

Engaging Agnes Heller

A Critical Companion

EDITED BY
KATIE TEREZAKIS



LEXINGTON BOOKS

A division of
ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK

Editor's Introduction

Katie Terezakis

Agnes Heller's work has been described as a "true product of the twentieth century," a "defense of liberal modernity," "a *Lebensphilosophie*"; as "Marxist," "post-Marxian," "existentialist" and "postmodern," to name a few. Where each of these abbreviations fails is not in its expression of a vital aspect of Heller's thinking, but in supposing that that thinking might be best encapsulated with reference to any one philosophical epoch, methodological form or dominating ideal. Heller has written that the key question animating her work is "good people exist; how are they possible?"—appropriating György Lukács' transcendental approach in the Heidelberg *Aesthetics* ("Works of art exist; how are they possible?"). In several works and interviews, she has also made plain that the three events that most powerfully shaped her life and thought were the Holocaust, her encounter with Lukács and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. In a backwards glance that spans from her early works to her current writings—for having begun in the middle of the twentieth century, Heller has never ceased to write—it is clear that a consistent concern with human emancipation and flourishing runs through them all, as does the distinct character of her authorial voice. It is in and through that concentrated interest and an inexhaustible willingness to pursue it that Heller continues to produce a body of work that resists attempts at summary and compartmentalization. One could easily mistake the nature of her rejection of forms of critical theory if one did not pay equal attention to her contextualization and critique of the "bourgeois attitude," for example, in *A Theory of Feelings*, or her close examination of the potential held in the "prose of everyday existence" in *Everyday Life*. One might misjudge as amenable to conservative politics Heller's recent polemics against terrorism and "totalitarianism in all its guises," were one not reading them alongside her close examinations of the political and procedural conditions of personal and political freedom, for example in *Beyond Justice, Can Modernity Survive?* and *Dictatorship Over Needs*. Likewise, one might be confounded by Heller's various studies of seemingly discrete themes and thinkers, from the Biblical *Genesis* to Shakespeare to theories of beauty and of comedy, if one did not have the opportunity to note the inherent associations, in Heller's thinking, between aesthetics, politics and ethics, or her recognition of the consequence of *form*—another understanding she appropriates and adjusts from Lukács—in both the production and examination of works.

The claim that Heller's work resists meaningful synopsis belongs to the argument that for all its elements, Heller's thinking is internally consistent in its motivation and largely methodologically consistent in its approach. Conceptually speaking, there is no real break between her "Marxist" period and her most recent examinations of the conditions of integrated, creative individuality. And though the style of earlier works, such as *Renaissance Man*, is widely divergent from that of later works, such as *An Ethics of Personality*, in both cases the careful examination of human self-understanding develops from philosophical and literary accounts and ideals, through the relevant anthropological considerations, through the social and ethical projects in which self-understanding is engaged and extended. Albeit in diverse styles, Heller's unfailing methodological approach involves the designation and analysis of each element and process entailed in the creation or prolongation of the particular phenomenon or system of meaning at hand; she follows these both for individuals and for groups; and she tracks the internal connections and external constraints on the elements under consideration rather than attempting to finesse a unified whole for analysis. For example, in *Radical Philosophy*, she meticulously details the sorts of *needs* philosophy addresses and explains just how it is appropriated to do so, freely pulling examples for orientation from philosophy and literature. She then concentrates on each form philosophy can take in everyday experience and communication, in terms of its personal, interpersonal and political manifestations, again with generally recognizable examples where possible. With this groundwork in place, she turns to reified needs and relations of social domination, showing how these are taken up by radical philosophy—the philosophy that speaks directly to real needs—in particular. As the nature of her critique and deployment of radical philosophy becomes clearer, we find that the work is both a thorough examination of the forms of radical philosophy, and a paradigm case of radical philosophy. The work employs the methods of radical philosophy insofar as we appropriate it in our own attempts at radical philosophy—which, Heller makes clear, means actively participating in value discussions and actually working to ensure that every rational being can participate in determining human values. This necessarily entails the creation and maintenance of social relations that are not based on subordination and superordination; the need for radical philosophy does not cease until philosophical value discussions can be "generalized" or participated in universally, which means that while the book gives a solid account of the conditions for radical philosophy, radical philosophy also remains elsewhere; it must yet be enlisted.

This same methodological approach is why, for example, in presenting *A Theory of Modernity*, one narrative voice can guide the reader from the "philosophical presuppositions" of "modernity from a postmodern perspective" all the way to the closing arguments about how modernity can, and ought to, do justice to the experience of contingency and self-choice—whereas in pursuing the entailments and consequences of contingency and self-choice in *An Ethics of Personality*, existential and normative claims are made only through the

characters Heller devises to personify them, none of whom may be finally subjugated to or assimilated into another existential and normative possibility/personality.

Heller's consistency, then, is not a matter of topics or of the ready application of an easily recognizable formula, but is marked by the insistent pursuit of each aspect of the theme at hand, the commitment to shape the analytic framework and the style of analysis in a way that is fitting to its theme, and to the balanced pursuit of the personal as well as the social aspects of a given theme. Moreover, at every turn, Heller will rise against those internal or external constraints that she takes to be undermining of *authentic*—understood in the full existential sense—development. At every point in which empirical facts have been ascertained, the necessary assumptions openly admitted, and the just-stated form of analysis pursued, Heller will make a direct normative appeal: she will point us toward a particular kind of goodness, namely, she will ask us to help ourselves and to help others. Knowing what this will entail, in terms of self-understanding and the actual requirements and possibilities of the given situation, tends to be the stuff of particular works and thus depends upon their particular insights; but on the whole, Heller's work ends in encouragement and it is the encouragement to become engaged in the cause of humankind. This engagement necessarily involves self-choice, self-creation, and the involved, reflective and active project of "becoming who one is." Just as categorically, it involves working to allow and promote that same project for others. So said, Heller's encouragement is simple. Yet in order to encourage us meaningfully, the full force of her polemics against totalitarian ideologies is necessary; the full weight of her affirmation of contingency is requisite; the full intensity of her analysis of false-consciousness, crucial. Likewise, in Heller's fascination with the philosophical accomplishment recorded in Scripture, in her regard for Shakespeare's ability to portray and characterize subtle achievements of individuality and human association, in her willingness to demarcate beauty and kitsch, and in her vindication of the philosophical heart of comedy—Heller pursues and encourages the discrete achievements of human self-understanding and self-creation; she looks closely at what we think and make when we work on our pain and the pain of others, and at what shape our joy can take.

Many of the authors gathered in this collection interpret not only Heller's work, but comment on her life and her personality. It is as if people cannot help but remark on her singularity and vivacity, as well as on the historical details of her biography, precisely in order to record their theoretical positions on her thinking. Perhaps it is true that all philosophy is in some sense autobiography, or more specifically, that Heller has very much lived her philosophy, including when she has had to pay for it with political persecution, social ostracism and the resultant need to emigrate from her native Hungary. But it is also true that Heller's way of *being in the world* and of *being with others* is utterly in harmony with her approach to philosophy, and this is remarkable. For who has not had occasion to notice a disparity between some thinker's avowed ideals, political or otherwise, and his other personal practices? In Heller's case, enthusiasm for the

shared pursuit of philosophy, as the passion of individuals, dominates every conversation. And though this may come through in her writing, those who know Heller know that her genuine interest is in people pursuing their genuine interests. Heller has no concern for shows of agreement with her own position and no patience for sycophancy; she thrives on agon and stages the pleasure a philosopher can take in vigorous argument without a trace of pettiness or defensiveness; and she cheers on all who do the same, especially when they contest her own claims. Perhaps this is why Heller cannot readily be identified with a particular type of philosophy, as she is so unreservedly herself, and is herself a philosopher. It is possibly only from the perspective that acknowledges this singular life that Heller's most recent activities make sense: traveling widely at the invitation of student groups struggling to articulate an emancipatory political position, for example in Iran, Latin America and Europe, while entering into volatile debates about American foreign and domestic policy, and simultaneously continuing to pursue the hermeneutic projects she finds most worthwhile, regardless of dominant trends in contemporary philosophy.

In the hopes of presenting something of Heller's singular approach for this volume and of charting its consequence for different modes of thought, authors were invited to write essays on Heller's work with no recommendations or constrictions on the topic. The contributors are philosophers, political scientists and sociologists, as well as former students of Heller who have gone on to law and to journalism. Their chosen topics, ranging from the sociology of knowledge to the viability of Heller's ethics to Heller's relevance for contemporary political activism, should convey some of the breadth of her undertaking. As I mentioned, a number of these essays return to the facts of Heller's biography, so my discussion of it here will be minimal. The first contribution, a *Laudatio* for Agnes Heller originally delivered by Yirmiyahu Yovel to mark Heller's receipt of the Hermann-Cohen-Medal for Jewish Culture-Philosophy in 2006, powerfully recounts the key moments of Heller's life and thought in more detail. I cannot conceive of a better written "introduction" to Heller's life and thought. Preben Kaarsholm also specifies how Heller's "autobiography" and unique history relate to her contributions to sociology and philosophy, and Kira Brunner Don reveals how especially Heller's early experiences with totalitarianism continue to inspire her politics. The task of describing the correspondence of Heller's life and thought is taken up by these authors.

Some Facts of Heller's Life

Heller was born in 1929 in Budapest, Hungary, to Pál Heller, who was trained as a lawyer, and Angyalka Heller, née Ligeti, a homemaker. Pál's mother, Sophie Meller, was a well-known and much adored teacher; she is the model for the wise grandmother in Heller's own *An Ethics of Personality*.

Heller remembers studying and debating the merits of works of literature with her father; their relationship seems to have been exceptionally close, with Pál often at home caring for his young daughter. As Jews, the Hellers were in danger well before the deportation of Hungary's Jewish community began. Pál used his legal background to help a number of others escape from Nazi Europe. He was seized and deported and died in Auschwitz in 1945, just as the Nazis were defeated. Again, Heller's physical and emotional survival after her father's deportation and during the Nazi reign is addressed in several of the essays collected here.

In 1947, Heller began her university studies, joined the Communist Party and first heard Lukács lecture, an event quickly followed by her decision to study philosophy and to study with Lukács. By 1949, Heller was expelled from the Communist Party; her membership was later restored, and then she was rejected by the party again in 1958, for refusing to condemn Lukács as an enemy of the Marxist state. She was also dismissed from the university, where she had taught philosophy since 1955. By 1963, she was recognized as a key figure of the "Budapest School," first formed by Lukács to pursue Marxist critique particularly in light of the repressive forces of actually existing socialism, and was reinstated to a post at the university in Budapest.

While still a university student, Heller married István Hermann and had a daughter, Zsuzsa. The marriage ended in divorce. Heller married Ferenc Fehér, also a student of Lukács and a member of the Budapest School, in 1963, and they had a son, Gyuri, even as their intellectual interests were developing from the "Marxist Renaissance" they helped to inaugurate, to the time of Heller's second expulsion from the university and from political life, this time as a result of her open criticism of Soviet suppression of the *Prague Spring* of 1968. Following this expulsion, Heller was banned from university teaching and from publishing. After working as a grade-school teacher and living as a dissident for years, Heller and other members of the Budapest School were invited to take up posts at La Trobe University in 1977. Though Heller was at first separated from her daughter, who stayed behind in Hungary to marry, she threw herself into her new working environment, writing and publishing prolifically between 1978 and 1986, traveling widely, and firmly establishing her international reputation. In 1986, she and Fehér took up invitations to join the faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York, where Heller still holds the post of Hannah Arendt Professor of Philosophy. Fehér died in 1994. Heller currently splits the year between the New School and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, where she has again held a post since the political changes in Hungary in 1989. She won the Lessing Prize for Philosophical Activity in 1981, the Szechenyi National Prize in Hungary in 1995, the Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Philosophy in 1995 and the Sonning Prize in 2006.

Engaging Heller: The Essays

In addition to the contributions already mentioned, the essays collected here take up diverse aspects of Heller's thought, both examining it and attempting to build upon it. Though the distinctiveness of each essay renders incongruous the idea of organizing this collection with closed topical sets, several key themes continue to emerge among the essays. I have already mentioned the theme of Heller's lived experience examined in several essays. János Boros weaves this theme, together with a survey of current trends in philosophy and an analysis of Heller's most recent books (so far published only in Hungarian), into a compelling argument that Heller's work establishes a new genre in philosophy, which he identifies as *narrative philosophy*. Boros gives good reasons to believe that Heller's work is constitutive of the genre of narrative philosophy, providing invaluable English translations for additional support. Insofar as his argument is ultimately convincing, he provides a powerful and very novel framework for our encounter with Heller's writing.

Boros's take on how to understand Heller's interpretations of Scripture and religion in general, as well as her utilization of Nietzsche, is poles apart from the reading offered in Horst Hutter's essay. In it, Hutter alternately criticizes and plays off of Heller's hermeneutic and political positions in support of his own attempt to retrieve and defend "thumotic politics," as explored by Plato and by Nietzsche.

Even more explicitly political themes are worked through in the essays of Peter Beilharz, Bryan S. Turner and Simon Tormey. Together, these essays provide a kind of sociology of political action, with Beilharz examining the consequence of Heller's understanding of modernity as encompassing, potentially, totalitarianism, liberalism and modern democracy; Turner weighing up how sociological research, including Heller's, flourishes (only) during periods of rapid social change; and Tormey making a forceful argument that even while Heller is an inspired critic of totalitarianism (and a defender of liberal democracy), today's liberal democracies share more in common with totalitarianism than Heller admits. On the one hand, Tormey asks that we return, *contra* Heller's defense of liberal democracy and by implication liberal capitalism as developed in *Beyond Justice*, to Heller's earlier skepticism about the potential for a sustained politics of liberation within those modern forms. He argues that this is particularly crucial in light of globalization and our increasingly devastated environment and declining security on a global scale. On the other hand, however, Tormey also criticizes his own earlier critique of Heller, now recognizing that it is Heller's focus on the centrality of the individual for movements of social change, as well as Heller's investigation of modernity as allowing for the proliferation of subject positions, that best explains our most promising contemporary forms of dissent and emancipatory social movements.

Not unrelated to these political concerns, but concentrated upon their significance in the lives and self-understandings of individuals, both Anthony Kamm's essay, and my own "open letter" to Heller take up the issues of dependencies, interdependencies and more specifically, in Kamm's essay, of *radical needs*. Kamm argues that while radical needs, as Heller understands them, may appear in a paradoxical form, they also create the conditions of possibility for freely undertaken, unalienated self-understandings and social relationships, without which a vibrant and integrated political life is impossible. Likewise, my open letter takes seriously Heller's profound and unswerving defense of emancipatory desire and freedom, and asks how it relates to her apparent rejection of feminist philosophy in general, and her concern with what she has called "sexual dependency" in particular.

Another group of essays, though they share in common several of the above-mentioned subjects, converge around questions about Heller's existentialism, or more specifically about her existential and ethical insistence on "self-choice." One might say that each of these essays asks Heller to pay heed to the second half of Marx's claim that, to paraphrase, people create their own worlds, *but never under the conditions of their choosing*. Richard J. Bernstein questions the application of the Hellerian distinction between the categories of difference and universality, and finds that they do not accomplish as much, theoretically or practically, as good old Aristotelian habit and education, nor do they take into full consideration the contingencies of moral luck. Nevertheless, Bernstein argues that even if Heller's notion of self-choice under the categories of difference or universality will not apply to everyone, her vigorous defense of individual subjectivity (especially in the face of certain postmodern discourses) and her relentless insistence on the modern experience of contingency, mark the genuine means of dealing with fundamental choices, coping with external conditions, and undertaking our real responsibilities.

John Grumley's essay also probes the ethical tasks confronting the modern subject, considering Heller's "existential leap" in this regard. Grumley, too, questions the universality of self-choice, but seems to resolve (or dissolve) the tension between the categories of difference and universality, instead returning to the contingencies and constraints that might preempt such choosing. To make his case and in a manner close to Heller's own style, Grumley draws eloquent examples from the fictional characters of J.M. Coetzee and W.G. Sebald. Likewise drawing from fiction and from narrative, Amos Friedland employs Imre Kertész, Marcel Proust and Nietzsche—thinkers he recounts encountering as Heller's student—to both affirm the Hellerian account of choice, and to deny that it must include the *affirmation* of life, the *resolution* of pain or the *love* of one's fate—even potentially. What Grumley calls turning "contingency into destiny," after Heller, Friedland argues may just as authentically require an unreconciling and unreconciled *refusal* of this fate and this life. Indeed, to *affirm* a *no* to life, Friedland maintains, may in some cases be the only authentic choice.

Alone among the essays, Dmitri Nikulin's study both follows Heller's recent work on comedy and builds upon it, developing the significance of the

claim that comedy is through and through a philosophical genre. Nikulin details the structural features necessarily shared between comedy and philosophy, supporting his case that comedy is a rational enterprise with a wealth of examples from Aristophanes through Terence and Woody Allen, as well as arguments from Plato through Hegel and Heller. Pressing Heller's recent work, Nikulin reveals the deeply humanistic, immanent form whereby comedy, like philosophy, rationally develops a series of possibilities into a conclusion in which "the good" is validated both non-moralistically and non-theologically.

Two short essays by Agnes Heller finish the collection; the first is a response to the essays collected here. The second, included as an appendix, is an essay Heller first published in 1972 (in *Philosophical Forum*, III: 3-4 [Spring-Summer 1972], 360-370). The decision to include it, beyond the most obvious point that it is a marvelous essay otherwise as much as lost to the archives, was motivated by the lucidity with which the short essay manifests the consistency of Heller's work. It exhibits her debt to Lukács, but just as powerfully, her ability to critically appropriate, adjudge and reject from among Lukács' suggestions. The essay shows Heller, even before the writing of her most commanding works, generously reading, but then readily assessing and standing apart from the approach of her teacher. In a sense, it is even true that in offering this reading of Lukács, she tells us at least as much about her own thinking, explaining how philosophy is a tacit confession and how insight into its workings is gained. Here too, we see Heller commenting on themes she will take up more rigorously later, and on several themes at issue in the essays collected here: she comments of the dialogic form, on life-castes, on the role of women, especially the woman vis-à-vis the philosopher, on the existential leap or self-choice and precisely under the categories of difference or universality, and on the theory and development of personality. Assessing Lukács in the early 1970s, Heller may also be read as responding implicitly to some of the queries raised both about her work and on its behalf in this collection. For Heller here acknowledges the difficulties attached to universalizing self-choice, to its epistemic verification, and to the way that it may function as the ideal of alienated life. And she comes out clearly privileging the refusal to sacrifice others, and the commitment to meet suffering with empathy and with action, over and against the severe self-choice of the dialogue's hero. As well, Heller's appreciation of Lukács' achievement is marked by her approval of the insight he expresses, in part through writing or narration, into the correspondence between his subjective choices and his objective ideas. Lukács not only criticizes the asceticism of his hero and himself through his female interlocutor, he also shows how the activity of philosophy transcends the ascetic "poverty of spirit" and is itself transcended in actualization. Writing, here, is part of that actualization, precisely insofar as it is part of the realization of the philosopher's own being. And this is the key to understanding the way that Heller has always, consistently, incorporated real moral commitments and choices, as against any "other worldly morality," slogans and expedient ideals, into actualizations of personality.

I am grateful to my colleague and friend, John T. (Jack) Sanders for first bringing his translation of Heller's *Von der Armut am Geiste: A Dialogue by the Young Lukács* to my attention and for flagging its importance. I am also grateful to Jane M. Smith, his co-translator, and to Agnes Heller and the editors of *Philosophical Forum* for permission to reprint the essay. The idea of putting together a collection of essays on Agnes Heller formed in the beautiful and hospitable environment provided by the Ferrater Mora Chair of Contemporary Thought in Girona, Catalonia/Spain. Under the auspices of the program, Professor Josep-Maria Terricabras invited John Grumley and me to lead sessions on Agnes Heller for the June 2005 program. The enthusiasm of the Girona faculty, students and non-academic population for Heller's work convinced us that a new volume of critical essays was in order. I am thankful to the Ferrater Mora Chair and the Girona participants, as well as to John Grumley, who actively supported the project from the outset, including in helping to formulate a proposal for it and in giving the collection its name. Further, I would like to thank the contributors to this collection both for their valuable studies and for their many helpful suggestions as it developed. I was awarded a grant to support the research for this volume from the College of Liberal Arts at Rochester Institute of Technology, for which I am grateful. I am also grateful for the support and warm, always philosophically rich environment provided by my colleagues in the Department of Philosophy at RIT. I am indebted to Lawrence Torcello for carefully thinking through with me the objectives of this volume with consideration and inevitably with good sense. As well, I was especially lucky in being able to depend upon the acumen of a group of tremendous discussants and readers. In preparing my essay for this volume, Edward P. Butler first guided me through the terrain of recent feminist thinking with his customary shrewdness and openhandedness. Angelique Craney offered both unfailing encouragement and incisive, no-nonsense critique. Megan Craig provided invaluable advice, including about the reformulation of my conflicting thoughts into the more fitting letter format. I could not have wished for a more thoughtful, savvy reader than Elizabeth Mazzolini, who stepped in at the moment of *kairos*, both for my essay and altogether. Finally, I am grateful to **Agnes Heller** for all that cannot be said and more perceptibly for her support of **and participation** in this project.

Chapter 9.
To Agnes Heller:
An Open Letter on Philosophy and the
Real Problem of Woman

Katie Terezakis

Assuming that you share my abhorrence for writing that indulges in every association that presents itself to thought, I won't risk opening those floodgates with the pretext of justifying the epistolary form. Suffice it to confess that I want to return to a conversation we have had, on a topic so nebulous it might be better set aside. I hold out the hope that this is the best way to settle it. You'll remember, on several occasions, the same basic scene: we are away from the university but not far away, of course drinking. You are in the act of being a mentor, a kind of friend, and we are doing philosophy (something like what the Jena boys called *Fichtizieren*). I find you gracious, flippant and animated with real interest only when contention becomes heated, that is, only when it is focused on a discrete problem. In any case, we think together and observe the conditions for our discourse; we range from problems of interpretation and politics to the stuff of personal relationships. In this scene, where everything you say will be noted, you say this: "women's only real problem is that of our own sexual dependency. The fight for every kind of equality is already won. We are suffering only at our own hands, from our own dependency." Are you making a psycho-sociological evaluation or a personal confession? You dodge the question this and every subsequent time I ask, while your claim continues to dog me. I dismiss your assertion as superficial, as falsely dichotomous, as privately regretful, but it seems to return, unlit, not only behind Freudian and Lacanian assessments of female sexuality or more intentionally pushing the analyses of *The Second Sex*. I begin to see it vaguely present and decidedly unresolved in a range of recent works on recognition, sexual difference and desire. More noiselessly and ominously, I start to suspect that I see it perching right on the margins of the works you take more seriously: what *are* rational autonomy's material conditions, once secured in the founding works of modernity? What is the nature of the form of independence, or rational maturity, that all moderns after Kant come to associate

with enlightenment? Where does woman's "real problem," especially if she is a woman-philosopher, place her in relation to this tradition?

None of these texts or my questions about their connection to your assertion tell me how to read your claim in light of its historical specificity: you to me, a mentor who has always looked askance on feminisms, who delights in declaring that "women's studies do nothing more than put women back in the kitchen," and who genuinely champions her female students. It is you who tells me that women do philosophy no differently than men, and alternately that women may be better suited to philosophy than men. In either case, you insist that the female philosopher ought simply to "do philosophy"; no reflection on the situation of woman *per se* and no defense of feminist philosophy are required. As I take to the academic marketplace and encounter ever more self-avowed feminists who seem positively unsettled by their female colleagues—who treat other women, in person if not in theory, as competitors for scarce goods, I wonder again at your alleged hostility to feminism and robust generosity toward particular women. Could it really be that there is no meaningful inversion at work? And given how much care has gone into your thinking on *need*—radical needs, alienated needs and various material and psychological interdependencies—how could it be undeserving of further consideration when you identify one last, pressing dependency, especially of woman's? And Agnes, if you'll indulge me just a little, notice how strange it is when this lingering problem is identified as sexual dependency by *you*, for whom I want to coin the term *erosūne* to try to express the particular form of self-possession you exhibit, a kind of command uniquely erotic and entailing rather than merely paralleling or challenging the *sophrosūne* that is its linguistic model.

Allow me then, because I can neither come to terms with your assertion nor write it off, to ask you to have a kind of dialogue you haven't really had. Let me bring in a few other authors and ask where you stand. Let me take it, for now, as a matter of the most pressing importance that two women from different generations have come together through philosophy, and established the sort of relationship anticipated in feminist philosophy, without ever expressing a concern with its texts or their authors. Let me take it as a matter for study, even if no good method lies on hand, when in this context one woman offers advice expressly about women, which given the source and the recipient, leaves the other unable to grasp the claim and unable to disregard it.

Luce Irigaray has been a pioneer among feminist thinkers who both criticize traditional philosophical and psychoanalytic discourses related to woman and who attempt, in both form and content, to offer new ways to understand woman without homogenizing sexual difference. Irigaray writes that revolutionary feminine discourse must assume the feminine role programmatically, playing

with mimicry or mimesis to convert subordination into affirmation. She writes "to play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. [...] It also means 'to unveil' the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. *They are also elsewhere*: another case of the persistence of 'matter', but also of 'sexual pleasure.'"¹

You authorize your most recent acts of sustained mimesis on seemingly different grounds. For in your handling of the "ethics of personality," you claim that individuals, autonomous in their singularity, must speak for themselves. You give up the status of author or expert in your *An Ethics of Personality*—or more precisely, you play at giving it up—to do justice to an ethics concentrated upon irreducible persons. Correct me if I'm wrong, but as I understand it, you claim that all modern ethics must culminate in an ethics of personality. Your work is split into three parts, in which, first, a philosophy professor—someone who sounds very much like Agnes Heller—lectures on Nietzsche, followed by an involved conversation by two of the professor's students (Joachim and Lawrence) who are later joined by a mysterious woman (Vera). In the third part of your book, we learn that all the conversations of the second part were a written dialogue, penned by Lawrence, their youngest and most passionate interlocutor, and given to a co-student, a young woman who studies literature. This young woman (Fifi) then enters into a vivid correspondence with her grandmother, concentrating on elements of the written dialogue. Grandmother and granddaughter also discuss their hopes and cares as well as the reactions of the dialogue-writer, who is made privy to their correspondence.

Though you speak through these characters, they sound to me more like you, in person, than many of your writings do, and they speak with your most beloved images and tropes: wagers, masks and crutches, as well as leaps and throws are as much characters in this work as the personalities who speak about them. Through your main characters, these metaphors and similes become essential to the work; the leap, for example, is a symbol that fixes the central conclusion of your philosophy of morals. Why do we listen to the summons of others at all? On what grounds do we take responsibility for ourselves and others? If we choose ourselves existentially as decent, honest or good persons, we make that choice without an observable cause or set of reasons. The choice of oneself is a founding choice, for which no norms can be provided, no advice given, nor prior principle consulted; and it is this choice alone which gives reality and meaning to our subsequent moral choices. The existential choice need not occur at a certain time; in a way, it occurs at each moral juncture. And the existential choice of oneself is the leap; we leap, for no good reason, into ourselves as good or decent or honest—as determined by ourselves leaping.

Likewise, a couple of your characters, like you, claim that general ethics and moral philosophy are like crutches we will need to "pick up and put back down" repeatedly, according to our own needs and limitations. But it is also in this regard, here in the book that is supposed to elaborate a unique ethical form,

that you seem to insist upon making the dependencies of that form manifest. Exerting oneself against the dramatic rotations of this text, searching for your thesis or a consistent line of reasoning, it becomes apparent that your judgment is that *qua* ethics of personality, modern or postmodern ethical theory strands us without the crutches, principles, or references we would need to be concerned about the leap, or to keep taking responsibility after taking the first leap. An ethics of personality, standing alone, is insufficient for addressing the grueling deliberative process that must accompany taking responsibility. Independent of other ethical forms, the ethics of personality is ultimately ineffective. So in keeping with the image of the crutch, you seem to think that while we may move about freely for intervals of untold duration, ethically speaking we are permanently hobbled—or perhaps internally so fragile as to ensure recurrent disabling injury—and must perpetually, even if occasionally, return for support to ethical norms, moral prescriptions, and to the traditions in which they are elaborated.

At the same time, following your various characters through their manifold disagreements, it seems as though you, the stage director, mean to show that any properly modern ethics either culminates in an ethics of personality or exhausts itself in futility. The challenge you must have faced with this work, then, was to present and portray an ethics of “autonomous singularity” that remains interdependent with other ethical forms.

Is this not precisely why you employ mimesis? It seems to me that in taking on the challenge—in doing theoretical justice to the ethics of personality in its distinctiveness and in regard to its permanent scaffolding—mimesis becomes your mode of recovery, resubmission, playful repetition, and, as Irigaray imagines, a case of persistence, of nourishing the mimetic operation itself, and of self-affected articulation. But I think you hit Irigaray’s mark without entirely accepting her aims. In the first place, you don’t put much store in stylistic extravagances; I can neither imagine that you would allow yourself one, nor do I see evidence of literary self-indulgence here. Rather, this personification of autonomous individuals committed to ethical deliberation and action, but occupied with the personal drama and uncertainty of “real life,” seems to be just what is necessary for you to present a viable pluralistic discourse while offering neither crutches nor formal principles, but models of behavior themselves charged with personality.

When *An Ethics of Personality* begins, the character of the lecturer, ostensibly Professor Heller, is our guide. She—you seems to speak to us directly from the opening line: “You may wonder why I am starting to discuss the ethics of personality with an illustration, for Nietzsche’s ethics does seem to serve us as an illustration of this kind of ethics. Nietzsche is not even my proxy: he does not speak in my name (at least not entirely). I let him speak for himself.”² By what affectation does Nietzsche “speak for himself”? Quoting is sparse in these five lectures. The unnamed professor is the occasion for Nietzsche’s confessions as the hidden author occasions the written dialogue of Lawrence, the young Nietzschean, and his friend-ideal, Joachim-playing-Kant. Then as Vera, who knows the philosophers of the canon all too well, the author interrupts and re-

frames the dialogue between our two young men, retreating again to allow that Vera has been Lawrence's writerly creation. As Sophie Meller, the personification of intellectual maturity and moral authority, the author ranges easily across philosophy and literature: luminous, practical, unpretentious; she closes her correspondence unable to give "any real advice," "at the crossroads," and ever her granddaughter's champion. Yet from the Introduction to the work we also know from *you* that "In her character I tried to draw a real-life portrait of my own grandmother, née Sophie Meller (1858-1944). My inferior ability in characterization cannot do her justice."³ So in some real sense, you are also the granddaughter Fifi, inspired by Wittgenstein's willingness to climb free of his propositions, to throw away his ladder, but admitting to us and your grandmother that you prefer our company to silence, and crutch-metaphors, which can always be picked up again, to the finality of the discarded ladder.

As the author is the condition of possibility for each of the personalities and distinctive approaches to ethics animated on these pages, it would be platitudinous to note their dependence upon her, as would be a statement about the author's formal dependence upon this mode of self-expression. Yet within this configuration and without speaking about woman or the task of a woman-philosopher, you fulfill—I cannot believe in spite of yourself—at least a part of Irigaray's proposal (and for that matter, of the proposals concerning writing of Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva). For what could be more established, for the female philosopher, than the resolute philosophical associations of young men, battling and closed into themselves? What could be more familiar than the early rush of scaling their walls, to be welcomed as "confused," "self-deluded," "interesting [but] inconsistent" and in possession of a "wonderful [but] untutored mind"?⁴ And once she has undertaken these conversations, staking herself against them, to what would any woman philosopher have become more accustomed than her fellows' need to idealize woman, envisioning woman-as-wisdom—Vera—playing the enigmatic schoolmistress and hoping that she will play along?

In Irigaray's idiom, you indeed resubmit yourself, "in particular to ideas about yourself," and you indeed "make 'visible', by an effect of playful repetition," but your goal is never to uncover "a possible operation of the feminine in language."⁵ It seems, as far as you are concerned, that there is no invisible or insidious weight of subordination within philosophical language so heavy that we cannot treat it lightly, toss it around at will perhaps, "reverse" it perhaps, but without the need to, as Irigaray advocates, "*destroy the discursive mechanism*." You do here what you advised me to do, philosophy, in the form your subject warrants. Yet in so doing, you demonstrate the relevance of Irigaray's schema, and not simply because you return in "re-semblance" to your grandmother to "nourish speculation" and reclaim what reflection (or a young male philosopher) casts out—but because, with this artifice you in fact produce a disruptive excess, you do leave us, not lacking, as we continue to think about the fundamental de-

ficiencies of ethical theory, but ready to see the “view from somewhere different,” to draw in the language of another proposal.⁶

The “view from somewhere different” does not describe a new idea, nor is it an idea for which we are solely indebted to feminist thinking, but Linda LeMoncheck, who turns the phrase, supplies it with methodological direction. Drawing on the work of María Lugones, LeMoncheck tells us to ask “(1) what is the subject context in which claims about women’s sexuality are made? and (2) what is the investigative context in which such claims are evaluated?”⁷ Regarding your assertion about woman’s real problem, the subjective and investigative contexts were partially described at the outset; they occasion this letter. “What it’s like to be you” and “what it’s like to be myself in your eyes” (to borrow Lugones’ words) meet where two women from different generations come together in shared interest. Our shared interest links directly to our investigative context, in that we both endorse, *as* contingent, the contingency that brings us together and according to which we continue to constitute ourselves; even while we both endorse, *as* constitutive, the particular relations of intentional recognition according to which our relationship can be meaningful.

As entrenched as contingency may be in each of our worldviews, I now recall that I first learned its name from a book of yours. I threw that book off a roof but retrieved it later; later still, I found you returning to the theme in gentler or perhaps just more familiar tones with the voice of Vera.⁸ “A human being,” Vera says, “is a throw.” We are thrown into a world and thrown into a particular genetic configuration without knowing how or why; who or what throws us, to use Vera’s language, remains undisclosed; hence the throw, whether lucky or unlucky, cannot be explained. Contingency is the self-consciousness of thrownness; contingency consciousness is the starting point for modern individuals. When we choose ourselves (that is, when we take the “leap”) we choose in the face of contingency; we leap into a void. As a throw, however, each of us is already angled, or configured, in two elemental and essentially unrelated ways. Each person is the site of both a genetic and a socio-cultural “a priori.” Genetically, each person is the result of an unlikely and unique hereditary collision; a person’s precise genetic code cannot be predicted, it has the status of an accident, though many of its entailments are absolute. Nor are the particulars of the socio-cultural world into which we are thrown apodictic; only that there is a world, and that we will have to make our way within it, is certain.

A human being is a “throw” insofar as she has two, equally binding and mutually unrelated a priories that necessarily precede her experience. Her singularity, or what you (and Nietzsche) call her potential for becoming what she is, will be forged in her necessarily interminable attempts to dovetail these givens. The tension between both givens sounds like what Kant considers the *creative imagination*; it sounds like de Beauvoir’s notion of *ambiguity*; what Arendt calls *natality*; and what you and Goethe associate with that “golden-tree of life” which proves to be “not gold but green”—the happening, dynamic human condition. This then is where we meet, to return to LeMoncheck’s methodological advice, agreeing that our condition is as your Vera describes it, in terms naming

and denying the real problem of woman. Because you have taught that contingency and the struggle to dovetail two unrelated a priori provides a way of thinking about the condition for ethics, while also accounting for the plurality of perspectives or truths, we both know that our own different historical and cultural circumstances preclude the possibility that we will have the same response to our biological situation. Yet we have both arrived at LeMoncheck's aforementioned view, recognizing that "different women will have very different experiences of sexual subordination by men and that some women may be more empowered to determine the course of their sexual lives than others. [We] acknowledge that any one woman's life is a unique, complex, and variable mix of sexual subordination and empowerment under institutional and ideological constraints [...]"⁹ It is not such a far stride to add that some women will insist that their sexual subordination has not been "by men," or even by a "phallic regime," but in and through our own self-alienation. In either case, what is essential is not the origin of the subordination, but its morphology and the recurrent mechanism of contemporary domination.

If we take seriously this real problem of woman as you identify it, then we must acknowledge, with de Beauvoir, that woman's dependency is interiorized.¹⁰ Likewise, we accept that the social and ideological paradigms for woman's independence, without revolutionary reformation, tend to undermine her self-realization and that, now as in 1949, the "reconciliation between the active personality and the sexual role is, in spite of favorable circumstances, much more difficult for woman than for man: and there will be many woman who will avoid the attempt, rather than wear themselves out in making the effort involved."¹¹

Just as dependency is not simply economic or material, sexual dependency cannot be simply about the need for sex or about the way in which, as de Beauvoir tells of standard twentieth century "sexual initiation," girls are understood as dependent upon men to reveal to them their own desirable, womanly bodies.¹² The sexual dependency you identified, about which you thought to warn me, must have more to do with an unquestioned need for regard, with the desire to be the object of desire at the expense of creative development. If an active personality, one engaged in the project of self-becoming, fails to examine her sexual role in both its biological and cultural expressions, she will be dominated by that role. To be sexually dependent in the way you identified is to be at the mercy not of a person or group of people, but of one's own ideal. To depend upon a certain sexual role, to desire that it be assigned without alternative, is to choose the appearance of desirability over the experience of real desire; the appearance of sexual pleasure over the pursuit of it.

Yet if this delineation of sexual dependency provides a fine example of inauthenticity or bad faith, then it is also incomplete. No one could deny the legal and economic dependencies of women's long-standing past and present, or the fundamentality of the colossal battles fought and won at those frontlines. Recent extensions of feminist care ethics, or of the "dependency work" closely exam-

ined, for example, by Feder Kittay, also deepen our understanding of relations of dependency, forcing us to recognize the ways that interdependency may be conditioned by relations of dependency.¹³ But the nature of your claim speaks rather to the current context within which, where sexist laws have changed, woman may yet fail to create values newly and inwardly. To be the object of sexual desire, pursuit and liability is to experience a kind of power. However fleeting, women tend to know the intensity of this power, often at the exclusion of other forms of capacity and command. So I am supposing that your warning is one about accepting a sexual part, and accommodating oneself, without question, to the situation in which regard, power and love may be won by playing it exclusively. As I now see it, your claim is that the current situation requires self-recreation, specifically of ourselves as sexual, and as such, it is not a new or untried demand, but one about which you expect that practice has not caught up with theory. Am I right in understanding, then, that you never meant your elusive warning about sexual dependency to imply an intricate or unsolved theoretical framework, but simply to be a matter of concern in "everyday life," or that sphere in which the theoretical rubber hits the road, and must be integrated in living practice?

You've argued that everyday life is the fundament of every social action and institution of human social life in general.¹⁴ So, to borrow your language, you would say that if, in everyday life, women are not newly "objectivizing ourselves," we will not hone our abilities in new forms. Decades ago, you first claimed that "the unity of personality has always been constituted by everyday life"; your observation that women now remain bound only by our own sexual dependency is a comment about how we relate to our immediate environments; how we accommodate what seems to be a "ready made" world and its attendant social roles.¹⁵ Hence your declaration that "women's studies put women back in the kitchen" must be a polemic against retreating from the traditional realms and methods of study before one is able to develop their terms, leaving that language and its power outside of woman's mastery and outside of the conversations we ought to have fluently. To withdraw from these conversations in the way that one withdraws when speaking from within a safe haven is to undermine in advance our ability to interrupt the operation of discourse, to reshape it and exceed it as we can when we are also engaged with it in self-critique and self-confrontation. Your aversion to "women's studies," I take it, is a revolt against instituting, in everyday life, a sphere of intellectual and collegial objectivations that will stand in the way of our encounter with a world we have not yet made our own. Insofar as we remain unable to claim and know that world in everyday life, we will maintain abstract knowledge about relations of submission and domination that we also conceal and reproduce in our actual relationships.

But now, Agnes, I'm torn. On the one hand, I want you to consider a richer notion of what polythematic women's studies may accomplish. And I want you to recognize, with some solidarity, that different approaches to women's studies and to feminism raise a call to imagine just the kind of involvement and mutual

initiative that you've already made a matter of everyday life. I want you to see that one reason so many of us have already taken your advice, pursuing our intellectual interests without any direct reference to the specialized language or disciplinary departments of women's studies, has to do with ongoing cultural discourses about gender and about women in particular, which anchor our in-gresses into the matters of our individual preoccupation.

On the other hand, I see that you have in fact identified one way that insidious models of subordination—especially of the sort that the best examples of feminist theory call out—become concealed and reproduced behind allegedly personal, private choices. For we know that even where some particular discourse treats a (sexual) theme, it may fail to make a critical turn to examine its own (sexual) presuppositions. This failure allows speakers to assume a role of significant theoretical expertise which, precisely in its unidirectional conceptual mastery—its self-assured ability to “frame” the problem—extends the fortification between the thinker and her problem. The way in which arguments for liberation often reproduce domination has been perhaps the most pervasive study of postmodern critical theory, and sexual domination and liberation are already its paradigm cases. To fail to take on this state of affairs, or to treat it inattentively or insufficiently, constitutes a failure of the eros that drives inquiry no less than it drives the pursuit of everyday fulfillment. I will not even pretend to wonder whether this eros is a necessary condition of personal and social transformation; and we clearly also agree that it demands to be met in philosophy and as philosophy. But now it seems to me that you would also make the case that our repression of the eros operative in a dominant discourse will correspond precisely to our regression in the face of it. In other words, our dependence on discourse and its meaningful regulation, and on the discursive tradition from which we have been overtly and covertly excluded, is an actuality we have yet to fully take on. It is a dependence we might rather repress, and insofar as we do repress it, we maintain ourselves in a posture of subordination. Our criticisms of the discourse might be strident, but in failing to inhabit it, to desire what is best in it and to make it our own, we will also evade the experience of ourselves as its minders.

To acknowledge dependence is to begin to de-fetishize it, both in terms of the personal relations you warn of and in terms of the discursive tradition in which they may be either authorized or criticized.¹⁶ This, then, is the enterprise of the philosopher: it is, as you argue, to demythologize and defetishize, which are the marks of philosophical engagement from the beginning—and not only from the beginning of Western philosophy, but from the start of your own, consistent identification of its “radical” crux.¹⁷ For I think you would argue as vehemently now as you did a few decades ago that every philosophy is simultaneously a *system* of organizing the world in terms of a chosen *good* or *truth*, as well as an *attitude* you identify expressly with encouraging others in philosophical building and critique. We depend upon philosophical tools to establish ethical principles and to show that they can be practically applied, and we depend

upon philosophers to model a stance of both unrelenting critique and earnest encouragement of our own philosophical efforts, which includes their unrelenting critique.¹⁸

The reason I wanted to play your claim about sexual dependency against the thoughts of some feminist thinkers is that to me, it has been as important that there might prove to be a general truth in your comment, as that *you* said it. In other words, I thought that your advice might express a more performative veracity specific to our rapport. As you know, I doubted the statement's validity. But I also thought that we might be rehearsing a kind of script, issuing and repeating speech-acts in the manner Judith Butler associates with gender development, except, ironically or maybe with some tactical desire, undoing the traditional dependencies about which you warned and replacing them with the critical philosophical interdependencies in which we were simultaneously engaged.¹⁹ More precisely, since our shared interests and philosophical commitments constitute both our context and the conditions of our discourse, then however seemingly flippant, your expressed concerns on your own, my, or any woman's behalf, already figured in a more intense, more potentially meaningful field of force than any one of them taken alone could conjure. In our conversation, understood performatively, sexual dependency was already overpowered by our affirmed dependency on philosophical tools and relationships.

Even without having directly engaged feminist theory, surely we both already knew that we lived with some of its most important and certainly most *modern* discoveries. And I think we accepted at the outset, as part of our shared acceptance of contingency, that our own conceptions of sex and gender actively interact in shifting social situations. So I'm sure we both would readily acknowledge Linda Alcoff's delineation of gender, and would be happy to extend that delineation to include sexual self-understanding widely speaking: "Gender is not a point to start out from in the sense of being a given thing but is, instead, a posit or construct, formalizable in a nonarbitrary way through a matrix of habits, practices, and discourses."²⁰

Yet this means that if women are, indeed, sexually dependent, and if this is, somehow, our real problem—even if now understood as a philosophical problem and hence an issue appropriate for and constitutive of critical inquiry—then we should be able to better understand the dynamism of our gender and the matrix of practices that animate it by understanding both its historical and conceptual claim upon us and the current mechanisms that stem from them. What are the conceptual claims made upon us? A common theme in feminist theorizing across different types, methods and formal or aesthetic attempts is a critique of the traditional identification of woman or femininity with a kind of *lack*. Much of feminist theory alerts us to the discursive practices that associate woman or femininity with lacking or negativity; this lacking tends to be conceived together with woman's status as base matter or materiality as opposed to intellectual capacity. Some feminist theory rejects this characterization of woman as thoroughly unaware or contrived, other feminist positions make arguments about the fundamental fact of human dependency (hence lack) altogether. Most all call for

new ways of imagining and writing about woman, ways that have moved beyond the uncritical acceptance of veiled assumptions about woman's intrinsic lacking. Given that sexual dependency seems to imply such lacking (an as-yet unsatisfied need for fulfillment) and given your basic affirmation of human needs and interdependencies otherwise, we require an open dialogue between you and some feminist thinkers and I've been trying to imagine how it might play out.

Here, I know you would insist that the identification and analysis of *lack* returns us to a historical and conceptual paradigm that has nothing to do with a uniquely feminist critique. And the fact that I know why you would make that claim, or indeed, that I remember you often making it, indicates how you provide an authentic model of feminist philosophy whether or not you mean to, and whether or not you reject the most common public attestations of feminism. It now seems to me that you provide this model precisely in the ways that you exhort your female students to get on with doing philosophy and to mind our own, potentially sexually dependent relations. Perhaps it is this appearance of incongruence over a deeper affinity, regarding what is at the heart of feminist commitments, that I at first found so puzzling in your advice. But let me explain why I think you would reject and revise the feminist critique of woman-as-lack and let me thereby try to account for my claim about your deeper "feminism" (I hear you rising to reject this *ism* even now).

You would reject the critique of lack as decisively feminist because of Plato; because *lacking* is the fundamental character of erotic desire treated in the Platonic dialogues without which philosophy does not begin or progress. Through Plato and almost from its inaugural moment, philosophy stakes the claim that the longing for a beloved, followed by an awareness of our desire for more binding and more lasting realizations, is the first manifestation of the desire to understand—both the world in all of its strangeness and the forms through which it is intelligible to us.

You know the details. My point is that the reading of Plato that best understands the problem of erotic dependency, and of philosophy's dependence on eros, is the one you give and that remains consistent with your approach to reading Plato overall. *Your* Plato is a theatrical virtuoso, speaking through masks and characters with unparalleled literary talent; your Plato paints personalities in and through the arguments, and the personal dramas, in which they engage. No one is supposing that you were the first to say so, or even that you do say so with more rigor or insight than others. But in telling us something about reading Plato, I think you are both telling us something about your own writerly and philosophical ideals, and inadvertently providing evidence of my claim that you are a model of a kind of feminist philosophy. In *Beyond Justice*, you defend your position that the *Republic* as well as the *Gorgias* present the "paradox of reason."²¹ You contend that Plato knows well his teacher's inability to prove his fundamental ethical principle, namely that it is better to suffer than commit injustice. Rational argument necessarily lands Socrates at an impasse and Plato

does not shy away from admitting it. Plato, not Socrates, overcomes the impasse by giving us a Socrates with whom we can be utterly fascinated. This Socrates, who we too grow to question and to love, obeys the dictates of his own conscience, acting as a model of prudence. As you say, Plato captures the true Socratic *gesture*, Socrates' personality and his authentic righteousness; this and only this sway us in his favor.²²

You have argued that Plato stages the staking of a wager in both the *Republic* and the *Gorgias*; its ante is the interlocutors, young men poised between just and unjust possibilities. Like the young men disposed toward justice and enchanted by the trappings of injustice, we need to figure out how to choose, and then as now, we might find that equally good arguments can be mounted for each alternative. So Plato evokes what you call the "charisma of goodness," the goodness of Socrates' personality and personal story in particular, to tip the balances.

Socrates' *being*, in the Platonic dialogues, is an ethical model, a regulative ideal, but here crucially, *as* a personality. Socrates provides an ideal we fix our sights upon because we actually want to, because he has a charisma that appeals to us directly, with the force of his singular character. Returning to the *Symposium* and erotic dependency, you ask that we notice the different *characterizations* of erotic possibility (or impossibility). At polar extremes, we have Diotima's assertion, as delivered through Socrates, that the conceptual contemplation of the Beautiful will be absolutely fulfilling, preempting any further need of eros; and we have Alcibiades' confession, delivered to Socrates, of his own hopeless erotic desire for Socrates. Between both and acting as their textual intermediary, we have Socrates, who Plato describes in the same terms as Eros himself—tough, wrinkled, barefooted, homeless, a schemer after beautiful and good things, brave, eager, intense, a terrific hunter, always inventing some device, desirous of understanding, resourceful and engaged in philosophizing his entire life (at *Symposium* 203d-e)—and who Plato infuses with the "charisma of goodness" as you identify it. And this is just how we come to learn that eros is, ultimately, as erotic as Socrates: provocative but otherwise committed. Neither eros nor Socrates will satisfy us erotically, and to expect them to do so is a sure route to desolation. Rather, both Socrates and eros gear us toward the search for wisdom and the creation of beautiful things; they propel us away from themselves, toward the autonomous pursuit of what is most eternal, immortal, true and good.

Here interpretation, and your kind of interpretation in particular, is necessary. Because insofar as Socrates does compel us, both to follow his example rather than him and to do philosophy, he does so not through his own arguments or principles, but through his personal magnetism and achievement, as drawn by Plato. Indeed, it is Diotima, the most independent woman who ever lived (in text), who provides the principles and mechanisms of eros, and her advice would be incongruous on the face of it, were it not mediated by Socrates. The idea that we would *decide* to be mindful of the conceptual commonality between bodies and institutions, en route on an upwards-moving trajectory that promises to end

in erotic and conceptual independence, would be but one more brashly issued speculation if it weren't the case that we can literally see Socrates, ascending Diotima's ladder, his back to us and to this world. Plato makes us see Socrates, that is, uncannily free of most worldly cares, largely unmoved by the beautiful bodies that surround him, invulnerable to cold, alcohol, food- and sleep-deprivation, and to the noises that might interrupt his thinking. We know too that Socrates is decidedly not deaf to the voice of his daimon or to his responsibilities to the laws or the gods, so we cannot picture him entirely detached and closed into himself; rather, we see his sights as fixed upon the higher ideals about which he tells us.

And again, at the other pole of possibility, we have worldly Alcibiades, militant and unsparing both in his comic self-awareness and in his tragic reproof of the Diotimic deployment of eros. Alcibiades' pathognomy reveals how the love of one particular preempts the possibility of moving forward to others, all reduced to a sameness that only an intellectual vision could love. He remains in the grips of a kind of sexual dependency which is neither a requirement for more sex, since sex with Socrates is never an option, nor a need to fulfill a social role ready-made for him, since he admits to moving between erotic roles readily. Alcibiades' state of dependency is literally hopeless, because he must either cease to desire Socrates as powerfully as he does or must have him, and neither is possible.²³

Why does Plato paint these irreconcilable possibilities so vividly? Because this is the very scene we might prefer to view in a softer light when we must make, or fail to make, what *you* call the leap. Between the irreconcilable possibilities Plato places the image of Socrates, making and having made his choice. As you have it then, a wager is staked and a balance is tipped: Alcibiades the fraught votary, declaring his love for Socrates the particular, meets Diotima the priestess, lover of pure conceptuality. Here then, is an image of erotic independence and another of erotic dependency; the former is as difficult as the latter is dangerous to follow. In presenting us with the strange, singular personality of Socrates, Plato tips a balance not between degrees of erotic dependency, but, with erotic dependency as a key problem, in favor of philosophy as a way of life, a way that tends to begin with questioning our erotic dependencies and that retains a disciplinary passion for the persona of Socrates. Whereas Diotimic procedure can only promise to save us and Alcibiadean yearning cannot even do that—you establish that Platonic philosophy, on which we all depend, creates itself as overtly dependent upon both extremes.

The Platonic portrayal of eros itself as lacking, and as bound up with the desire constitutive of philosophical interest and engagement, precedes feminist theory's criticisms of the identification of femininity and lacking. This in no way undermines those criticisms or renders any less problematic the texts (including Aristotle's) criticized for their less reflective notions of woman's negative character. On the contrary, it highlights the meeting point where your thinking and different waves of feminist theory can be of mutual support. For

Platonic eros imagines desire to be constitutive of genuine intellectual striving, so much so that philosophy *is*, for Plato, a lacking; it is a reckoning with certain limits and an intentional effort to make good decisions and to act on them, given such limitation. So it seems to me that both in your reading of Plato and in your depiction of what is inmost, or “radical” in philosophy, you hold on to the idea philosophy begins when we are struck not just with generalized *taumadzein*, but inevitably with a powerful curiosity about the attitudes we encounter in philosophers, in our teachers, who seem to encourage us above all to propel ourselves away from them to find our own way.²⁴

You tell us to get on with doing philosophy both because philosophy already allows for and encourages a desire that isn’t merely a lack, and because it honestly remains swept up in its own lacking. This is entailed in your assertion that, since Plato, every philosophy offers both “a form of life and the critique of a form of life” and that every philosophy will be taken up by being criticized or rejected, which will require the commitment of *our* eros and *our* logos.²⁵ You argue that Plato and the best of the ancients never worried about whether they were borrowing or stealing one another’s thoughts because “how could anybody steal someone else’s *personality*?”²⁶ Therefore, you are claiming—and knowing you, I believe that you are not only claiming, but staking yourself on the affirmation—that real philosophizing requires the commitment and the development of personality.

Finally I think I better understand your apparent refusal to get involved in feminist philosophy, or more specifically, your overt rejection of “women’s studies.” In describing relations of subordination and their opposite, you insist that the difficulties of human relationships and communications arise not through our singularity or the uniqueness of our different experiences, but only where individual singularity shows up as a mystified, alienated aspect of particularity.²⁷ Our differences from others do not pose a difficulty; rather, the trouble arises when either those differences or a commonality in which they are subsumed can be declared a way of life, or a formula, that actually undercuts individual development and relations of solidarity. Moreover, you call “ready-made formulae” those roles and linguistic formulations that conceal motivations and reduplicate themselves in repeatable expressions. And you call hypocritical and alienated any relationship in which the individual, unable or unwilling to face and investigate her own particularity, presents that particularity in borrowed, pre-established formulations.²⁸ This is also the form of life that your Vera calls “perishing” or “loosing oneself”; it is a failure, deliberate or not, to identify and work to dovetail the competing “givens” of one’s situation.

I think you’ve found that the pre-established role of “the radical” or “the feminist” can be as ready-made and as self-undermining as any other. So I take it that your warning about sexual dependency is at bottom no different from your written interrogations of negligence in examining ready-made social roles altogether. You are as critical about the “sympathies and antipathies” now congealed in the discourses initially crafted to criticize those ready-made roles, and as heedful about the inner vagueness or self-neglect with which they might be

thoughtlessly assumed. What remains, throughout the ascription of any given meaning, its rejection, and the critical review of that rejection, is the fundamental movement of philosophy, constituting and critiquing the world. When you insist that the philosopher maintain this attitude, regardless of gender, what you insist upon allows the notion of woman, and of the woman-philosopher, to remain open, even while we find ourselves imprinted with the marks of our times.

Irigaray, too, contests the same idea you call "ready-made," rejecting the common identity composed for woman in the symbolic order, and taking notice of the lack of social and symbolic forms suitable for woman's need to mediate her relations to self and other, and to come to terms with her own destructive drives. In sum, she writes, "women lack a mirror for becoming women."²⁹ Again sidestepping a key aspect of Irigaray's concern and fulfilling another, you are adept at being a "mirror," though not by trying to be a mirror, but by, as you enjoin, just getting on with doing philosophy, with being who you are. While you haven't attempted to supply or pass on any tokens of the feminine ready-made, you have unambiguously theorized the ways in which philosophers can both be and invoke models for thought and action, even where arguments fail. Your Plato does that, as does your Sophie Meller, so perhaps it should come as no surprise now that, while more could be said in pursuing your imaginary dialogue with feminism, your gesture—the gesture of the woman philosopher—proves definitive.

I maintain, then, that you ultimately succeed in defending an ethics of autonomous singularity that remains dependent upon other ethical forms, but that your success manifests not merely in your moral theory, nor in your outward dismissal of feminist philosophy, nor your concern over sexual dependency, but in the models you animate and are willing to embody, and in the way in which you affirm and so clearly enjoy the philosophical context and inheritance of this exchange.

The wise voice of your ideal, Fifi's grandmother or the original Sophie herself, might interject here that insofar as we remain concerned with ethical self-creation, this still does not explain why anyone would seek a regulative model in the first place, and consequently, that we have not explained how to look for a model or to create one. Now I would answer that it is on account of our perpetual dependency itself, of that fact that we are reliant epistemically, physically and socially, and of the fact that this dependency is sustained because our world remains at bottom contingent, that we require models and choose those who live best with values we have already, if vaguely, identified. We seek regulative models or recognize ideals not merely as matters of logical pursuit, but insofar as we are drawn by personalities, manifest in action and articulation, and only later are we able to describe these as a particular person's manifestation of goodness, or of the pursuit of truth, or of any other value with which we identify. It now seems to me that whereas Diotima is an early model of independence in an ongoing history that idealizes independence, the model you provide resists dependency upon certain social roles and formulations, including those

associated with feminism, but actively affirms interdependency as a necessary circumstance in the philosophical life. Not only have you been willing to describe the personalities of your models, and to hold them philosophically accountable, but you have also been willing to be a model, namely of a philosopher who revels in being a woman, affirming each contingency and inevitability that continues to animate that permutation, while exemplifying how this freedom and this necessity manifest, together, in utter singularity.

Notes

1. Irigaray, Luce. "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine" *The Irigaray Reader*. Margaret Whitford, Ed. (Cambridge, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2004) 124-125.
2. Heller, Agnes. *An Ethics of Personality*. (Cambridge, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 11.
3. *An Ethics of Personality*, 8
4. *An Ethics of Personality*, 244-246.
5. "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine" *The Irigaray Reader*, 124.
6. LeMoncheck, Linda. *Loose Women, Lecherous Men: A Feminist Philosophy of Sex*. (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 20ff.
7. LeMoncheck, 22. And paraphrasing Maria Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World-Traveling' and Loving Perception," in *Women, Knowledge and Reality*. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall, eds. (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 289.
8. The book thrown off the roof (later retrieved) was *A Philosophy of History in Fragments* (Cambridge, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996). Vera's recapitulation of contingency consciousness is in *An Ethics of Personality*.
9. LeMoncheck, 20.
10. de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. H.M. Parshley, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) 481.
11. de Beauvoir, Simone, 482, 411.
12. de Beauvoir, Simone, 380.
13. Feder Kittay, Eva. *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency*. (New York, London: Routledge, 1999), xii, xiii.
14. Heller, Agnes. *Everyday Life*. (London, New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) xi.
15. *Everyday Life*, 7.
16. For a fuller elaboration, see Benjamin, Jessica. *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 206.
17. Heller, Agnes. *Radical Philosophy*. (Cambridge, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1984), 11.
18. *Radical Philosophy*, 10.
19. Judith Butler. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. (London: Routledge, 1997).

20. Alcoff, Linda. "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory" in *Feminist Theory in Practice and Process*. Micheline R. Malson, et al., eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 321. And quoted in LeMoncheck, 20.

21. Heller, Agnes. *Beyond Justice* (Cambridge, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1987).

22. As I've detailed in "Heller, Justice and the Greeks" *Ethics and Heritage*, János Boros and Mihály Vajda, eds. (Pecs: Brambauer, 2007) 179.

23. In her momentous essay on the *Symposium*, "The Speech of Alcibiades: A Reading of the *Symposium*," Martha C. Nussbaum underscores the incommensurability of the erotic desire of Alcibiades and the eros-driven ascent of Diotima. Nussbaum, too, argues that Plato stages this contest to make our deliberative possibilities—and the seriousness of our choice—clear to us. The essay is Chapter 6 of *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 165-199.

24. See e.g., *Radical Philosophy*, 26.

25. *Radical Philosophy*, 26.

26. *Radical Philosophy*, 29, your emphasis.

27. *Everyday Life*, 10.

28. See e.g., *Everyday Life*, 13: "The impromptu dissembler [is someone whose] relationship with himself is so vague, [who has] failed so completely to make himself a *cognoscendum*, that he simply does not know what he feels or why; and he expresses his sympathies and his antipathies in ready-made formulae borrowed from his environment."

29. Irigaray. *Divine Women* as quoted in *The Irigaray Reader*, 159.