up today” (Sellars 2017: 41) and Michael Chase has argued that this conception might offer a “third way” of doing philosophy that is neither analytical nor continental (Chase 2013: 280). Bringing Nietzsche into dialogue with Hadot, who is largely responsible for introducing the idea of philosophy as a way of life into contemporary intellectual discourse, offers a fruitful avenue of research: while Hadot’s considerations on philosophy as a way of life shed light on Nietzsche’s novel philosophical practice, Nietzsche might offer an important contribution for current debates inspired by Hadot on what philosophy is – and even should be.

In this contribution, and inspired by Hadot’s suggestions, we endeavour to illuminate how this practice of philosophy is at work in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Although Nietzsche’s thinking undergoes significant developments after his early writings, we wish to show that *Zarathustra* is an especially fertile text to look at in the light of philosophy as a way of life. In this highly distinctive text in his *corpus* not only do we see Zarathustra intensifying Nietzsche’s criticism of “scholars” and putting forward his own conceptions of knowledge and wisdom as a transformative practice, we witness Zarathustra embracing and embodying this practice of philosophy, undergoing a process of self-transformation and promoting the transformation and indeed conversion of his readers to a new way of life. We will start by tracking the evolution of Nietzsche’s conception of philosophy in the texts preceding *Zarathustra*. We will show how Nietzsche’s ideal of philosophy as a practice that entails a particular mode

of life in his earlier texts becomes more complex with the advent of his middle writings and his commitment to “the passion of knowledge,” until it assumes a dramatic form in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Section 2.2 will deal with Nietzsche’s critique of “scholars,” “wise men” and academic philosophy in *Zarathustra*. We will discuss Zarathustra’s key discourses on the topic, showing their connection with the middle writings, which we hold are particularly relevant to a comprehension of *Zarathustra*’s fundamental philosophical notions and imagery. The final section (2.3) is focused on the practice of philosophy as a way of life in the text. In particular, we show how Hadot’s notions of incorporation of truth and of self-transformation and conversion are at work in *Zarathustra*. We conclude by outlining some considerations on the pertinence of reading *Zarathustra* in the light of philosophy as a way of life.

### 2.1 Nietzsche and Philosophy As a Way of Life

When we think of philosophy as a way of life, we think essentially of a conception of philosophy that privileges practice over theory, and even life over truth. Inspired by the Stoics, Hadot makes a distinction between “discourse about philosophy” and “philosophy itself”: whereas the former is empty and vain if not incorporated and translated into practice, real philosophy corresponds to a practice and a particular mode of living (Hadot 1995: 267). Hadot further stresses that the goals of this conception of philosophy are often therapeutic since the philosophical life that is aimed at is deeply connected with an ideal of human flourishing, perfection, or completeness. This is particularly evident in antiquity, especially in the Hellenistic schools such as the Epicureans and the Stoics who explicitly presented philosophy as a practice intended to bring peace of mind and cure mankind’s suffering and anguish. In recent reinventions of the model the matter becomes more complex and a therapeutic effect must not be assumed – as John Sellars points out, and as evident in Nietzsche himself, “it may turn out that philosophy is no consolation at all” (Sellars 2017: 48; see *D* 424).

Nevertheless, Hadot’s characterization of philosophy as a way of life has led to some concerns that we would like to address before analysing Nietzsche’s commitment to it as a model of philosophical practice. Indeed, an important question raised in recent negotiations with the topic is whether the goals of this conception of philosophy are compatible with the goals of genuine philosophical inquiry, notably the goal of securing truth or “truths” about ourselves and about the world. As Tom Stern has

noted, if it is to be serious, philosophy must commit itself to the concern of finding the truth and this concern has to trump any attempt to make us as human agents in the world simply feel better (Stern 2015). This concern has been echoed by John Sellars who has recently argued that although “really good philosophy” worthy of the name needs to take seriously the idea of philosophy as way of life, this cannot be at the expense of the desire to understand the world as it is, and this means that philosophy cannot be construed simply as a project aimed at making us feel good because “truths can sometimes be uncomfortable” (Sellars 2017: 49).

An appreciation of Nietzsche as a figure who practices philosophy as a way of life needs to take these concerns seriously, and in this chapter we shall show how a concern with truth and knowledge and a concern with self-transformation are linked together in *Zarathustra*. It must be noted, however, that the aforementioned concern stems mainly from a misunderstanding of Hadot and of the schools of thought that inspired him in his conception of philosophy as a way of life. An easy route to attaining mental serenity is offered neither by the Epicurean school nor the Stoic school of philosophy. In both schools the aim is not to make human beings “feel better” in any simple-minded or straightforward manner. In the case of Epicureanism, difficult and uncomfortable truths have to be faced and incorporated; in the case of Stoics to practice virtue as a way of life is a constant task, involving a great deal of self-discipline and mental focus. It is often said that in Epicurean doctrine physics is subordinated to ethics and to the detriment of our knowledge of the world: we learn as much as is necessary to live a blessed life here and now. But this is a distortion of their actual practice of teaching. Tim O’Keefe is helpful here:

[T]he Epicurean arguments in physics are supposed to establish that their conclusions are true, not merely that believing them helps us feel good. The pragmatic justification comes in, instead, to answer the question of why we should bother to engage in the activity of trying to understand the workings of the world in the first place. (O’Keefe 2010: 135)

With respect to Stoic teaching, so severe are the demands placed on human beings seeking to practice the life of virtue that a number of thinkers have seriously doubted whether such a life is actually attainable by human agents, let alone even desirable. Emerson, to take one example, writes: “There is no permanent wise man except in the figment of the Stoics” (Emerson 2000: 175–176). Similarly, Malebranche notes that such is the Stoic person’s passion for glory that he strives for an impossible ideal of invulnerability (Malebranche 1997: 343). Nietzsche himself raises a

deep-seated suspicion about the Stoic practice of philosophy, and from a decidedly modern psychological perspective, when he quizzes the pursuit of virtue that we find emphasized in the writings of figures such as Seneca and Epictetus (*GS* 122). In fact, even Hadot acknowledges the difficulty of the task involved in these philosophies when he writes that “both the grandeur and the paradox of ancient philosophy are that it was, at one and the same time, conscious of the fact that wisdom is inaccessible, and convinced of the necessity of pursuing spiritual progress” (Hadot 1995: 265). It would, therefore, be mistaken to construe these philosophies as presenting easy routes to attain mental serenity, or as downplaying the role of truth in the philosophical life. The fact that they privilege practice over theory does not imply that theory or truth are undervalued. On the contrary: according to this model of philosophical practice, truth is so important that it must not only be learned but incorporated and actually *lived* through. If its aims are therapeutic, this is because truth is conceived as something that transforms, heals, and redeems. But to have this effect it must be truth we are incorporating and not some kind of fiction designed to make us feel better. Any worthwhile conception of philosophy as a way of life, then, not only must not undervalue philosophy’s commitment to truth, but it must translate it into a way of life.

Let us now examine in a more focused manner how these issues bear on an appreciation of Nietzsche, taking into account that he has an intellectual development, and a complex one at that. We begin by noting that Nietzsche has an interest from the beginning in philosophy as entailing a particular mode of life, and he makes this clear in his untimely meditations on history and on Schopenhauer. One of the earliest references to Epicureanism, for example, is an incidental remark in *Schopenhauer as Educator* where Nietzsche says that to write today in favor of an education that sets goals beyond money and acquisition, that takes a great deal of time, and that also encourages solitude, is likely to be disparaged as “refined egoism” and “immoral cultural Epicureanism” (*SE* 6).<sup>1</sup> In the meditation on history he laments the fact that today we have only “weak personalities” and adds that “[n]o one dares to fulfil the law of philosophy in himself, no one lives philosophically, with that simple, manly loyalty that compelled an ancient, if he had once declared loyalty to the Stoa, to act as Stoic wherever he was and whatever he did” (*HL* 5). In contrast to

<sup>1</sup> The following translations are used in this chapter: *A* (2005); *AOM* (2013); *BGE* (1998); *D* (2011); *EH* (2007); *GM* (2017); *GS* (1974); *HH* (1995, 2013); *HL* (1995); *PT* (1979); *SE* (1995); *TI* (2005); *WP* (1968); *WS* (2013); *Z* (1969).

the impoverished and constrained version of philosophy that Nietzsche saw operating in his own time, he models his own ideal of philosophical practice on the Greek schools of thought: "I profit from a philosopher only insofar as he can be an example. . . . But this example must be supplied by his outward life and not merely in his books—in the way, that is, in which the philosophers of Greece taught, through their bearing, what they wore and ate, and their morals, rather than by what they said, let alone by what they wrote" (*SE* 3).

With the advent of the middle writings upon the publication of *Human, all too Human* in 1878, matters become much more complex when it comes to construing Nietzsche as a thinker dedicated to the practice of philosophy as a way of life. In these writings, we may note, he has a commitment to the methods and procedures of scientific truth and sceptical inquiry (*HH* 634–635), a dedication to the passion of knowledge (*D* 427, 429; *GS* 3, 123, 249, 283, 319, 328, 351), and a concern with how human beings can make instinctive, and endure, the incorporation of truth and knowledge (*GS* 11, 110). Commencing with *Human, all too Human* Nietzsche conceives philosophy as a practice of a sober mind that cools down human beings who are prone to neurosis. Philosophy, in concert with science, has the task of tempering emotional and mental excess. Indeed, Nietzsche defines the philosopher as a human being who speaks "from a cool, invigorating resting place" (*WS* 171). Nietzsche maintains that by fixing on the question of what knowledge can do for the happiness or well-being of human beings, ancient philosophy has served only to retard the advance of scientific inquiry (see *HH* 7). However, by the time of the second installment of *Human, all too Human* Nietzsche appears to no longer attach himself to an ideal of pure knowledge, and he is now keen to relate the story of a natural history of humankind in a way that aids the tasks of human emancipation. For example, in *Mixed Opinions and Maxims* he writes:

Natural history, as the history of the wars and victories of moral-spiritual force in opposition to fear, imagination, indolence, superstition, folly, should be narrated in such a way that everyone who hears it would be irresistibly impelled to strive for spiritual-physical health and maturity, to feel gladness at being the heir and continuer of humanity, to sense his need for ever nobler undertakings. (*AOM* 184)

This citation is a significant one since it brings into relief in a highly instructive manner Nietzsche's two main enlightenment concerns: a commitment to naturalism that is to be pursued through the study of natural history, and a concern with an emancipatory philosophical program. It is

interesting to reflect on the fact that Nietzsche conceives natural history “as the history of the wars and victories of moral-spiritual force,” and he is clearly stating his Enlightenment-minded agenda when he refers to the need to combat “fear, imagination, indolence, superstition, and folly.”

So, although aspects of Nietzsche’s commitment to science continue in the subsequent volumes of *Human, all too Human*, there is a fundamental reorientation with him now positively reappraising Socrates and antique philosophers such as Epicurus and Epictetus (*WS* 86). It can be noted, for example, that although Epicurus is first and foremost an ethical teacher, he also embodies Nietzsche’s ideal of the philosopher, and this is even acknowledged in *Human, all too Human* where he is said to be sober and rational, with his teaching serving to make us “colder and more sceptical” (*HH* 244). With respect to figures such as Epicurus and Epictetus, these are to be regarded thinkers in whom wisdom assumes bodily form (*AOM* 224). Admittedly, in his late writings Nietzsche comes to have a decidedly more complex appreciation of key Hellenistic figures. In these writings, Nietzsche has the legitimate worry that Epicurus’ garden teaching of philosophy as a way of life results in lassitude, revealing an uncanny and troubling attachment to a “hypnotic feeling of nothingness” (*GM* III: 17; see also the description of him as a “typical decadent” in *A* 30). Nevertheless, even in the late writings Nietzsche continues to express an important, and overlooked, identification with the Epicurean “bent for knowledge,” and to the extent that he is content to “look like an Epicurean” (*GS* 375; for further insight see Wotling 2020). It is clear, then, that Nietzsche’s conception of ‘flourishing’ possesses unique features, bound up as it ultimately is with a commitment to Dionysian joy (over mere Epicurean delight), with self-overcoming, and even the surpassing of the human (see *KSA* 11:25[95], *WP* 1029; *Z*:I “Prologue”).

As his projects unfold in the middle writings, Nietzsche is in search of a blending together of knowledge and wisdom (*AOM* 180), as well as a philosophy of spiritual health (*AOM* 356). He holds up Epictetus as a teacher of wisdom in whom wisdom “is the whispering of the solitary with himself in the crowded marketplace” (*AOM* 386). It is with the aid of the teachings of the antique schools that Nietzsche will endeavour to refashion the tasks of morality. He writes, for example, of transforming the passions of humanity into ‘delights’ (*WS* 37; see also *Z*:I “Of Joys and Passions”), of a morality of continual self-mastery and self-overcoming in both the largest and smallest of things (*WS* 45), of an ethics based on the individual virtues such as justice and peace of mind (*WS* 212). In all of this, the task is to become “spiritually joyful, bright, and sincere” (*WS* 88).

More than this, free spirits are willing to “*look directly at the great task of preparing the earth for a growth in the greatest and happiest fertility*” (WS 189). If we call upon the thinker for assistance we do so not simply as an educator but rather “as someone self-educated,” one who has experience (WS 267).

We hold that it is clear that this conception of the self-educator, one who has educated himself through “experience,” is fully at work and on display in the narrative of *Zarathustra*. However, although Nietzsche draws heavily in *Zarathustra* on the themes, motifs, and imagery he has sketched out in his middle writings, his conception of philosophy as a way of life, as opposed to an appreciation of philosophy as pure knowledge, now takes on a highly dramatic form with philosophy given the task of generating in free-spirited beings the desire for self-transformation, involving willing their own down-going (*Untergang*), and heralding a transformation of the earth. Before we come to this, let us consider how Nietzsche’s conception of philosophy and criticism of scholars is dramatized in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

## 2.2 The Critique of Philosophy and of Wise Men in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

The conception of philosophy as a way of life contains in itself a sharp criticism of academic philosophy. Hadot contrasts it very explicitly with the way philosophy is conceived and practiced in current universities, where philosophy is reduced to mere philosophical discourse or discourse *about* philosophy: “modern philosophy,” Hadot claims, “is first and foremost a discourse developed in the classroom and then consigned to books” (Hadot 1995: 271). Its aim is no longer the education of individuals toward complete and flourishing lives but the formation of specialists, who are then supposed to train other specialists in the context of the state educational institution. It has thus become a purely academic specialism with no practical effect or implications. As such, Hadot complains, “in modern university philosophy, philosophy is obviously no longer a way of life or form of life – unless it be the form of life of a professor of philosophy” (Hadot 1995: 271).

We have seen how in his earlier and middle writings Nietzsche criticizes the modern professionalization of philosophy and endorses a similar model of philosophical practice. *Zarathustra* is a text that can be brought into close rapport with both the early and middle Nietzsche in a number of ways, and indeed in a letter to Franz Overbeck of 1884 Nietzsche writes

wittily, referring to *Zarathustra*, that he “did the commentary *before* writing the text” (KSB 6: 504). This is particularly evident in Nietzsche’s conception of philosophy and corresponding critique of scholarly or purely theoretical philosophy, which in many ways anticipates the main traits of Hadot’s account. For example, in the discourse entitled “On Scholars” in Part II of *Zarathustra* Nietzsche can be seen as renewing the critique of scholars he had first developed in *Schopenhauer as Educator*, and that then features again in chapter six of *Beyond Good and Evil*. The problem with scholars is that “they want to be mere spectators in everything,” taking care “not to sit where the sun burns upon the steps,” choosing instead to simply “stare at thoughts that others have thought” (Z:II “On Scholars”). They “crack knowledge as one cracks nuts” and inhabit “dusty rooms” (Z:II “On Scholars”). *Zarathustra* also echoes the key motifs Nietzsche has put into play in his middle writings. The imagery of ‘dawn’ and heralding of ‘new dawns’ features prominently and in a recurrent manner in the text (Z:III “On Old and New Law-Tables” 3). In addition, Nietzsche once again proffers the idea that human society is to be regarded not as a contract but as an “experiment” (Z:III “On Old and New Law-Tables” 25; compare *D* 453), and the text highlights the intellectual virtues he has stated in the middle writings as being of special importance for the philosophical practice of modern free spirits, including “one of the youngest virtues,” namely, honesty (Z:I “Of the Afterworldsmen”; *D* 456). Furthermore, the human “will to truth” needs to be earth-bound, harnessed to “the humanly-conceivable” and “the humanly-palpable” (Z:II “On the Blessed Isles”). As is made clear in this discourse in the text, enlightened free spirits – that is, spirits who have incorporated into their practice of truthfulness elements of cold, sceptical, rational and sober inquiry – can feel at home “neither in the incomprehensible nor in the irrational” (Z:II “On the Blessed Isles”). Furthermore, all the conceptions of classical metaphysics, such as “the one,” “the perfect,” “the unmoved” and “the intransitory,” are to be regarded as ‘misanthropic’ (Z:II “On the Blessed Isles”).

The discourse on “The Famous Wise Men,” featured in Part II of *Zarathustra*, contains valuable clues as to the nature of Nietzsche’s appreciation of philosophy, in particular how he conceives the free-spirited philosopher as a figure who is “the enemy of fetters” and “the non-worshipper,” and who dwells in a particular domain, namely, the forests. This discourse affords valuable insight into how we can productively construe Nietzsche as advocating in *Zarathustra* a particular practice of philosophy as a way of life, and it rests on a critique of alternative

conceptions of philosophy, including and most notably philosophy conceived as a form of contemplation and in the manner of “immaculate perception.”

The discourse on “the famous wise men” makes it clear that for Nietzsche ‘truth’ is a free-spirited notion, and this means it cannot be found wherever the will to truth is placed in the service of the common life of the people since this is to restrict truth to the “superstitions of the people,” as well as, one might add, to their prejudices and presumptions (Z:II “On the Famous Wise Men”). Of necessity, then, since their commitment is to finding and positing uncommon truths, the free-spirited philosopher is not a figure who resides in the town or city but rather outside their walls, and hence Nietzsche’s reference in this discourse to the genuine philosopher as a dweller of the forests. Again, it is in the middle writings that we find valuable clues needed to make sense of this curious reference to the forests. In *The Wanderer and His Shadow* Nietzsche outlines, with special reference to Epicurus, a conception of philosophical practice as ‘heroic-idyllic’ (WS 295). Epicurus is well-known for practising philosophy in his garden and with a community of friends and like-minded free spirits. Although references to gardens and garden philosophy abound in *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche now conceives of the genuine philosopher as dwelling in a specific location, namely, the forest. In *Mixed Opinions and Maxims*, and inspired by the example of Goethe, Nietzsche writes of a “poetry of the future” and assigns to poetry (*Dichtung*) a specific task. He suggests that the role of the poet is not to portray present times or to reanimate and condense the past, but rather to show the way to the future. The poet – the artist in the broadest sense as one who “invents” and “creates” – is to do this by composing and recomposing “images of beautiful human beings,” and by indicating that such humans are still possible “*in the midst* of our modern world” (AOM 99). This is not an easy task when we take into account what Nietzsche says elsewhere in this text, chiefly, that today’s poets live in too close a proximity to “the sewers of the big cities” (AOM 111). This theme is continued in *The Gay Science* where Nietzsche writes of the need for “preparatory courageous human beings” who will emerge out of, and in spite of, “the sand and slime of present-day civilization and metropolitanism” (GS 283). We can note that the concern with the cultivation of beautiful human beings greatly occupies Nietzsche’s attention in *Zarathustra*, notably in the discourse on “The Sublime Ones,” where Zarathustra says that one should return from “the forest of knowledge” not in a state of gloominess, and as does the sublime human who displays “ugliness” and needs to become a “penitent of the spirit.” In the discourse, the

beautiful is configured in terms of notions of gracefulness, generosity of spirit, and self-overpowering. "Beauty is unattainable to all violent wills" (Z:II "On the Sublime Ones"). Furthermore, in "The Greeting" chapter in Part IV of *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche has Zarathustra invite his guests to speak to him of his "gardens," his "Blessed Isles" and his "beautiful new race."

Another important discourse for an appreciation of Nietzsche's conception of philosophy in *Zarathustra*, including the possibilities it offers for a renewed conception of philosophy as a way of life, is the discourse from Part II entitled "Of Immaculate Perception." It brings together in a single discourse many of Nietzsche's concerns that are played out in the book as a whole, including his criticism of the commitment to pure knowledge that echoes Epicurus' attack on purely contemplative philosophy or the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself, his attachment to a notion of beauty and the motif of the dawn of day. The discourse commences with a reference to the moon rising the day before and Zarathustra expecting it to give birth to a sun, so pregnant does it seem. This is a clear reference to "cold" knowledge containing within it the seeds of new possibilities of thinking, feeling and willing; in short it is a reference to the passion of knowledge (see *D* 429). However, Zarathustra has allowed himself to be deceived by the moon, and there is more of man in it than there is woman. This is not much of a man, though, since he reveals himself to be a "timid night-reveller"; he is "catlike" and "without honesty." This is a parable that Zarathustra narrates to "sentimental hypocrites of 'pure knowledge'." Although full of lust, their desire is not focused on the need for difficult or hard (unsentimental) knowledge that allows the philosopher to posit new conceptions and emotions of the kind that lead to self-transformation and even the creation of new peoples (see Z:III: "On Old and New Law Tables" 25, 28).

Although the seekers of pure knowledge love the earth and all things earthly, they have a bad conscience in their love and are just like the moon. Their love of things of the earth is combined with a healthy contempt of the earthly too, but this does not then express itself as a desire for transforming the earth. Rather, they want to love the earth only as the moon does, touching its beauty "with the eyes alone" (Z:II "On Immaculate Perception"). They wish, in short, only to gaze and not to create: "And let this be called by me my *immaculate perception* of all things: that I desire nothing of things, except that I may lie down before them like a mirror with a hundred eyes" (Z:II "On Immaculate Perception"). To this Zarathustra sternly replies, "Truly, you do not love the earth as creators, begetters, men joyful at entering upon a new existence!"

(Z:II “On Immaculate Perception”). Zarathustra then makes an appeal to “innocence” and “beauty,” declaring that beauty resides in a courageous will, namely, where one has to will with all one’s will, including where the will welcomes its own perishing, so that “an image may not remain merely an image” (Z:II “On Immaculate Perception”). At work in this whole discourse may be an oblique set of references to the image of the sun in Plato, the contemplative philosopher of ideal forms par excellence, and how we are to emerge from the cave so as to contemplate the eternal form of the Good represented by the sun. Clearly, the sun is operating quite differently in Nietzsche, signalling the arrival of new life and new dawns, in short, new possibilities of life. We can also note that aspects of Nietzsche’s criticism of the famous wise men may also be directed at Aristotle, who famously construes contemplation as the highest mode of a philosophically-inspired existence (on Nietzsche on Aristotle, see Loeb 2017a).

In linking together so potently in this discourse the will to love with the will to one’s death, Nietzsche is harking back to his conception of the genuine philosopher in *Dawn* where he argues that the most beautiful virtue of the great thinker radiates from the magnanimity “with which he, as a person of knowledge, undauntedly, often ashamed, often with sublime mockery and smiling—offers himself and his life in sacrifice” (D 459). It is worth noting that this aphorism from *Dawn* is in large part an attack on the likes of Rousseau and Schopenhauer, both of whom professed, following the motto of Juvenal, to have dedicated their lives to truth, but who, Nietzsche holds, did not possess the intellectual maturity that would have enabled them to dedicate truth *to life*. Rather, both thinkers were vain and sought only in truth and knowledge a mirror of themselves. For Nietzsche this is especially the case with Schopenhauer, whose philosophy is to be regarded as the mirroring of a “character,” a melancholic one at that, and that reveals an “interesting vehement ugliness” (D 481).

The idea that the passion of knowledge is a practice of knowledge that requires a self-sacrificing humanity is one that Nietzsche has already floated in *The Gay Science* in his account of preparatory human beings. He describes these preparatory ones in a specific way: they will be “silent, solitary, resolute”; they will be distinguished “by cheerfulness, patience, unpretentiousness, and contempt for all great vanities as by magnanimity in victory and forbearance regarding the small vanities of the vanquished”; and, finally, in addition to having their own festivals, working days, and periods of mourning, they will be “more endangered human beings, more fruitful human beings, happier beings!” (GS 283). In living dangerously, the preparatory ones will be prepared to make sacrifices, that is, sacrifices of

themselves and for the benefit of a future to come. This mode of life is their pride, their happiness, and their reason for existence. Nietzsche concludes this aphorism as follows: “Soon the ages will be past when you could be content to live hidden in forests like shy deer. At long last the search for knowledge will reach out for its due; it will want to *rule* and *possess*, and you with it!” (GS 283).

Let us return to Nietzsche’s attack on the practitioners of pure knowledge in “Of Immaculate Perception.” He labels them “deceivers” and “contemplatives,” clearly revealing his consternation at the fact that the philosopher can have a desire for knowledge without wanting this to have any transformative effects. He even acknowledges that he too once thought there was no better art than the art of pure knowledge, and this self-criticism may be directed at the position he had promoted in *Human, all too Human* (see HH 7). The discourse concludes on a powerful note with Nietzsche indicating that through knowledge we can elevate ourselves and come to cultivate within ourselves, as experiments and sites of self-overcoming and self-sacrifice, a non-vain desire for the advancement and enhancement of life. The conception of knowledge advanced here is fully in accord with the depiction of the philosopher’s magnanimity presented in aphorism 459 of *Dawn* and a clear expression of philosophy as a way of life:

But I *approached* you: then day dawned for me—and now it dawns for you  
—the moon’s love affair had come to an end!

Just look! There it stands, pale and detected—before the dawn!

For already it is coming, the glowing sun—*its* love of the earth is coming!  
All sun-love is innocence and creative desire!

Just look how it comes impatiently over the sea! . . . It wants to suck at the sea and drink the sea’s depths up to its height . . . It *wants* to be kissed and sucked by the sun’s thirst, it *wants* to become air and height and light’s footpath and light itself!

Truly, like the sun do I love life and all deep seas.

And this *I* call knowledge: all that is deep shall rise up—to my height! (Z:II  
“On Immaculate Perception”)

### 2.3 Self-transformation and Conversion in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

We have attempted to show how from his earlier writings until *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche develops a substantial critique of scholarly philosophy and endorses a model of philosophical practice that resonates with

Hadot's conception of philosophy as a way of life. Let us now see how this model is displayed and put into practice in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* on the level of self-transformation and conversion to a new way of life.

According to John Sellars, transformation of one's way of life is the ultimate motivation of philosophy conceived as a way of life (Sellars 2017: 41). In one of his multiple formulations, Hadot defines it as "a method of spiritual progress" that demands "a radical conversion and transformation of the individual's way of being" (Hadot 1995: 265). This conversion and transformation are achieved through the constant pursuit and activation of wisdom, which as we have seen is not to be externally acquired or simply learned, but incorporated or embodied, in such a way that it becomes a way of life, that is, a total "mode of existing-in-the-world" (Hadot 1995: 265). We have shown how in his middle writings, such as *Dawn* and *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche has sought to clarify what it means to cultivate the passion of knowledge and defined our new task today as one of learning how to incorporate truth and knowledge. These conceptions are dramatically put to work in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* when through its main character Nietzsche's passion of knowledge assumes "bodily form" and gives itself the task of enhancing the human species and giving a new meaning to the earth. Zarathustra is precisely that thinker who "considers truthfulness to be the highest virtue" and as such "has more courage in his body than all thinkers put together"; his peculiar virtue, Nietzsche claims, is "to speak the truth and *shoot well with an arrow*" (EH "Destiny" 3). In so doing, Zarathustra brings together that "species of courage" and "extravagant generosity" that has hitherto "been *lacking* in mankind" (D 551), that kind of wisdom that out of its honesty, coldness, vigour and exuberance opens up new ways of thinking, feeling and living and "tells us something of the *possible*" (EH "Destiny" 3).

The *possible* is, in this case, Zarathustra's own way of life, which is also his true teaching. It is not a coincidence that Nietzsche considers *Zarathustra* "a new sacred book" (KSB 6: 404) or a "fifth 'Gospel'" (KSB 6: 375) and that many of its stylistic aspects and motifs are modelled after the Bible. Just like Christ in the New Testament, Zarathustra *is* the message, the wisdom and the truth, the possibility of a new dawn, a new meaning of the earth, a new redemption of the world and, above all, the expression of Nietzsche's hope in a self-overcoming of mankind. For Zarathustra, people are "something unformed, matter, an ugly stone that needs a sculptor" (EH Z:8) and, as the Prologue famously declares, "Man is something that should be overcome" (Z:I "Prologue" 3). As a sculptor of a future humanity, Zarathustra teaches a new kind of faith that "*shall be*

the meaning of the earth” after the death of all gods – a meaning that must be built and created anew through the same courage, magnanimity and self-sacrificing spirit that Zarathustra embodies and aims to cultivate in free-spirited human beings:

And this is the great noontide: it is when man stands at the middle of his course between animal and Superhuman and celebrates his journey to the evening as his highest hope: for it is the journey to a new morning.

Then man, going under, will bless himself; for he will be going over to the Superhuman; and the sun of his knowledge will stand at noontide.

“*All gods are dead: now we want the Superhuman to live*”—let this be our last will one day at the great noontide! (Z:I “Of the Bestowing Virtue” 3)

The metaphors of the “great noontide” and the “new morning” – just as “midday,” “dawn” and others that abound in the text – are of great significance here and show how *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is perhaps the moment in Nietzsche’s work where his philosophical practice comes closest to what Hadot described as philosophy as a way of life. The metaphors point to the ideas of renewal, renovation, rebirth, and they indicate the appearance or eruption of something new, which even though bearing a relation with the past also implies a break, a scission, a rupture with a previous condition or state of affairs. Both the idea of rupture and the idea of a new start or a new beginning are involved in what Hadot describes as the “philosophical conversion” that is at the core of philosophy as a way of life, especially but not exclusively as conceived among Stoics and Epicureans. Indeed, Hadot holds that throughout the history of Western thought, philosophy has been “essentially an act of conversion” (Hadot 2020: 102), and by this he means the following:

In all its forms, philosophical conversion is the tearing away from and breaking with the everyday, the familiar, the falsely ‘natural’ attitude of common sense. It is the return to the original and the originary, to the authentic, to interiority, to the essential. It is absolute new beginning, a new starting point which transforms past and future. . . . In any way it presents itself, philosophical conversion is the access to inner freedom, to a new perception of the world, to authentic existence. (Hadot 2020: 102)

Hadot characterizes it as a “decisive illumination” (Hadot 2020: 99), one that provokes a radical transformation of one’s way of life. Significantly, Zarathustra is compared to a sun that must “descend into the depths” in order to “bring light to the underworld” (Z:I “Prologue” 1). Retrospectively, Nietzsche calls *Zarathustra* a “revelation of truth”

(*EH Z:6*), something that “throws you down and leaves you deeply shaken” (*EH Z:3*). Both in the religious and in the philosophical contexts, it is this moment of awakening and enlightenment that makes us question our most ordinary and rooted habits, thoughts and feelings and embrace a totally new way of thinking, feeling and inhabiting the world.

This is a process that does not come about spontaneously, but rather requires the intermediation and guidance of somebody who has himself gone through this process of self-transformation and is able to communicate to others his own experience and awaken in them the desire to go through the same process of conversion to another way of life. Mirroring the figure of the wise man in antiquity, Zarathustra is an educator who has first educated himself, a converter who is himself “converted” or, in the formulations of *Zarathustra*, “an awakened-one” speaking to “the sleepers” (*Z:I* “Prologue” 2). The means of communication are extremely important in this context, which is why in ancient philosophical schools, just like in *Zarathustra*, “the means of rhetoric and logic are put in service of the conversion of souls” (Hadot 2020: 96). In philosophy as a way of life, and as evident in Zarathustra’s speeches, discourse is not meant to simply convey a theory to listeners or readers, but rather to provoke this awakening, inviting individuals to remove themselves from their common ways of life and calling for a new way of being and existing in the world.

If this performative use of language can be generally attested in Nietzsche’s highly unconventional style – at least when compared to the traditional forms of philosophical discourse – it is clearly exacerbated in *Zarathustra*, where self-transformation and conversion might be said to lie at its core. Thus, Zarathustra’s speeches – just as all the allegories, parables, visions, riddles, enigmas, poems, anecdotes, songs and dances that compose the narrative – are clearly not meant to merely teach something to his listeners or readers, but also aim to actually *do* something to them. In their performative aspects they are essentially tools to cultivate in human beings a desire for self-transformation and the creation of a new human-superhuman way of life. Particularly noteworthy in this regard are the spiritual gymnastics that Zarathustra undergoes throughout the text in order to deal with the numerous challenges and obstacles that he finds in his way, as well as the powerful images of self-overcoming and self-transformation that he not only displays but often incorporates, most notably the image of the shepherd biting the “heavy, black snake” after which he is “no longer a shepherd, no longer a man” but “a transformed being, surrounded with light, *laughing*,” with a “laughter that was no human laughter” (*Z:III* “On the Vision and the Riddle” 2) – a

transmutation that Zarathustra himself undergoes at the end of Part III, signaling the end of the “down-going” that he had started in the Prologue (Z:III “The Convalescent” 2). In this context, it has been noted how these spiritual gymnastics that Zarathustra undergoes throughout the narrative, and most notably the thought of the eternal return, the incorporation and acceptance of which produces the radical self-transformation just mentioned, can be equated to the spiritual exercises with which Hadot characterizes the practice of philosophy as a way of life (see Hadot 1995: 82–109). These exercises are practices specifically designed to change our way of living on the basis of a new perception of the world and indeed, as Ure notes, the eternal return is “an exercise through which we transform our present life such that we would desire its eternal repetition” (Ure 2018: 95). By embodying not only a new way of life, but also the spiritual exercises and transitions needed to get there, Zarathustra teaches this new way by experiencing it and also putting it to the ultimate test of seeing “whether one can live in accordance with it” (SE 8).

According to Hadot, philosophical conversion has the same radical and totalizing character as religious conversion (Hadot 2020: 96), and *Zarathustra* certainly plays with this religious dimension in which “God’s initiative irrupts into the world, introducing a radical novelty into the course of history” that is “often delivered in a sacred book, demands absolute adhesion, a complete break with the past, a consecration of one’s whole being” (Hadot 2020: 100). As Michel Foucault makes clear in his analysis of Cynic conversion, however, what distinguishes the philosophical form of conversion from the religious one is that whereas the latter constitutes a movement to “an *other* life” as the condition for access to “the other world” (*l’autre monde*), philosophy aspires to and aims to build a “life which is other” (*une vie autre*) as a means to promote a “world which is other” (*un monde autre*) (Foucault 2011: 247, 287, translation modified). We see this intention at play in the whole of *Zarathustra*, which in the twenty-two speeches that make up the first part of the narrative, summarizes the main traits of the “life which is other” that Zarathustra aims to promote, cultivate and indeed convert us to.

The idea of *otherness* is here fundamental, firstly because it is mainly in opposition to our current life that Zarathustra’s new way of life emerges, and second because it is precisely *otherness* that it aims to teach and promote: otherness in the way we think, feel and evaluate, otherness in the way we judge ourselves, others and the world, otherness in the way we conceive ourselves and our life possibilities to be. Zarathustra wants to free human beings from the fear and superstition of religious phantasms,

slavish moralities, and life-denying ideals that demand the same “Thou shalt” for all, and to awaken them to the infinite possibilities of thinking, feeling, judging, doing and being *otherwise*. Above all, Zarathustra is concerned with another sense of gratitude, beauty and joyful being in the world – a world that in the lives of those who accept the challenge of creation, experimentation and self-overcoming, also becomes *other*, thus providing a new meaning to the earth. As Zarathustra pleads in his last speech of the book’s first part:

Stay loyal to the earth, my brothers, with the power of your virtue! May your bestowing love and your knowledge serve towards the meaning of the earth! Thus I beg and entreat you. [. . .]

Lead, as I do, the flown-away virtue back to earth—yes, back to body and life: that it may give the earth its meaning, a human meaning! [. . .]

May your spirit and your virtue serve the meaning of the earth, my brothers; and may the value of all things be fixed anew by you. To that end you should be fighters! To that end you should be creators!

There are a thousand paths that have never yet been trodden, a thousand forms of health and hidden islands of life. Man and man’s earth are still unexhausted and undiscovered. (Z:I “Of the Bestowing Virtue” 2)

Throughout the narrative, Zarathustra stresses several times that such a transformation of human beings and the human world cannot come about without much destruction and sacrifice, and indeed without willingness to perish for the sake of this new meaning of the earth, which Zarathustra epitomizes in the superhuman. In this context, it has been argued that the superhuman repeats the same pattern that we find in the case of the ascetic ideal, in which human life is accorded value only to the extent that it is a means to something that brings about its negation (see Clark 1990: 273). This concern can perhaps be allayed by appealing to a note from the time of *Dawn* where Nietzsche says that there is need for a new “non-ascetic renunciation of the world” (KSA 9:7[197]). This significantly distances his position from any residual attachment to the ascetic ideal: the concern is not with creating anything otherworldly or transcendent, anything unearthly, as is the case with ascetic ideals, but rather with fostering a richer, deeper and more beautiful humanity, indeed, to the point where there would emerge a new species. This does not imply a simple negation but a self-overcoming or, one could say, a self-sublation of current humanity that would mark, in Hadot’s words, an “absolute new beginning,” a “new starting point which transforms past and future.”

It is worth stressing the extent to which Nietzsche has been foregrounding a discourse on sacrifice, with reference to both an experimental self-sacrificing humanity and the character of the magnanimous philosopher, well before *Zarathustra* and the positing of the superhuman. Clark wishes to focus critical attention on the figure of the superhuman in Nietzsche, but she fails to appreciate the extent to which the key philosophical project at work in his middle writings is an anticipation of, and preparation for, what is being presented and posited in *Zarathustra* (see, for example, *D* 45, 459; and *GS* 283). So, although one might have concerns about the positing of the superhuman they need to be informed by an appreciation of the middle writings, one that would show the extent to which the idea of a self-sacrificing humanity is far from being an idiosyncratic feature of Nietzsche's philosophizing.

#### 2.4 Conclusion

Nietzsche's global concern with the earth and the human as a species in *Zarathustra* is an aspect that distinguishes his philosophical project from the much narrower and limited aims of Hellenistic philosophers. Even though Nietzsche's philosophy can also be considered therapeutic on a cultural level – and perhaps even on an individual one in his middle period – it is clear that the goals he sets for himself, as well as for free spirits and future philosophers in different moments of his work, go beyond the prescription of a way of life intended to secure peace of mind and freedom from suffering or disturbance of the soul. And yet, if there is something that Nietzsche never abandons throughout his entire productive life it is the conviction that philosophy should not be allowed to become a purely abstract and innocuous discipline, consigned to “dusty” books and sterile classrooms, with no impact on one's life and character. For Nietzsche, just as for the Hellenists, and in coincidence with Hadot's account, philosophy is a deeply performative and transformative practice, one that demands total commitment from its practitioners and that opens up the possibility of a radical conversion of one's whole being.

As we have tried to show, however, Nietzsche does not restrict the conception of philosophy as a way of life to a single task. Sometimes philosophy is identified in Nietzsche with *Bildung* or self-cultivation, as in his Basel lectures on the future of educational institutions, and this is a theme one might see at work in the middle writings and also informing parts of *Zarathustra*. Also at work in Nietzsche is an appreciation of philosophy as the mode of thinking and way of being in the world that

discovers “beautiful possibilities of life” (*PT* 143–144), and we see this at work in his early work on the pre-Platonic philosophers and then renewed in *Human, all too Human* (for example, *HH* 261). Finally, especially in *Zarathustra*, philosophy is to apply itself to the task of cultivating noble and singular individuals, and ultimately therefore, in Nietzsche philosophy as a way of life is to dedicate itself to the cause of promoting superior human types, ones who are able to affirm life and provide a new meaning to the earth (*Z:I* “Of the Tree on the Mountainside”).

We have sought to show how this conception of philosophy develops throughout Nietzsche’s early and middle writings until it reaches its most dramatic and expressive form in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which is perhaps the best example in Nietzsche’s *corpus* of him not only advocating but practicing and teaching philosophy as a way of life. With *Zarathustra* Nietzsche has clearly chosen to write in a specific manner, eschewing the forms of the treatise and the essay, even the quasi-scientific report, and constructing an alter ego instead of writing in his own voice. Within these choices we can identify a criticism of, and alternative to, the academic and professionalized practice of philosophy that today has become the norm. As Hadot notes, the intention of an author is inscribed not only in the content but also in the form of his or her works, such that “the first way to recognize the author’s intention is to look for the literary genre to which the text belongs” (Hadot 2009: 64). In the case of *Zarathustra*, and similarly to other works in the philosophy as a way of life tradition, it is clear that the form and genre of the text is strictly dependent on the effect of (trans)formation Nietzsche wanted to provoke in his readers. In fact, the majority of Nietzsche’s works are written in unconventional forms and designed to have a similar effect of formation in the context of a genuine philosophical education, one which modern universities are unable to provide. What is particular about *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is that *Zarathustra personifies* the theories, doctrines and values he wishes to convey. *Zarathustra* is not simply a fictional substitute of Nietzsche. He teaches through his speeches and, most importantly, he teaches through his own example, his own life and his own experience. His journey is itself a journey of self-transformation and self-formation (with many difficulties, resistances, self-overcomings) that he wishes to share with others. So, it might be claimed, what he shares and what he teaches is first and foremost his *way of life*. In so doing he comes close to the wise human being in antiquity, whose philosophy was conveyed not only by his teachings but also by his own life. In this sense, *Zarathustra* recovers, to a great extent, the personal, communal and dialogical character of philosophy in

antiquity, as well as the form of “teaching by example”, which, as Hadot stresses, was so fundamental and yet has been almost irremediably lost in contemporary academic philosophy (see Hadot 2009: 54ff.).

In short, with *Zarathustra*, which features all of his mature teachings and ideas, Nietzsche appears keen to gain a wider and more practically oriented audience than academic philosophy allows for. We wish to contend, therefore, that taking seriously a philosophical work like *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is of the utmost importance today. With the rise of neoliberalism, education is perhaps even more threatened by increasing professionalization and policing than it was in Nietzsche’s (or even Hadot’s) time. Students are increasingly treated as consumers, with teachers expected to be dispensers of readily digestible information. In today’s university culture there is a growing absence of genuine education and a lack of genuine educators who would teach the virtues of self-cultivation and self-overcoming. Nietzsche saw the crisis coming and Hadot valiantly reacted against it with his appreciation of philosophy as a way of life. Their conceptions of philosophy as a way of life retain their pertinence and potency today, not only as important forms of resistance to current university educational practices, but also as important reminders of the original vocation of philosophy and its role in transforming human lives.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The authors wish to thank Paul Loeb for his pertinent and challenging feedback that has helped us improve the essay and finesse our interpretation of Nietzsche.