Jonathan Pickle
Thesis Eleven 2010 103: 118
DOI: 10.1177/0725513610386096

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://the.sagepub.com/content/103/1/118.citation

Published by:
©SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for Thesis Eleven can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://the.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://the.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
may present some uncertainty to the contemporary reader, on any given page one is as likely to find an example attributed to Shakespeare or Goethe generally as to the individual characters of Gregers Werle, Naphta, Philine, Major Tellheim, Coriolanus, Prinzessin Natalie, or Nora Helmer (etc.). This is Heller’s characteristic mode, and readers familiar with her work will recognize with appreciation the breadth and nuance of her exposition. Yet Fényö did not provide a smooth translation of the work in 1979 and the merely light editing of his English has scarcely improved the prose of this edition.

Inconsistent editing of the text and translations of the quotes add to an impression of expressive hastiness which is out of kilter with the momentum of Heller’s conceptual advance. One hopes that such annoyances will not deter the reader, for in view of the full articulation of Heller’s philosophy, this edition is likely to be even more expedient than it was 30 years ago. In the three decades since Heller first presented A Theory of Feelings, the terms of philosophical modernity and post-modernity have become more urgent, and the prospects of self-creation under current economic, social, and environmental conditions have become scarcer. Yet as the times have changed, this optimistically practical thinker has continued to refuse cynicism and conformism at every turn, constructing instead an integrative, elastic account of our contingent human being and its most vital involvements. Conversance with this volume will allow Heller’s readers to pursue the applicability of her tremendous enterprise.

Katie Terezakis
Rochester Institute of Technology
Email: Katie.Terezakis@rit.edu

Katie Terezakis (ed.),
DOI: 10.1177/0725513610386096

Since the fin de siècle, there has been steadily increasing interest in the work of Ágnes Heller as an independent thinker in her own right, beyond her seminal contributions to the dissident Budapest School and their appropriation by the emergent Western New Left. Certainly, these early works continue to inspire her colleagues and students, particularly those who seek in Heller’s life and work the mise en scène of a radical philosopher defying acquiescing to the atrocities of the 20th century’s most conspicuous and shrouded terrors. However, it is noteworthy that Heller herself remains perpetually dynamic and surprisingly metamorphic, as if in anticipation of impending practical and philosophical problems that the world is only beginning to manifest. Heller, however, seeks no disciples; those who follow and attend to her work can do so faithfully only by
developing the insights of their own theoretical talents and distinctive intellectual personality.

Engaging Agnes Heller contributes to this tendency as the most recent addition, collecting essays devoted to critically addressing the significance and variegated dimensions of her unique oeuvre, of Heller’s most abiding concerns and enduring insights (e.g. ethical personality) as well as those themes of her most recent publications which have yet to receive much scholarly attention (particularly comedy, which Dmitri Nikulin engages with sophisticated aplomb). Terezakis’s volume follows (in English) both the groundbreaking 1994 effort of John Burnheim’s edited collection, The Social Philosophy of Agnes Heller (Rodopi, Amsterdam), by inviting Heller to respond to agonistic criticism, as well as the lesser-known conference proceedings devoted to Heller’s work published under the heading Ethics and Heritage: Essays on the Philosophy of Agnes Heller (eds János Boros and Mihály Vajda; Brambauer, Pécs, 2007). What appear to these previous collections as obstacles to their wide reception (particularly limited, high-cost printing) is rectified in an edition that also mirrors the heterogeneous nature of the book; what the latter is, however, is rather difficult to discern.

Terezakis has assembled an array of figures to contribute to this peculiar Festschrift who are as diverse as are Heller’s philosophical interests. Here, one finds not only the most established of writers continuing to elaborate upon their previous engagements with the Hungarian’s thinking: Peter Beilharz and Richard J. Bernstein (both of whom had contributed to Burnheim’s seminal collection), John Grumley (author of the 2005 Agnes Heller: A Moralist in the Vortex of History [Pluto Press, London]) and Simon Tormey, who revises some of his previous appropriation of Heller’s philosophy that he had elaborated in Agnes Heller: Socialism, Autonomy and the Postmodern (Manchester University Press, Manchester: 2001). (Along with the latter two, Terezakis herself has an essay included in Boros and Vajda’s anthology.)

The dramatis personae, however, also include former doctoral students, friends and colleagues, all of whom were given no specific directives to orient either their topics or theses. The result is a mosaic of images representing the various ways Heller has touched the lives of her contemporaries: from the scholarly rigorous to occasional pieces, from the laudatory to the subtly insulting. Most of the essays included address not only her philosophical importance but also reveal the great affection and esteem their authors have for Agnes Heller’s person and character. Referring to his deep personal appreciation for his friend and their mutual enjoyment of vigorous agon, Bernstein reflects that he is compelled to offer a ‘love letter’, seemingly alluding to the philosophical eros of Plato’s dialogues. At the same time, it is a similar eros that appears to animate the editor in her decision to arrange this collection, for the book is also an occasion for Terezakis to offer her own missive, directly confronting Heller on the latter’s philosophical refusal to align herself with feminism. (As she reveals in her response to her critics, Heller is inimical to all so-called ‘isms’, because they prescribe a holistic set of commitments to their adherents that may not be accepted piecemeal. Whether this appropriately addresses the issue of feminism, this reviewer is skeptical and rather prefers Heller’s contention that she is appreciated by non-academic women in the streets of Budapest because she is understood, which is to suggest that she can be more politically efficacious.) Between Bernstein and Terezakis, several generations of academics lend
their hand to elucidating and challenging some of Heller’s most enduring concerns, but the collection remains philosophically uneven in terms of the quality of the contributions and, as a result, this reviewer remains uncertain about who exactly is their intended audience.

The collection of papers Terezakis gathers together offers insight into three spheres of Heller’s life: the personal-biographical, the social, and the philosophical. As indicated above, many of the essays included notice the inextricable relationship of Heller’s biography and her philosophy, consequently elaborating upon certain exemplary moments to illustrate her character and thought: from her stalwart refusal ‘to board the trains’ during the Nazi occupation of Hungary to her love of Platonic symposia. In this regard, János Boros offers an especially welcome addition to the existing scholarship on Heller by addressing in exemplary fashion the particular nature of how Heller’s personal philosophy is a narrative philosophy pari passu attending to two volumes not yet available to her English-reading public (Incarnation and Philosophical Interpretations of Genesis) and bringing Heller into discussion with Donald Davidson.

At the same time, Preben Kaarsholm and Bryan Turner focus on the radical social embeddedness of Heller’s writings, the essay of the latter concerning the sociology of knowledge production by a participant in an amorphous Eastern European migrant culture while the former’s (along with Anthony Kammas’s excellent piece on radical needs) concentrates on the role of Marxian thinking for Heller’s social criticism. In light of the recurring theme of totalitarianism, this concern for the eminent social issues of our day is complemented by the straightforward political journalism of Kira Brunner Don’s contribution and Simon Tormey’s provocative thoughts about what relevance is Heller’s political thought today. Hence, from the foregoing catalog it becomes readily apparent that numerous points of convergence obtain between the various essays here collected and it is only to be expected that they will naturally contradict each other in important respects. However, like Heller, I will refrain from explicitly offering my judgment on their individual merits, given that there is little room in a review of this size to give each paper its due.

While the personal and social dimensions of Heller’s personality are prominently accounted for, two motifs recur in the writings of this collection with considerable critical attention: the socio-political dynamics of modernity (Beilharz and Tormey) and the existential choice of the ethics of personality (Bernstein and Grumley). (A correlative question regarding the problematic form of the third installment of Heller’s ethics trilogy also reappears in several of the essays.) Beside her non-philosophical and autobiographical reflections, Heller devotes most of the balance of her response to these two of her most original philosophical contributions. Whereas Beilharz delineates the subtle shifts in the logic of modernity Heller proposes between her early 1980s papers and collaborations with Ferenc Fehér and György Markus and her monumental A Theory of Modernity (Blackwell, New York: 1999), Simon Tormey is more aggressive and endeavors to extend Heller’s critique of totalitarianism to the everyday life of liberal democracies.

Notwithstanding the contention of several authors that her abandoning of a broadly construed Marxian orientation is exaggerated, Heller’s subsequent qualified defense of liberal democracy and a politics based on representation is likely not to appease her more radical audience seeking inspiration from the Marxist humanist of yesteryear, a polemical gesture that seemingly also serves to introduce evidence to the difference between
the mature thinker and her younger self. Nevertheless, her apology affords her the opportunity both to maintain the contingency of the destructive tendency of the presently disquieting mutual support the logics of democracy and capitalism provide one another and to predict the ameliorating potential that may arise if ‘those who promote the logic of modern science and technology will intervene and interrupt this unhappy marriage’. This wager is exceptional in both the present volume and the majority of Heller’s writings on the philosophy of modernity, for she prefaces this remark with: ‘This is the only place I will venture a prediction’ (p. 250).

Each in their distinctive manner, Richard J. Bernstein and John Grumley explicitly address the tacit question of the volume itself, whether the radicality of the existential choice suffers from an elitist romanticism or, in other words: who is the intended audience of Heller’s moral philosophy? The ethics of personality, Heller insists, is a product of the modern social arrangement, of the desire to reconcile individuality and universality to the contingency that inheres in the human condition. As such, the disparate manifestations of ethical personality have been, are, and will continue to be as amorphous as the diverse persons of modernity; that is, Heller addresses her audience universally, while recognizing that some persons encounter greater difficulty realizing their distinctive selves while others are simply deaf to the moral timbre of humanity. Grumley’s sharp criticism of Heller’s romantic image of self-creation, however, appropriately closes the first part of the collection, leaving his reader wondering whether there is such a formidable and exemplary personality, speculating about the feasibility of transforming contingency into destiny (or – as in Amos Friedland’s beautiful paper – echoing Nietzsche, of ‘Loving Fate’).

However, it is precisely the form of the Festschrift that Terezakis has chosen that allows for the performance of an answer to Grumley. If one considers that each of the essays assembled in this volume is a unique instance of irreducibly personal ways of formulating and directly posing questions and engaging the philosopher, then the reflections she offers as a rejoinder appear as the veritable answer to this tacit question regarding who is the ethical personality. Indeed, it is Ágnes Heller herself who has lived the life of her philosophy, who all of the essays implicitly call forth, who Yirmiyahu Yovel announces in the opening piece ‘Laudatio for Agnes Heller’.

To be certain, it is not Heller who makes such claims about herself. My contention that the volume maintains that it is Heller who is the ethical personality par excellence regards the editor’s decision to include in the collection a peculiar addition. The article ‘‘Von der Armut am Geist”: A Dialogue by the Young Lukács is neither especially inaccessible nor does its inclusion in the present volume particularly rectify a significant lack of attention that should have been given to Heller’s work despite the liberal attitude taken towards the topics and orientations of the essays assembled. By appending to the collection this piece from the young Heller, it is rather Terezakis who demonstrates not merely the continuity, or substantiality, of Heller’s philosophical interest in ethical personality; more importantly, it evinces the essential durability of which questions she selects to ask of this personality and how the manner of choosing such questions endures throughout and is constitutive to Heller’s life and work. If it is Heller who wonders ‘good persons exist, how are they possible?’, then it is Terezakis who presents the reader with an example of the answer.
A *Festschrift* cannot be a dialogue, but it can mimic one to a greater or lesser extent; and, like all dialogues, it elicits a response that cannot entirely be predicted. Heller’s decision to reflect in the main upon her ethics of personality and socio-political philosophy leaves many issues raised by her critics open and unresolved, although she gestures towards those future conversations she is most interested in having, particularly in relation to Dmitri Nikulin’s extended remarks on Roman comedy and her later writings on aesthetics generally. However, several of the relevant texts that would be necessary to have such a meaningful debate are not yet accessible to Heller’s English-reading public (although they are currently in preparation). One may, for this reason, begin to glimpse with anticipation topics for subsequent critical engagement with Agnes Heller, whose dynamism demands of her reader the regenerative capacity to remain curious about what unpredictably comes to pass and to continually confront fresh new issues as they arise. In the meantime, one is well-served by considering the themes of Terezakis’s volume, which – while certainly uneven in both their academic rigor and ability to yield substantively new contributions to scholarship on Heller’s work – nevertheless provide fertile grounds for future work and to keep the conversation going.

Reviewed by Jonathan Pickle
Department of Philosophy, The New School for Social Research
Email: PickJ707@newschool.edu

Bryan S. Turner (ed.),
DOI: 10.1177/0725513610386093

Short reviews such as this one can’t do justice to all the material contained in *The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, edited by Bryan S. Turner. This collection of 29 essays on different areas of social theory, which runs to some 560 pages, provides an excellent reference for anyone wanting to find out the basic elements and influences on some of the main theoretical traditions.

More than half of the book focuses on theories and theoretical traditions, rather than on particular theorists. These chapters are organized in terms of different traditions – for example, functionalism, structuralism, symbolic interactionism. There is also a section on the interfaces between sociology and other social sciences, focusing on a number of interdisciplinary areas like economic sociology, historical sociology and demography. And finally there is a section on what Turner regards as some of the emerging issues that sociology and social theory in particular need to address – human rights, ‘mobilities’ and the growth of cosmopolitanism.

Most books of this sort begin with some kind of definition of social theory and its place within the social sciences. In his introductory essay, Turner attempts to do this, but