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Essays Letters O.O.P.S. Reviews A/V Index About Contributors Submissions

DEMOCRACY EDUCATION ESSAYS THEORY & PRACTICE

Agnes Heller and "Everyday Revolutions"

Anna-Verena Nosthoff — December 14, 2015

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Agnes Heller, October 27, 2014 © Fundació Catalunya-La Pedrera | Flickr

- Anti-Semitism
- Fascism
- Hungary
- Bloch (Karola)
- Borges (Jorge Luis)
- Heidegger (Martin)
- Heller (Agnes)
- Lukacs (Georg)
- Orbán (Viktor)



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"I felt that I had a debt to pay as a survivor. Writing moral philosophy and philosophy of history for me then became a way to pay my debt as a survivor to the people who could not survive. So in this respect my philosophy became a sacrifice but a sacrifice which I enjoyed. And this is not contradictory, I can sincerely say that my whole life became a sacrifice to pay my debt and simultaneously I enjoyed writing philosophy." —Ágnes Heller [i]

Ágnes Heller says she has four identities: she is a Hungarian patriot, a Hungarian Jew, a woman, and a philosopher. Thinking, for her, is the continuation of acting by other means. This is a short portrait of a truth-seeking revolutionary.

Funes possesses a perfect memory. No wonder, no childhood.

The forms of the southern clouds at the dawn of April 30th, 1882, are comparable to those mottled streaks on this one book he had only seen once (a Spanish edition). Following the *Naturalis Historia*, he recounts exactly four historically exemplary cases of prodigious memory: Cyrus, first, Mithridates Eupator, second, Simonides third, Metrodorus fourth. For him, this is all bare retrieval of factual knowledge; he never has to actually pursue thoughts. He is number five, he is Ireneo Funes. [ii] Zarathustra having become *Übermensch*.

Poland in early summer 2014. Mosquitoes dominate the stuffy green of Wrocław's Juliusza Słowackiego Park; somewhere, in its very midst: philosophy [iii]. Slight coldness surrounds the seminar room; an almost imperceptible air conditioning hums a constant hum. As usual, Ágnes Heller is accompanied by her light sun hat. She lays it on the table, right next to it the calmness of the hands of a philosopher.

The story of Funes seemingly occupies her mind. She admires the true fictions of his literary creator—not least because they touch on moral dilemmas. By the time Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges invented Funes's impeccable memory (1942), she was a child of thirteen. Today, being a grown-up philosopher, the Hungarian Jew has enough reasons to question the desirability of a mechanical memory.

Of course, memory capacity is indispensable to life. Heller has radical skepticism about her own capacity for remembering; she rather trusts in the durability of the letters in her diaries. However, it is not without cause that Borges writes how Funes had little talent for actual, reflective thinking: "To think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions. In the teeming world of Funes, there were only details, almost immediate in their presence." [iv]

Details of a complete lifetime. For Funes, this means that everything will always be available, each fragment of a moment, never again only a slightest loss of time. In turn, surely, this makes any search of time superfluous. By possessing full, radical, and relentless transparency, one would probably win less than one would lose; Heller seems aware of this. The last thing she would want to do is simply juxtapose Funes' associations with a composition of recurring Madeleine moments. Lime-tree-blossom tea, Combray—nothing but a beautiful Proustian fiction.

"Without having gone through hell, you can never get to paradise," [v] she once said. Each of us knows that she survived the Holocaust and that she lost most of her family in Nazi concentration camps. The question regarding Funes's memory resides somewhere in the room; pending answers remain quiet. Silence. She wants us to think for ourselves.

When Heller strings together nets of associations and thoughts, she follows a peculiar consistency, which is far from formal logic. "A good philosopher," she says, "must be like a child," daring to ask "naive questions" because it is these that constitute his or her essential breeding ground. [vi] She shares this reflexive turn to childhood with early Frankfurt School-thinkers such as Adorno, or Ernst Bloch, or with the German filmmaker Alexander Kluge, who was once a student of Adorno. In the seminar room, it so happens that honest candor makes her clap her hands—not infrequently; one senses an always-fleeting splendor of childlike enthusiasm.

Discussions with Ágnes Heller are friendly. The seminar is deprived of battles in which the force of the better argument necessarily excludes others. We read English dramatists and female political theorists, while abstaining from Nazi jurists; Shakespeare and Arendt take Schmitt's place this time. Rigorous categorization is considered per se immoral, no need for friend-enemy-distinctions. This here is philosophy that touches the political on a different basis.

Heller's critical mind is always influenced by realpolitik, constantly aware of detecting dangerous tendencies. Unafraid of telling political truths, she is banned from speaking on Hungarian television. However, she cares little about this — for the TV ban is just another significant confirmation of her own criticism of the Hungarian government system, primarily directed against the right-wing populist Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Orbán's formal bourgeois party, Fidesz, held a two-thirds majority in Parliament until recently, which

allowed Fidesz to build up a new media regulatory authority, *Nemzeti MEDIA ésHírközlési Hatóság* (NMHH) via constitutional amendments by the end of 2010. Since then, not only public but also private media and the internet have been consistently monitored for "balanced content" and for "relevance to the citizens of Hungary," among other subtle "soft-censorship" strategies [vii]. If NMHH disapproves of content, they sanction with fines up to \$928,000. [viii]

In 2010, more than 1000 employees forcibly lost their jobs, especially those who had protested. One exemplary case is Attila Mong, who was fired for having interrupted Kossuth Rádió's program with a minute of silence to protest against government sanctions. [ix] Given these circumstances, Heller finds it absolutely absurd to still refer to Hungary as a "democracy." She says this with obvious disdain. What she benefits from in dire times as these is her immense political and satirical repertoire, for example, when she talks about the national conservative government and jokingly refers to their inhuman and non-human qualities: "They're like parrots—constantly repeating themselves. We cannot tolerate it if neither public speech nor freedom of opinion exist." [x]

Orbán has spent more than half of his life in the spheres of public policy. He wears his suits with a sense of masculine pride, encompassed by an autocratic aura of efficient pragmatism. Machiavelli would have probably circumscribed Orbán's clever state steering with virtù; for the author of *The Prince*, however, this would have had little to do with morality (this arguably holds at least for *The Prince*, if not so much for his *Discorsi*). Florence had left behind, at least partly, those democratic practices that had dominated the Greek polis. In contrast, Heller loves to quote the ancient Greeks deliberately; her wisdom goes way beyond princely efficiency-thinking for the sake of maximizing long-term power. She clearly has meticulously read Machiavelli's writings; thus, she notes that Orbán's strategy differs from "Machiavellianism" [xi] in a crucial point: "A Machiavellian would pretend that he is a peaceful man who wants to cooperate with the EU. And then do the opposite. In contrast, Orbán proclaims his goals openly." [xii]

Meanwhile, many call him "Pusztá-Putin," drawing parallels to alleged territorial expansion fantasies of the Russian President. However, it is subject to debate whether Putin's staged masculinity entirely corresponds to buttoned-shirt wearing Orbán. At least, Hungary is still a land without propaganda bodies on superb horses. Beyond the Siberian tundra, however, Orbán and Putin are not entirely dissimilar: Heller is convinced that "Orbán is a dictator," though she does not conceive of Hungary as a dictatorship. After all, there is an opposition — at the very least, on the streets of Budapest.

Yet in 2010 Orbán publicly proclaimed that "democracy in Hungary was not in danger." Nevertheless, even then, the alarming omnipresence of nationalist symbols on walls and on "national taxis" were hard to ignore, such as pictures of the former monarchy Kingdom of Hungary (existing from the Middle Ages until 1946) adorning driver's doors, side mirrors, and taxi lights. Some believe that they still owe their ancestors a proper fight for "Hungarianism" aimed at reconciling ethnic boundaries with state borders. Of course Orbán knew about all of this, yet cared little: His sole reaction consisted in a trivial reference to alleged "normality": "In all democracies, there are ten to fifteen percent extremist forces." That this was a radical and indeed dangerous understatement became obvious with the emergence of the motorcycle club called "Goi"; this Hebrew term means "non-Jew." On Holocaust Memorial Day in 2013, Goi planned a motorcycle "counter-rally" as they called it, which lead past a synagogue. Its self-declared motto was: adj gázt — "step on it!" In Hungarian, however, this has a perverse double connotation: it literally translates to "give [adj] gas [gázt]!", carrying an obvious allusion to the Nazi-gas-mass-murders.

When Heller returned to Hungary a few months earlier, one of the first things she realized was: "*Liberal* is a dirtier word here than Nazi or communist." [xiii] Moreover, she recognized

that "Orbán says he defends all minorities, including the Jews. So, for the Jews this literally means we are not Hungarian."

Many of his opponents accuse Orbán of actively contributing to political radicalization of daily life. This is exemplified by Jobbik, the third largest party in parliament since 2010. Some members of the Jobbik party advocate for the introduction of "Jew lists"; they consider "true" Hungarians to be a "superior race." In 2014, they held 20.5 percent of the votes in the parliamentary elections.

Orbán tolerated most of this, in fact he used Jobbik's popularity for his own political purposes. Yet Heller claims: "The relation between Fidesz and Jobbik changes. When Orbán intended to reach far-right voters, he approached Jobbik. When he needed to make a good impression in front of the EU, he distanced himself from Jobbik." She points out that the party has radicalized; last year, Jobbik spoke in favor of reintroducing the death penalty and exiting the EU. Seemingly, this agenda is too radical even for Fidesz, which recently tried to distance itself from Jobbik. Yet, Fidesz lost around 8% in the last parliamentary elections.

Most recently, Jobbik could benefit from modifying its far-right image to a rather moderate direction. As a result, many voters do not view Jobbik as radical anymore. Nevertheless, Jobbik had countless corruption scandals just recently. In addition, "politicians" such as Lajos Rig who reportedly wears a tattoo featuring the motto of the Nazi SS, "*Meine Ehre heißt Treue*" (My honor is called loyalty) remain in the party's infamous ranks [xiv]. Even if Jobbik's leader Gabor Vona is believed to intend to push out Jobbik's extremist elements, he has seemingly not managed to fundamentally change the membership-structure so far. [xv]

Heller offers many reasons for the political developments of recent years, but above all, she believes that Hungarian voters are "immature." Heller maintains that the central problem is that Hungary lacks democratic traditions and has suffered an "unfortunate history." The philosopher is convinced that the first step to maturity is for the country to develop a democratic will to learn its own mode of articulation, before it can utter specific content. Thus, much depends on learning how to act politically. Moreover, as Heller points out, it is vital that Hungary finds a voice, which finally manages to emancipate itself from its former invaders (the Germans and the Soviets). The danger, of course, is that this turns into an unconscious and maybe even traumatic form of nationalism.

Much of this, then, depends on lengthy processes and gently pacing the process; sometimes it might even involve slow failures. Yet, Heller approves of this; for her, democracy can only sneak in at a "snail's pace," especially if it seeks to be a counterpoint to loud fascism that only calls for homogeneity. By contrast, Heller resists -isms that try to subsume politically heterogeneous realities under a single term on the grounds of a limited party doctrine, thus criticizing populist ideas of bipolar societies, allegedly divided into "communists" versus "fascists"; left versus right. For Heller, this has little, if anything, to do with democracy, or what she thinks of as true democracy. True democracy ought not to know resentment, not even when faced with the fate of an utterly oppressive and exclusionary history.

Heller is well-known for being the most popular regime critic. Recently, Budapest has seen a few disturbing incidences of graffiti and anti-Semitic slogans that explicitly refer to her. It would be entirely understandable if the 85-year-old felt threatened. Yet, what has to be taken into account is Heller's own historical narrative that consistently forced her into opposition, forcibly assigning to her the role of an outsider. Thus, she is too smart and experienced to admit fear now. She understands that this would only prove right the cowardice of her opponents; this is all too familiar to her: a seemingly never ending political game with truths and untruths, with propaganda and ideology. While she always lives conscious of the general assumption "that people will hate me too," she knows at what point public defamation becomes really dangerous. Rather than admitting fear, her strategy is to

show strength by referring to the powerful commitments of her supporters: “Many people speak to me on the tram and say *I love you, please keep on doing what you do.*” She says it in German (“Ich liebe dich, mach weiter, was du machst”), addressing an Austrian audience. [xvi] One senses that this is no exaggeration, but part of her everyday reality and microphysical, everyday revolution.

Her very personal shield is humor. Trying to illustrate the extent of “Hungarianisation” in its everyday absurdity she claims: “Every word is inspired by this ‘Hungarianism’.” People have become accustomed to “sitting in *Hungarian* rooms and drinking *Hungarian* water, while reading *Hungarian* books and talking to *Hungarian* people; they even wear *Hungarian* glasses.” She repeats the term “Hungarian” almost ad infinitum, yet in its obvious absurdity one senses that this, too, is an authentic fragment of her daily life.

Indeed, Orbán likes to conjure a “spiritual energy of national culture”. He speaks of authentic roots and the family, drawing rhetorical pictures of “the homeland,” thus striving to satisfy a longing for nationhood. What Heller has satirized so aptly, sounds frighteningly exclusive in Orbán’s very own, idiosyncratic (quasi-Orwellian) Newspeak: “With Hungarian eyes and a Hungarian way of thinking, following the Hungarian heartbeat, we alone are authors of our constitution.” Orbán incorporates a self-declared savior of the nation, thereby emphatically placing Schmitt’s decisionism into concrete practice (and he does so with an obsession close to Schmitt’s permanent insistence on “*die konkrete Möglichkeit zur Unterscheidung*”, depicted so nicely by Derrida). [xvii] Orbán sees enemies both within and outside of the state. For Orbán, Heller is clearly a concrete enemy. (Or: Feindin, as Schmitt would have written had he cared about gender-sensitive terminology. [xviii])

For Heller, what is truly democratic, above all, is philosophy itself, as it begins in wonder — what the Greeks called *taumadzein*. In Heller’s terms, however, what Plato referred to as an “attitude of the man” can only lead to truth beyond a pre-established prejudice. She knows too well how the history of philosophy in many parts was a grand narrative that men have written for men. Heller also knows that this is some sort of tautological terror embedded in an almost unbreakable *circulus virtiosis*. Indeed, ink-soaked feathers have all too often managed to pave exclusive ways of thinking, whilst heavy stones have erected immovable edifices, in which many still follow.

Heller, however, does not wish to pettifog over feminist issues (it is worth mentioning that she does not consider herself a “feminist” since it involves an –ism, which she rejects as indicated earlier). For her, feminism, at its most basic, is about the acceptance of gender equality; the acceptance of the doctrine that women are equally as capable as men — in particular, that women are capable of using their reason. For Heller, reason and emotion are not necessarily diametrically opposed or mutually exclusive. Rather, her philosophy is based on a straightforward modification of Kant’s radical dichotomy between reason (and, with it, morality and the a priori moral law [*Sittengesetz*]) and sense inclinations. As is well known, the eternal Königsberger held that an act committed out of a sense of pity, compassion, or sympathy was immoral, as was any action sufficiently motivated by sense inclinations (*Triebkräfte*). Heller disagrees, thus reconceptualizing the Kantian heritage of the Enlightenment in some sense. For her, judgment also means empathy; in fact, it requires empathy. Only then can it challenge one-sided, entirely outer worldly and radically abstract ways of thinking.

To be sure, regarding feminism and its historical emancipatory project, Heller knows how mere insights into an alleged universal truth—that is, “equality,” and the right to equality as well as positive and negative freedom—need not necessarily bring about change on a (real-)political scale. To remind us all, it just took Robespierre two years to put Olympe de Gouges to death on the scaring scaffold of the guillotine after the female author wrote *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* in 1791. All of this was rhetorically legitimized

as "virtue" in Robespierre's very own sense.

Gouges was already endowed with what Heller would later refer to as "attitude." She challenges Robespierre's almighty "fraternité" with a slight yet significant modification: "*Les mères, les filles, les soeurs, representantes de la nation*" – "We mothers, daughters, sisters, representatives of the nation." Implicitly taking into account Gouges and countless lesser-known examples, Heller's writings are aware of the necessity of formal, legally embedded, and politically practiced equality; in a sense, they are responses to Gouges's *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*, which had been written yet never adequately recognized. Besides highlighting the necessity for appropriate juridical and political frameworks to guarantee equality, Heller's writings also stress the need for one's own emancipatory will. Emancipation is also about autonomy, about the relation between *autos* and *nomos*, self and law; it must start from *autonomía* as self-legislation. Thus, Heller consciously speaks of the fact that the woman must "equalize" herself—i.e., in an explicit, active sense.

In this sense, actualized equality is dependent on a minimum amount of self-achievement. This is what Heller fights for, and why she constructs her own fundamental thoughts unlike most (male) philosophers. Less deductively-analytical, she relies on fewer systems; her thinking grows organically and in correspondence with her life experiences. Moreover, Heller always seems aware of the presence of phenomena over "which the thinking being properly has no power," [xix] as Adorno once stated during a lecture in Frankfurt.

Thus, it is not without reason that Heller responds to the question of philosophical influences with the name of two women. Maybe she does so because of what Rousseau, Hegel, and Plato wrote about women. Most of all, she does so as she finds both women to be peculiarly wise — irrespective of the gender debate. First, there is her grandmother, Sophie Meller, to whom Heller refers as a "rebel" and "revolutionary." Her grandmother was a "rebel" because she wanted to be a teacher in Vienna during the 19th century, and a "revolutionary" as she actually succeeded in realizing this ambitious dream after she was awarded her university degree.

What Heller finds most fascinating regarding her grandmother's character is that she managed to realize a plan that was not actually part of the historical realities of that time. From the beginning, Sophie's wish sprang from mere, mental solitude. There were no exemplary role models her grandmother could rely on — many of her sisters had married, thereby imposing upon themselves a corset that matched the more "appropriate" allocation of gender roles. Thus, at a time when the emancipation process was still searching for a manner in which to express itself, Sophie had already aspired to become an intellectual. Heller would say, her early desire was somehow existent in what she terms the space of "*Sein-Sollenden*" [xx], which for her is a space of obligation, which negotiates between *is* and *ought*. Indeed in Austria, such an abysmal gap between *is* and *ought*, in which so many impossible wishes for emancipation dwelled, remained predominant at least until the 1920s. It was only then that Article 7 of the *Austrian Federal Constitution Act* claimed at least formal validity for the right to equality. The establishment of the first Viennese Women's Association and the Prater uprising of the female navies had already occurred 50 years earlier.

Today, when Heller remembers Sophie, she leafs through a mental photo album of memories to admire her grandmother. She does this with a precision that can rival Funes' skills, yet she goes beyond his capacities, as she excels the art of reflexive, emphatic abstraction. She will see Sophie in her entirety, even if she writes that she is unable to draw an adequate picture of her, as one would need Goethe's genius to do so. Nonetheless, she speaks about Sophie, claiming that she had always wanted to build her own life, how she aspired to live from her own work, how she sought to raise her own children; Heller says her

grandmother was "a very strong woman, who respected strength in women." [xxi]

It was not easy for Sophie; she was one of the first women to officially enroll at the University of Vienna. Of course she felt alienated and she surely experienced discrimination. In the lecture room she remained hidden behind a partition, so that her physical presence always remained some sort of a bodily signifier pointing to actual unwantedness. Her invisible body thus constituted an impossible image, an image representative of isolated aspirations for freedom and equality; for truly universal justice.

When she found herself in this situation, Sophie's first affective wish was to escape. However, the exams came around at a much faster pace than the constant humiliations, which urged her feet to run. The pre-exam period marked a small-scale turning point at which male classmates suddenly consulted her. They asked her questions about the exam. As Heller remembers: "My grandmother was a very wise woman." [xxii]

Heller is not Goethe, yet Sophie's story and the way she tells it touches upon a truth that goes beyond a naturalistic image. Watching Heller encounter Sophie in her memories offers an insight into what *autonomía* – the relation between *autos* and *nomos* – can and should be in praxis. Most certainly, Sophie had a lasting influence on Heller's philosophy; on the image, form, and dimension of what would later become her very own life. One can hear a constant echo of Sophie's own life history in Heller's words, especially when she speaks about herself in retrospect: "I never wanted to be beautiful, but smart. Beauty is dangerous; wisdom good." [xxiii]

Like Gouges, Sophie was endowed with what will later be found in Heller's overall ethical project: "attitude," "personality," and "character." In *Philosophy of Left-Wing Radicalism*, she writes about the inseparability between thought and life: "The respective categorical imperative of the philosopher is: Act according to your own theory!" An un-experienced philosophy is inauthentic. "Philosophy is acting, acting is philosophy: Deed is an argument." [xxiv]

The second authentic role model in her life is her aunt Rózsi Meller, an early female intellectual and writer. And of course, there was her mother, who—although adopting a traditional role—never stood in drastic contrast to Rózsi's early emancipation. Heller's mother was also a great source of inspiration; perhaps her mother sought a different form of emancipation, a rather silent, tacit form—far from the public. Heller says: "It is a stupid thing to say that we are born free. We are dependent on our mother's love." [xxv] What she recalls in particular are long walks with her mother. Heller also remembers that she would ask her mother question after question, and how she would not always receive immediate answers. Her mother would often say: "No, not now, I am thinking."

Later, Heller adopts the practice of walking and simultaneous thinking — or, wandering as she calls it. She will quote Novalis from the *Fragments*: "Philosophy is really homesickness, it is the urge to be everywhere at home." [xxvi] However she is not a *flâneur* in the classic sense, as she does not waste time becoming involved in social spectacles while strolling; rather, she walks for hours thinking about ethics. While doing so, she might recall Heideggerian thrownness, the sense of *being-in-the-world* without there being a possibility to have ever actively chosen one's own place — a sense of being forced to be-there. Thus, she comes to learn that Heidegger discovered a strange truth in his quest for *Sein* and the need for an existential analytic — yet she believes that he is still not entirely correct. The loneliness of a black forest farm house risks reinforcing the tacit wish of a probably all-too-classic male philosopher to squint at a hypothetical philosopher king post. She writes: "I understood from Heidegger's work (not without any justification) that one should leave everydayness behind in order to be authentic. My whole self (including my female one) protested vehemently against this conception. One of the main messages of the first part

of *Everyday Life*, I formulated as an answer to Heidegger's claim. According to my alternative suggestion, a person's authenticity does not depend on leaving everydayness behind, but on her relation to her world and to herself." [xxvii]

In contrast to Heidegger thus, Heller holds that thinking which is insensitive to time's actual (which also means, political and social) being is immoral. Morality also implies the necessity of a form of expression, or forms of practice, and in that sense it might not be too surprising that wandering is one of the few constants in her life; indeed her "form of life" [xxviii] – her form of interaction with the world. Yet, it took her a while to become a cosmopolitan life-traveler, or an actual citizen of the world (in the literal Greek sense of *kosmopolitês*): "It occurs to me that I had to grow old for the great dream of my childhood to come true. When I was nine, or ten, under the influence of travel diaries, I decided to become a "world traveler" when I grew up." [xxix]

At the age of nine or ten, she dreamt ambitious dreams; at the time, she had already been radically excluded, with the situation of the Jews in Hungary having already been precarious for a long time: A so-called "numerus clausus law" determined how many Jews were allowed to study at university — at that time, it was no more than five percent. When Heller was born in 1929, the situation had calmed down briefly, for two rabbis had been appointed to the Upper House of Parliament; however, it did not take long before anti-Jewish tendencies intensified and were institutionalized under the influence of the German National Socialists. By the end of the 1930s, Hungary saw its first "Jewish laws." Faced with a fatal situation, her father told Heller to learn a craft, although he had always wished for her to once become a philosopher or a composer, "because this is the most absurd for a girl, and I want you to be the most absurd." [xxx]

A little later those who considered themselves omnipotent makers of history rushed in. Heller was fortunate to escape fascism. Her father and numerous relatives were murdered in concentration camps. While in Auschwitz, her father continued to write to her. In his testament, he wrote to Ágnes how he had not lost faith, despite the circumstances. He wrote that Good will prevail despite the fact that evil had triumphed. Her father also wrote that every good person could contribute to the victory of the Good: "My dear daughter Agi, if you think of me, you should remember that if you choose the path of love, your life will be outbalanced and harmonious; you only need a little greater share of luck than had been allotted to your father (...)." [xxxi]

Soviet terror followed Nazi terror. Heller studied chemistry and physics before she occupied herself with the dialectical philosophy of Georg Lukács, whose monumental *History and Class Consciousness* set the most important foundations of Neo-Marxism at that time. Arguably, choosing philosophy was Heller's first *existential* decision. This time she was able to choose her own fate, and she chose to reside and dwell in thinking, while the decision manifested that — as a thinker of the act — she had actively found thinking while having found herself — her personality — in active thinking.

Simply yet aptly, she writes: "Philosophy is thinking." [xxxii] This juxtaposition has far-reaching consequences for a concrete, philosophical praxis; it implies a need to constantly attempt to advance to the peripheral edges of a text, it requires effort to think about thinking itself, to permanently cross arbitrary borders. This task, which, again, involves both thinking and acting, or, an active thinking or a thoughtful (self-reflective) action, is based on an imperative: "Think about how to think, think about how to act, think about how to live." [xxxiii]

In 1955, she earned her doctorate under Lukács, and became his research assistant and a member of the Communist Party. During this time, the hope to find real, existing socialism without totalitarian elements never waned. This continued with a manifest belief in the

ability to grasp and, consequently, to realize a classless society — that is, without the allegedly “necessary” intermediate step of “dictatorship of the proletariat.” However, during that time, Heller always remained skeptical, arguing on the grounds of her very own, idiosyncratic, and down-to-earth pathos of distance, informed by ethical concerns. It seems consequential that she never responded to Lukács’ request to write a treatise on Lenin’s ethics. Although she adopted his materialism in the early years, she wrote: I already knew that “Lenin had no ethics.” [xxxiv]

1956 came, and with it, the Hungarian uprising against Soviet oppression, in which Heller participated emphatically. The uprising was brutally quelled; Heller was fired as a philosophy professor and excluded from the party. She continued her resistance though, and signed a resolution against Soviet invasion even after the end of the *Prague Spring*; what she had to accept in turn was to lose her job at the *Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences*. In addition, what she needed to face from now on, was a public speaking ban within the socialist bloc.

Both revolutions urged a renewed, critical interest in Marx. As a consequence, she began thinking through another form of resistance, which she terms a “revolution of everyday life,” a revolution being “superior to any political revolution.” [xxxv] What Heller proposed was a non-violent uprising able to change human behavior and consciousnesses in the long-term, while not remaining particularistic. Heller’s idea of revolution naturally opposed all Soviet-type-systems, including their ideology: “I made a case for a revolution which does not aim at seizing ‘the’ power, but rather rejects such attempts as counter-productive.” [xxxvi] She sought a revolution that abstains from leaving ethics behind when faced with the necessity of pragmatic means-end-considerations.

Today, she is far from seeking a perfectly just society. This is understandable given her background. She understands the fine line between utopias and ideologies, and she is familiar with houses of cards being built of stone, yet on false foundations. Thus, she understands thinking as an intervention, which infinitely negotiates between *is* and *ought*. Her approach to ethics is linked to a concept of “ought” residing on two pillars – the citizen on the one hand and the moral being on the other. Reflecting on ethics, she says: “Happiness is exorbitant in today’s world.” [xxxvii]

Listening to Heller, one is reminded of Karola Bloch, who in the 1960s spoke in similar tone after she moved to Germany with her husband Ernst — also a neo-Marxist and friend of Lukács. The Western world’s saturated consumption seemed to be a “vacuum against the fighting spirit” to her—a thoughtless renunciation of the “fight out of love for the human,” [xxxviii] which for Karola, always meant life. It is worth noting that her husband had also turned against the communist SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, i.e., the Socialist Unity Party of Germany — the governing **Marxist–Leninist** party of the **German Democratic Republic** from 1946 until 1989) regime subsequent to the Hungarian popular uprising; he held a lecture titled “Problems of the development of Marxism after Marx” (*Probleme der Fortentwicklung des Marxismus nach Marx*). One is also reminded of Adorno — again — to quote him once more: “It is no longer possible to live privately in the right manner” (*Es läßt sich privat nicht mehr richtig leben*). [xxxix]

Arguably, Heller fights in a similar manner and for equal purposes. She does so because she knows that the history of real socialism is still far from covering the intellectual breadth of a possible non-totalitarian Marxism. Each of her sentences seem to say that as long as there is injustice, the struggle is not yet over, and for that time, the struggle has to remain. Regarding Lukács, she says: “For the young Lukács there is only one, ‘either-or’: There are those fighting for the truth and those who do not.” [xl]

She continues her own fight under publication and speech bans — out of love for the

human. Eventually, she received an unexpected appointment offer from *La Trobe University* in Melbourne. She moved to Australia before she became the successor of Hannah Arendt at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1986. Even if Heller prefers not to be compared to Arendt in certain respects, ("when the romance between Heidegger and Arendt was discovered, (...) analogical thinking suspected that something similar had been the case between Lukács and myself" [xli] – these were ill-founded rumours), it is worthwhile to open a short philosophical dialogue between them. For, the ethico-moral question that Heller poses—following her own experiences with totalitarian regimes—is rather close to Arendt's concerns.

Heller asks: How are good human beings even possible? Good human beings, she says, have always existed and will always exist. It is a sign of her unbroken faith and never completely dried-up basic trust in the potential for authentic human existence that she always takes its mere possibility as given. Arendt, in a quite similar sense, challenged Heidegger's continued insistence on *being-towards-death* as authentic being's most originary (*eigentlich*) source by reevaluating natality as the starting point of an ever-present renegotiation with the world. Similar to Heller, she asked: "Why is there somebody at all, rather than nobody?" [xlii]

The personalized portrait of such a "nobody" has become the almost uncannily popular: Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi mainly responsible for the Hungarian deportations. Eichmann cited the Kantian categorical imperative in an amended, false kitchen formula in his bulletproof glass house to substantiate the directive guiding his "operations." To Arendt's account, Eichmann was a ruthless, shameless organizer. Further, it seems true that one can hardly speak of "act" in this context without indirectly affirming a bottomless euphemism.

Like Arendt, Heller delivers lectures on the subject of evil. It speaks for her that she does not confront Arendt's controversial term "banality." No need for pseudo-debates, Heller is far from being inclined to strive for popularity within academic recognition regimes determined by socio-philosophical capital. Taking this into account, her dictum that only modern genocide was "*radical evil*" (she consciously uses the Kantian term in an analogical sense in this context, opposed to Arendt) seems all the more energetic. Perhaps she knew the full interview Eichmann had given the former SS officer Sassen. [xliii] Perhaps she knew that Eichmann presented himself as an "idealist" in it, as one who had thought along, who completely and emphatically supported the Nazi cause, including plans for the "final solution." Reading through the interview, Eichmann seems far from being a "*Schreibtischtäter*", i.e., a bureaucrat. Or, at the very least, Eichmann himself describes his deeds as resulting from both a sense of organization and doing one's (un-Kantian) "duty" and from ideological anti-Semitism. "Yes, I was a cautious bureaucrat," Eichmann confessed to Sassen, "but a fanatical fighter joined this cautious bureaucrat, to fight for the freedom of my blood, that I descend from." [xliv]

Maybe evil in the modern age is therefore, above all, radical. Heller is convinced that totalitarianism is part of the history of modernity, that genocide is implied therein; if "only in a broader understanding." "Radical evil," she writes, "has not disappeared, but has just taken new forms." [xlv] She wrote this in 2010, at a time when evil was everywhere and nowhere, where time appeared to be out of joint, and when an obvious abyss separated *is* from *ought*. In earlier days, Heller cited Novalis in such circumstances, thus writing with even more energetic rigor from the perspective of an infinitely demanding normativity: "*Ich will, dass die Welt das Zuhause der Menschheit sei*" [xlvi] — "I want the world to be home of mankind."

Heller's hopes concentrate on finding a potential balance between nihilism and fundamentalism. For her, fragility is an inevitable, basic constant of the human condition—to which she does not respond by proclaiming a radically arbitrary canon of values, but with an old Socratic sentence from Plato's *Gorgias*: That it is better to suffer wrong than to do

wrong. Anyone who claims not to know this fundamental truth has already given up on humanity.

Heller calls for an active engagement of the individual with his or her respective, individual self. The existential moment of decision constitutes the heart of her philosophy. Everyone can decide to become a decent human being — a human being not only capable of distinguishing between right and wrong, but also keen on doing right and acting justly; a human being not insensitive to the responsibility for subsequent generations. In this sense, Heller modifies Nietzsche's often misleadingly transformed and frequently cited "Become who you are"; she writes both content and time into his words, as she is keen on filling Nietzsche's blank *Übermensch* with moral decency. Being human implies finality; it implies humility as well as fallibility. At the same time, humanity is dependent on thought, in specific praxis of reflective thinking, to possibly be more than bare life before the law. Although Heller was not always in entire agreement with Adorno, she knows that for him, "intelligence" is also "a moral category." [xlvii] In the end, only the choice of the single individual — not merely a formal imperative — can ensure that enlightenment does not turn into radical barbarism.

For Arendt, Heller would have been a somebody; a person who understands that historical events do not tolerate abstractions that ignore potential complicities with totalitarianisms, and concepts merely called universal without actually being universal, are nothing but a blurring of socio-political realities. A person who is aware of the problematic demands imposed by a specific situation upon the moral selves' ethico-political responsibility can remain unrecognized. Which brings us back to Funes. If thinking really takes place, then it does so somewhere in between abstraction and the individual case, between the universal and the particular.

As Borges writes: "Funes remembered not only every leaf of every tree of every wood, but also every one of the times he had perceived or imagined it. He decided to reduce each of his past days to some seventy thousand memories, which would then be defined by means of ciphers. He was dissuaded from this by two considerations: his awareness that the task was interminable, his awareness that it was useless. He thought that by the hour of his death he would not even have finished classifying all the memories of his childhood." [xlviii]

The German novelist Martin Walser recently wrote about his "habit" to search for traces of childhood in adult's faces. Walser claims that once his search is successful, he finds an easy emotional access to them. [xlix] Borges does not really write about Funes' face. Sometimes his words come close to Funes' face, however, they then decide to avert their literary gaze from a detailed description. Funes' "immobile and Indian-like" face remains "singularly remote," in the far distance, behind his cigarette. [!] One has reason to believe that there is little in his face that indicates childhood.

Ágnes Heller's face does one thing: it invites one to think. The traces of her childhood find one before one has even started actively searching for them.

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ENDNOTES

[i] Cited from Polony, C. (1998), “The essence is good but all the appearance is evil’: Interview with Ágnes Heller.” *Left Curve*, 22.

[ii] I refer to Jorge Luis Borges’ short story “Funes the Memorious.” Cf. Borges, J.L., “Funes the Memorious,” in: Borges, J.L. (2007), *Labyrinths*, transl. James E. Irby. New York: New Directions, 148–154.

[iii] Ágnes Heller’s seminar “The World of Prejudice” was part of the 2014 Democracy & Diversity Institute held by TCDS (NSSR) from July 3 – 19, 2014.

[iv] Cf. Borges, *Funes*, 154.

[v] Cf., “Ágnes Heller–Ungarn’s Mahnerin,” *Bayerischer Rundfunk*, April 17th, 2014.

[vi] Cf., “Ágnes Heller–Ungarn’s Mahnerin,” *Bayerischer Rundfunk*, April 17th, 2014.

[vii] Cf. Shnier, D. (2014), “Slow and steady: Hungary’s media clampdown,” *Open Democracy*, August 1st, 2014; available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/diane-shnier/slow-and-steady-hungary-s-media-clampdown>.

[viii] Ibid.

[ix] Cf. Dunai, M. (2014) “How Hungary’s government shaped public media to its mould,” Reuters, Feb 19th, 2014. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/19/us-hungary-media-insight-idUSBREA1108C20140219>

[x] I quote Heller from a talk about Hungarian politics, given in Vienna at Austria’s *Republikanischer Club*, April 22nd, 2014.

[xi] For clarity’s sake, it should be noted that references to Machiavelli made herein are—for the sake of this short text—invariably superficial. It is necessary to add that, in particular, Machiavelli’s *Discorsi* permit for democratic readings (cf. John P. McCormick’s brilliant and highly important *Machiavellian Democracy*, which expands on Machiavelli’s resolute criticism of elites and oligarchic tendencies and his admiration of the Roman *concilium plebis*), and even inspired Marxist readings from Gramsci to Althusser (yet, to be sure, also nationalist interpretations exist (think of, for instance, National Socialist Hans Freyer’s *Machiavelli* written in 1938). Also, what nowadays is often commonly referred to as “Machiavellianism” should not be equalized with Machiavelli’s entire Oevre (as Quentin Skinner aptly pointed out).

[xii] I quote Heller from a lecture on Hungarian politics delivered in Vienna at Austria’s *Republikanischer Club*, April 22nd, 2014.

[xiii] I quote Heller from an article written by Paul Hockenos, “A Scholar is back Home and defiant in Hungary,” *New York Times*, Dec 8th, 2013.

[xiv] Toth, C.T. (2015) “Hungarian far right pushes moderate image,” DW Online, April 13th, 2015. Available at: <http://www.dw.de/hungarian-far-right-pushes-moderate-image-and-wins/a-18378981>.

[xv] Thorpe, N. (2015) “Hungary’s nationalist Jobbik party woos centrist voters,” BBC News, April 13th, 2015. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32248965>.

[xvi] I quote Heller from a talk about Hungarian politics, given in Vienna at Austria’s *Republikanischer Club*, April 22nd, 2014.

[xvii] See Derrida, J. (1997) *The Politics of Friendship*, London and New York: Verso, 117ff. Derrida nicely depicts how Schmitt's insistence on the "concrete" itself depends on a concrete sense of the concrete, thus ending up in a performative contradiction. In turn, according to Derrida, this gives rise to an uncannily "spectral" dimension, which not only haunts Schmitt's *Concept of the Political*, but also his *Ex Captivitate Salus* (written in prison), amongst others.

[xviii] This would be the feminine version of "enemy" at the least in Schmitt's German terminology. It is worth noting, that Hungarian, being non-Indo-European, is a rather Gender-neutral language, -nő exists as a way to distinguish between male and female persons having a certain profession, thus "Feindin" (female enemy) would translate into "ellenség-nő," yet this version is hardly used). I am thankful to Orsolya Bajusz for this remark.

[xix] Cf. Adorno, T.W. (1958). "Einführung in die Dialektik" In: *Nachgelassene Schriften, Abteilung IV: Vorlesungen*, edited by Christoph Ziermann . Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 241.

[xx] Cf. Heller, Á. (1978) *Philosophie des linken Radikalismus*. Hamburg: VSA Verlag, 18.

[xxi] Quoted from an interview conducted by Ilona Nemeth, displayed in her wonderful, interactive video installation "Zsófia Meller" (2012).

[xxii] Quoted from Ilona Nemeth's "Zsófia Meller."

[xxiii] Quoted from Ilona Nemeth's "Zsófia Meller."

[xxiv] My translation. To my knowledge, the German version has not yet been translated into English. Cf. Heller, Á. (1978) *Philosophie des linken Radikalismus*, 27.

[xxv] I quote her from the short TV-documentary "Agnes Heller–Ungarn's Mahnerin" for the German *Bayerischer Rundfunk*, produced by Gabriele Pfaffenberger, April 17th, 2014.

[xxvi] Cf. Heller, Á. (1978) *Philosophie des linken Radikalismus*. Hamburg: VSA Verlag, 18.

[xxvii] Heller, Á *Short History of my Philosophy*, 31.

[xxviii] Heller, Á. (2011) *A Short History of My Philosophy*, Plymouth: Lexington, 110.

[xxix] Ibid., p. 110.

[xxx] Quoted from: Duda, S, "Agnes Heller," *fembio.org*, available at: <http://www.fembio.org/biographie.php/frau/biographie/agnes-heller/#literatur>.

[xxxi] Cited from Bernstein, J. (2009) "Existential Choice: Heller's Either/ Or," in: Terezakis, K. (ed.), *Engaging Ágnes Heller: A Critical Companion*, Plymouth: Lexington.

[xxxii] Cf. Heller, Á. (2011) *A Short History of My Philosophy*, Plymouth: Lexington, 42.

[xxxiii] Cf. Heller, Á., *A Short History of My Philosophy*, 42.

[xxxiv] Cf. Heller, Á., *A Short History of My Philosophy*, 9.

[xxxv] Cf. Heller, Á., *A Short History of My Philosophy*, 35.

[xxxvi] Cf. Heller, Á., *A Short History of My Philosophy*, 35.

[xxxvii] She says it in German, the terms are a bit complicated to translate: "Glückseligkeit ist

etwas Unverschämtes in der heutigen Welt." The German "Glückseligkeit" entails both - dignity (Seligkeit) and Glück (-happiness). Cf., "Ágnes Heller–Ungarn's Mahnerin," *Bayerischer Rundfunk*, April 17th, 2014.

[xxxviii] I quote from the following documentary: "Karola und Ernst Bloch – Die Tübinger Zeit," by Helga Reidemeister (WDR/ SWR,1983)

[xxxix] This sentence (my own translation) is an earlier version of what later became Adorno's most popular claim, which dominated his *Minima Moralia*: "Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen," which is often translated as "There is no right life in the wrong one." (cf. Adorno, T.W. (1997), *Gesammelte Schriften* 4, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 43.) The ordinary version cited herein is documented, for instance, in Martin Mittelmeier's (2013) *Adorno in Neapel*. Munich: Siedler, 222.

[xl] I quote from Heller's lecture, "Zwei Säulen der Ethik," Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt, April 15th, 2013.

[xli] Cf. Heller, Á., *A Short History of My Philosophy*, 29.

[xlii] My translation. Arendt contends: "Warum ist überhaupt Jemand und nicht vielmehr Niemand? Das ist die Frage der Politik." Cf. Arendt, H. (2003). *Denktagebuch*, München: Piper, 520.

[xliii] The German version goes: "Der vorsichtige Bürokrat, der war ich, jawohl," aber "zu diesem vorsichtigen Bürokraten gesellte sich ein fanatischer Kämpfer für die Freiheit meines Blutes, dem ich anstamme." Cf. Wojak, I. (2004) *Eichmanns Memoiren: Ein kritischer Essay*, Berlin: Fischer, 63.

[xliv] Cf. Wojak, I. (2004) *Eichmanns Memoiren: Ein kritischer Essay*, Berlin: Fischer, 63.

[xlv] Heller, Á. (2010), "Radical Evil in Modernity: On Genocide, Totalitarian Terror, and the Holocaust," *Thesis Eleven*, 101, 116.

[xlvi] Cf. Heller, Á. (1978) *Philosophie des linken Radikalismus*, 140.

[xlvii] Cf. Adorno, T.W., *Minima Moralia*, 127. I quote Jephcott's translation (Verso 2005).

[xlviii] Cf. Borges, *Funes*, 153.

[xlix] See, for instance, the obituary he wrote for German journalist Frank Schirrmacher in 2014: Walser, M. (2014), "Jähes Ende, jäher Tod." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 14th, 2014. Available at: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/frank-schirrmacher/martin-walser-ueber-frank-schirrmacher-12988843.html>.

[l] Cf. Borges, *Funes*, 149.

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