

Engaging Agnes Heller

A Critical Companion

EDITED BY
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Appendix.
“Von der Armut am Geiste”: A Dialogue
by the Young Lukács

Agnes Heller

Translated by Jane M. Smith (formerly Jane E. Sanders) and John T. Sanders and first published in *Philosophical Forum*, III: 3-4 (Spring-Summer 1972), 360-370.

“Von der Armut am Geiste” is a little-known work of the philosopher. It was published in a journal with a small circulation (*Neue Blätter*, Nos 5-6, 1912), and was never collected into a single volume. It is nevertheless one of the most important of his documents, and is certainly the most subjective; here the young Lukács thinks through the conflict of life and work to its conclusion and sums it all up—the conflict with which he was coming to terms in virtually all his youthful writings, whether they were of a philosophical, aesthetic or ethical nature.

The subjective element of this work stems from the circumstances under which it came to be written. A woman who was a particularly close friend of Lukács' (Irma Seidler, to whom *Die Seele and die Formen* is dedicated), and to whom he was deeply attached, committed suicide in 1910. He received the news in Florence, via the newspaper. The death of his friend, and the circumstances of that death, would have been sufficient reasons for his great dismay; but these weren't the only reasons. His own personality became questionable to him—his very existence became problematic. The awareness that he might have been able to prevent the death of the girl were he not the person he was, heightened his dismay to the point of a pressing need for self-analysis.

The dialogue on poverty of spirit is a direct expression of this dismay and self-reflection; hence the subjective character of the work. It is a personal confession.

It is rare that a philosopher achieves such deep insight into the correlations between his most subjective personal choices and his most objective ideas. The connection usually remains hidden; for the observer, there exist only the actualized ideas, while the personal choices remain in the dark. And this is for good reason. Ethical behavior changes—inasmuch as it changes at all—from concrete

behavior into generalizable norms: norms that are not merely *capable* of being generalized, but which *are to be* generalized. A philosophical analysis of possible patters of behavior, however, operates by means of abstract premises and conclusions: one can guess at the concrete personal choice of the philosopher, but not really know it. More exactly: if one knows the choice, then generally it is not because of philosophizing that one knows it. To be sure, philosophy is confession; as mentioned above, however, it is a tacit confession. The dialogue concerning poverty of spirit is the only one of Lukács' early works in which insight into this process is achieved.

A direct, confession-like formulation of dismay and self-reflection: this much we have said. The directness of this formulation is to be qualified in several respects, however. If, upon his first encounter with the dialogue, the reader is struck by the grounding of its ideas in conflicts of life and in decisions, then, upon deeper study, the "directness" comes round to its opposite. This occurs not solely—or even most importantly—because the protagonist resolves his conflict differently than did the philosopher who composed the dialogue—namely, by committing suicide; nor does it occur solely because the confession of the protagonist is related indirectly through the narration of a third person—a woman. These elements of the dialogue—especially the latter—are, of course, by no means to be neglected in the analysis of the work; for, among other things, they are evidence of a conscious and quite refined composition. The directness comes round to its opposite mainly because the confession (and the decision) of the hero is based on a philosophical category system which was already complete before the conflict and the decision. In any case it is the tragic situation (the young Lukács would certainly have protested against the word "tragic") which compelled the philosopher/hero to think out his categories and reach a decision. But the opposite is also true: an already completely existent category system "compels" the hero to react in this way and no other to the tragedy. He is able to react no differently to life than with the categories which he had already established about life. The young Lukács conducts a kind of "thought experiment" here: he uses the ideas with which he had come to terms in the years of his youth, projecting them onto his hero; for the given conflict situation, he allows them to be thought through to their conclusion by the hero and brings him to the consequences thereof. He leads his hero along a (philosophical) path which he *in this form* never pursued; in this way he confronts himself with the consequences which result from his ideas and which are unacceptable to him. "Poverty of spirit" is therefore not only the subject of the dialogue; the work is also a *documentation* of the "poverty of spirit," and was intended to be.

A documentation of the poverty of spirit, well and good; but not a *vain* one. It would be that, were we only confronted with the monologue of the philosopher/hero; but we are concerned with a *dialogue*. The woman with whom the hero has a conversation on the evening before his deed is not simply a passive listener and chronicler intent on good recollection; she is, in her non-philosophical way, an *equal* participant in the conversation. Indeed, she does not always understand the categories, but she always perceives the *intentions* hidden

in them and rejects them—despite her love for the hero? Or even as a result of this love? This woman is also a creation of the author/philosopher Lukács and was expressly created to scrutinize the inferences of the philosopher/hero.

So far as there is a work which is related to "poverty of spirit," then it is *Tonio Kröger*, or more specifically, the conversation between Tonio and Lisaweta. But the work by Lukács is not only intellectually more sharply pointed; it is more dramatic. It is composed backwards from the end—the death; the possibility for a solution is therefore eliminated, certainly not for the author, but rather for his heroes. This pointedness shows the way, interestingly, to the tragic solutions of the mature Thomas Mann, pointing particularly in the direction of Adrian Leverkühn's tragedy. The "you are not allowed to love" is just as absolute an imperative for the heroes of the young Lukács as for those of the mature Mann.

Thomas Mann's influence on the dialogue cannot be denied. But it is just as indubitable that, in the case of the young Lukács, postulates of a philosophy of life are present, whereas, despite the similarity of the subjects, one would search in vain for them in the works of the young Mann. One of these—and perhaps the most characteristic—is the existential loneliness of man, the impossibility of finding the way "from soul to soul" to help one's fellow man. The subject of the dialogue is the first suicide. The hero says: "To the loud crying-for-help voice of her silence I turned a deaf ear. I clung to the joy-of-life tone of her letters. Please do not say: I could not have known it. Perhaps it is true. But I should have had to know it." Or was there such a way? The hero still believes there is one—even if not for him: the "grace of goodness": "Her silence would have resounded far across the lands which lay between us, of I had been graced with Goodness."

The woman, "counterpoint" of the conversation, is "good" in the sense that the hero understands "goodness." But the scope of the dialogue includes another suicide; and the woman who writes down the dialogue says: "For me there is in my memory an almost eerie clarity about his deed, and today it is puzzling to me that I did not anticipate it, did not fear it, that conversely I went away from him almost completely quieted and in a good mood."

In this "duplication" the personal and the one-time occurrence acquire their existential sense. And once again a counterpoint: thereby the suicide of the philosopher/hero becomes spurious and fortuitous. It is not by chance that Lucien Goldman claims to find the seeds of numerous problems of modern existentialism in the early essays of Lukács.

The spuriousness and fortuitousness of the second suicide is only then a matter of major concern if the reader of the dialogue acknowledges the *ethical principles* and if he postulates from the outset a *causal relationship* between the events; if he thinks: "The philosopher/hero did not help the girl although he could have helped and *therefore* chose suicide." Lukács certainly points to this theme (he could not have helped in this way—*therefore* the choice was a random one) in order to strengthen his hero's philosophy of life with a second voice: *the rejection of the ethic which is based on positive normatives and the rejection of causality*. Between the two suicides—as much in accordance with

the author's intention as with the conviction of the hero—there is *no causal connection, only a succession*. The decision of the hero rests solely on him; he commits suicide not because he cannot help, but because he wanted to help and thereby has overstepped the bounds of his "caste," which are at the same time those of his personality. This decision cannot truly be described in generally valid ethical categories.

The hero of the philosophical dialogue is, namely, most deeply convinced that every person can live only according to the laws governing his *own caste*, that the bounds of the caste are not to be gone beyond. These "castes" are not social: they are the castes of life as such. One is the caste of the "everyday life," the other of the forms, into which the homogeneous medium forces them, those which bring about the "works" as objectivization; the third is the caste of the "living life" which stands above all forms, which breaks through all forms—the caste of those of whom the grace of goodness has become a part. These castes are not human inventions and it does not depend on the decision of the person, to which one he belongs; the individual person may suffer or become happy—he cannot leave his caste, at least not "unpunished."

A peculiar mixture of proud aristocratism and submissive humility. And it is precisely the blending of the two that makes the spiritual portrait so authentic. It is the proud aristocratism which forbids the person of the forms to establish contact with the "everyday" life. Lukács' albatross does not trip over its wings as it walks, because it is not permitted to land, it is not permitted to walk, it is only allowed to fly. Along with that, the submissive humility, because the individual is only a means, *only a vessel for the works which he produces; the work is not willed by the person but by the Substance*. The Substance ("the Spirit") wants to manifest itself; it is only able to do that by participation of the life-forms in the work. However, the individual person must live in accordance with the laws of his caste and *only* in accordance with those laws so that the Substance may manifest itself. Not the creator of works, but the work itself, which man serves, is the higher.

That is the hidden *point of departure* of the dialogue-hero's thought process, even though it is explicitly articulated only at the end of the conversation. It is this hidden thesis which the woman rejects from the beginning, even before she has understood it. The hero knows from the beginning that everything that he will say will run into a loving and spontaneous "no." Not because she *does not understand his thought*, but because he is *unable* to understand that he *cannot think anything other than what he thinks*; in the same way, that woman cannot think any other way than she does. The understanding is the excluded *ab ovo*: the partner in the conversation is—a woman. Not only do women belong to other castes (to the caste of the "everyday," or the "living life"), but they also reject the idea of the castes, and even more, the impossibility of passing from one to another. "Never will a woman understand with all her senses that life is only a word, and that only through the vagueness of thought does it contain a unified reality; that there are so many lives, so many *a priori* determined possibilities of our activity. For you life is just life as such, and (pardon me!) you

cannot believe that something really great ... is not ... a crowning point of life ... it is unjust, and even completely false, but this is true indeed: you will never achieve the poverty of spirit." In this way the feminine lack of understanding is expressed by the hero.

Lukács is thinking here along with his hero—it is his thought experiment. If we did not know this from somewhere else, we would understand it solely through the passionate logic with which Lukács' hero fights off every counter-argument. But this dialogue is, as we have said, a true dialogue in which the partner is equal—if not ideal. The conviction of the woman is—on the human level—considered just as much as the thought of the hero. And no argument on earth can undermine the conviction of the person of life (the woman), according to whom all greatness "perhaps not until the end, perhaps only after great suffering—is not, indeed, a crowning point of life, nor is it idle pleasure and ecstasy."

The woman's truth is just as irrefutable as the hero's. And to choose between the two truths—in the given situation, and only with the aid of logic—is objectively impossible.

We spoke about the unity of proud aristocratism and submissive humility, wherein the *hierarchy* of the persons who belong to different castes, and who are living according to the corresponding laws of those different castes, is called into question. I am not thinking here about the hierarchy of the castes themselves—in this regard the standpoint of the hero is clear: on the lowest level is the everyday life, on the middle one is the life dedicated to work, and on the top is the work of goodness.

That in itself does not yet say anything (or at least hardly anything) about the place of the *individual* within this hierarchy who lives in accordance with the laws of this or that caste. For the "everyday life" the hero finds only words of contempt—it is the alienated life of the work-a-day world—the "life without life," which he, as we have seen, contrasts with the "living life," with the life above the forms, with goodness. However, the woman cannot and does not want to accept this caste system: she wants to create a "living" life from "everyday" life. And towards the end, this thought even affects the hero: "It is wonderful and strong and beautiful, the embodied unity of life, sense and goals. But only as long as life itself is the goal and the sense of life. Where do you find a place here for the Work, however?"

And yet: if the work finds no place here, the possibility is not eliminated that individuals who bring about the unity of sense, goal and life *in their persons* stand above those who live according to the laws of the other castes. The share for those who live according to the laws of the second caste is *poverty of spirit*, through which creators "deliver themselves up" and indeed to the "metaphysical and metapsychical necessity": "The poverty of spirit makes the soul homogeneous: anything that is unable to become its destiny, will never even happen, as far as it is concerned, and only the wildest temptation will be appealing."

And that is not simply confession, not only mere questioning of the individual hierarchy of the caste members. It is the subjective formulation of Lukács' objectivization theory which was characteristic of him to the end. Beginning

with the early Heidelberg aesthetics up to the aesthetics written in his later years, he professes the primacy of the objective work as opposed to the personality of the particular individual who has created it. Not only because for humanity (as recipient) only the work—the objectivization of meaning—is important, and the circumstances of who brought it into being and how are unimportant, but also because the personality which is in the homogenous medium and which manifests itself in “form” is not identical to the “everyday” personality of the artist and philosopher. In his early thought experiment this difference appears to be a painful and insurmountable antithesis: the “poverty of spirit”—the renunciation of the diversity of everyday life—is not only the premise for the realization of the work; in the process of creating the form, the soul empties itself out more and more, because everything is given over to the work with which the soul becomes unified. Nothing remains of the particular personality. It is the most fundamental duty of the artist and philosopher to submit himself to this fate.

The inability to pass from caste to caste is the hero’s *a priori point of departure*. In this regard he cannot, therefore, think other than he does. Nor does the *problem* of the dialogue lie here. The problem is the being or non-being of the *ethic*: Is there an *equally* valid ethic for each caste, a system of duties and responsibilities, *to which every person must submit himself*?

Also in this regard, the dialogue is perfectly composed. The hero and his discussion partner concern themselves *three times* with solving the problem, each time from the standpoint of one “caste.” First it is *goodness*, the *life*, and finally the *work* which serves as the “observation post” of the analysis; the contradictions which come to light in the discussions are therefore known—to the creator.

The world of ethics—of the “duties”—is, for the hero, the world of the alienated everyday life. The “fulfillment of duties” is only a value in the world of ordinary people; the “fulfillment of duties is, for them, the only possible exaltation of their lives.” Goodness is something else, not an ethical category. Goodness is grace, a gift of God. In goodness man lifts himself above the knowledge of human nature, because his “view of mankind” becomes an “intellectual intuition”; through goodness man will not understand other men but will be able to identify with them: the goodness of the great Dostoevsky heroes.

Even on this point the woman does not accept the division into castes, she feels a “moral aversion” to this theory. At first she doubts the existence of such a goodness, and when she must recognize it as a fact, she finds the whole train of thought “frivolous”: “It might be grace ... but one must, then, want duty, and one must receive Goodness as a gift of God.”

Theoretically the foundations of this argument are weak, because ethics and goodness are not antitheses, although they are in fact different. But she identifies with great sensitivity the point where goodness finds its source in ethics: she speaks of the *results*. Subsequent to his conception of the “division of the castes,” the hero finds such questioning senseless. Goodness is “fruitless, confusing and without result.” The woman whose “moral sense” revolts does not want to accept his solution: for her, a deed without results cannot be evaluated.

Her morals are not alienated—but she does not consider the possibility of a relevance of moral categories eliminated. I agree here with the woman—as I will in most of what follows—and not with the hero.

In the second round the concept of *necessary sin* comes up and is to become a leitmotif. The question is whether or not one can be “pure” in life. The hero claims: “I wanted to lead a pure life, in which everything was handled with only cautious and frightfully clean-kept hands! This way of living is, however, the application to life of a false category. The work which is separated from life must be pure, Life, however, can neither become nor be pure ...” It is the observation post of life which appears here, from whence the spheres of “everyday” life and “living” life blend together. It must be this way, because the problem is set up from the *side of the result*: The condition necessary for saving the suicidal girl (result!) would be that the hero not concern himself with a “purity” of self, that he act according to the laws of “life.” It was a sin (ethical category) to want to keep himself from sin (again an ethical category).

Again it says something for the consciously beautiful construction of the composition that it is only here that woman can offer no counterargument, that this is the only point at which she senses the man’s intention. “What do you want? What do you have in mind?” she asks anxiously, and there is no doubt that at this moment she is thinking of suicide. And in this moment—but only in this moment—they are both standing—if only for a moment—on the same ground: on the ground of “life.”

And here begins the third “round,” in which the man formulates the *standpoint of his own caste*—and his tragedy (the “tragedy” against which the young Lukács would have energetically protested). Once again the hero rejects the category system of the popular ethic. He would have to find (create) an ethic, a generally valid one, more exactly, one which contains at least *one* generally valid imperative, otherwise it is no ethic. It should be an ethic, however, which can be united with the division of the “castes,” which expresses the inability to pass from one caste to another. “I have been talking about an utterly general ethic, an ethic which encompasses everything and which does not limit itself to everyday interpersonal conduct. Because insofar as every one of our activities is an act, every one has the same purely formal prerequisites, the same ethics ... if there is a very clearly expressible command in it, it must be this: allow what you must not do.” For the artist (and the philosopher) that means that he may do nothing, only that which the objectivization—the coming-to-be—demands. Only submission to the “must” is a virtue; every “crossing of boundaries”—even friendship and love—from this standpoint—is sin. The command “you are not allowed to love” imparted to Adrian Leverkühn became, a half-century ago, a philosophical generalization; the concept of duty takes on a new meaning—loyalty to one’s own duty.

All of this only *apparently* lends the ethic a new generality. The woman recognizes this, in that she says: “In your eyes, there is only one sin: the mixing of castes.” The real—and the general—ethical questioning disappears completely: to those who love the “everyday life” the hero can only say, they may

lead the everyday life, because they *must* do so and should not try to go beyond it, because they are not compelled to do so—not a weak solution, but rather none at all. The real ethic of the alienated life leaves the hero with normatives, which he himself considers alienated. For the person-of-objectivization, of the forms, this ethic creates, in fact, a norm that is seriously considered by the hero and the author: the creation of the work as a single moral criterion. That really says a lot, but it is deeply problematic. Not only because one could correctly ask: where is the assurance that one belongs to the caste of the forms, *before* he has accomplished the objectivization? It is only through the completed work, the perfection, the realization of the Substance, that the “poverty of spirit” will be morally justified! Who—or what—should decide *beforehand* if every compulsion is objective or subjective? The statement is therefore also problematic—and that is the determining factor—because one cannot isolate oneself from “life.” One can forbid oneself to love, but not to be loved; one can become as ascetic, but one cannot look down from the supposed or true pinnacles of the realization of the Substance, indifferent to the suffering of men.

The hero knows *that* and therefore in this work—as in so many other works of Lukács—the idea of the “necessary sin” becomes a leitmotif. The Biblical Judith, between whom and her deed God as set the sin, serves in more than one of Lukács’ works as a paradigm example of these thoughts. If it is the case that the examples are different, the idea, however, is the same. In the whole Balkan region one knows the story of the goddess of masons, whose blood alone could mend the mortar; the sacrifice of Abraham—which is not tragic, according also to Kierkegaard; the deed existing above the ethic is the necessary foundation for the bond between God and man. The emphasis lies here on the word *necessary*. The hero of the dialogue speaks about the suicide of the girl in the following way: “She *had to* die, so that my work could be completed—so that nothing remains in the world for me except my work” (my italics, AH). And very brilliantly the woman brings up two counterarguments (or are they antipathies?). With the first, she expresses the moral judgment; the second, from the standpoint of the work, formulates the objectivization itself: “is that not an all too comfortable solution? Doesn’t your asceticism just make things easier for you? Won’t your work, which you want to save, in that you give it human blood as its foundation, become truly bloodless and unprincipled?”

The woman pushes the *problem* aside, but finds, with a sure hand, the possible motive of the “solution” and its consequences. Because indeed: more than one work has “human blood as its foundation.” It cannot be denied that everyone who considers creating a work (whatever kind of work that may be) takes the risk of using people as means, and calculates the possibility that human blood could become a part of the work, the creation of which one considers his duty. But *possibility* and *necessity* are two different things. There is no work which one takes into consideration recognizing the *necessity—ahead of time*—that it must stand on a foundation of human blood. In the eyes of the hero of the dialogue about the poverty of spirit, this appears frivolous. But even if the Lord God of the Bible were by all appearances frivolous, Kierkegaard and the young

Lukács admire the greatness of Abraham anyway; Abraham, who is prepared to sacrifice his son in order to cement his bond with God, his “Work.” But I admire the greatness (or the “frivolity”) of the Biblical Lord God who did not accept Abraham’s sacrifice; and the bond between God and Abraham became an unbreakable one without being founded on human blood. Such a blood foundation is namely possible—but it was not necessary. The hero of the dialogue knows: the sacrifice of himself is no absolution from the sin of having sacrificed others. To this extent he is extraordinarily decent—even though he would not allow this category to be used for him. But the hierarchy of sins has been decided ahead of time for him (the only real sin is the passing out of one’s caste); nor does he question this hierarchy. That is his “other world morality” which he professes with head held high, which we, however—just like the woman in the dialogue, although not only on the basis of “moral sense”—reject.

The conflict of the “poverty of spirit” is solved *philosophically*. In order to solve it practically, philosophy must be *transcended*. One must actualize philosophy, said Marx, and that is the revelation with which the author of *History and Class Consciousness* later pushed aside a large number of the inferences of the “Armut am Geiste.” This, therefore, is why the older Lukács could analyze the tragedy of Adrian Leverkühn (which by that time he felt was a tragedy) with such tender empathy and understandable conviction, a tragedy which can only be ended by one *life*, one which again supplies the work with a foundation of life.