# Review: Agnes Heller : A Theory of Feelings, 2nd edn (Lexington Books, 2009)

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Agnes Heller,
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Philosophers since Plato have faced the difficulty of accounting for rational self-possession and moral agency in view of the fact that neither reasonable evaluation nor intentional action develop free of the demands of feeling. Given their power and persistence, the theoretical treatment of feelings is as requisite for philosophical psychology as it is for any political philosophy with genuinely emancipatory aims. To treat feelings is to treat that which is most inward for the individual as well as that which human beings commonly share. As such, Agnes Heller's *A Theory of Feelings*, first published by Van Gorcum in 1979 and now in a second edition from Lexington Books, both stands within a trajectory of philosophical engagement and charts an unmapped course into the role of feeling in existential self-creation, in the intricacies of personality, and in its codetermination with higher order cognition and action.

*A Theory of Feelings* is a work of reconnaissance, not of other theories of feeling, with which it is only marginally concerned, but of the system of instinct remnants, affects, orientation feelings, and emotions which must be part of each person's everyday life. The rationally and emotionally mature, well integrated life, the life of critical self-awareness and engagement with others, is Heller's ultimate target. But to achieve a justified account of that life, Heller begins with a fastidious definition of feeling, generally and in its particular types, and proceeds to classify feelings, to show feelings in social and historical context, to differentiate inauthentic or 'readymade' feeling from 'individual' feeling, and to trace the variations of human feeling in late modernity. *A Theory of Feelings* is therefore both a grounding work for the study of feeling and a key pillar in Heller's own philosophy of ethics, politics, and history. In respect to the latter, the work is imperative for understanding the consistency and internal accord of Heller's system. Insofar as it is also a groundwork for the study of feelings generally, and for the connection

of any theory of feeling to the analysis of thinking, of sociality, and of political forms, *A Theory of Feelings* is in turns commoving and unaccommodating.

Heller has left the original text of *A Theory of Feelings* largely unchanged. She writes in the Introduction to the second edition: 'I still think it stands on its own feet. I find its approach and its conclusions as relevant now as I did thirty years ago; time did not harm it. If I wrote a theory of feelings today I might, perhaps, rely more on Freud, but even of that I am not certain' (p. 8). The reader must understand this declaration in two ways. In the first place, Heller is choosing to ignore most of the work done on feelings over the last couple of decades. Heller is not engaged with evolving discussions about the constitution of feelings and emotions, their relationship to moral choices, cognition, and aesthetic appreciation, or – should any exist – with the new discoveries of contemporary theories. Most every reference in *A Theory of Feelings*, when not to a canonical philosopher or writer, is to a work of scholarship in psychology published in the 1960s or 1970s. In that sense, the work is not just 'unfashionable'; it is out of touch with the state of current theory.

Should Heller's approach and her conclusions prove amenable to or corrective of contemporary theories of feeling (in fact they are both), the task of staging a dialogue between Heller and other theorists must fall to the reader. And this dialogue which Heller might have begun could have been rich, for even if we confine ourselves to the work of philosophers, and to works under significant discussion over the last decade, we would still only scratch the surface by mentioning decisive theories of feeling developed by Cheshire Calhoun, Ronald de Sousa, Peter Goldie, Patricia Greenspan, Martha Nussbaum, Jesse Prinz, Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, Robert Solomon, and Richard Wollheim. By neglecting a confrontation with these and other theorists of feeling, Heller will leave most readers unsure of whether such treatment would have been a mere accessory pleasure, or whether it would have revealed crucial lines of continuity and divergence across the recent tradition. She has also as much as ensured that those thinkers most widely recognized for their theories of feeling will not be compelled to deal with her work.

Yet Heller's declaration also points in a different direction. At the outset, she confesses that of the thinkers who can be said to mark turning points for the study of feelings and emotions, Wittgenstein was the greatest inspiration for her writing. It is not only the upshot of Wittgenstein's inquiry into different feelings that so motivates Heller, but the form of his inquiry. With Wittgenstein, we have the invitation to think together; not a heuristic manoeuvre or a rhetorical performance, but the refusal to 'interpret, explain or build theories; he does not ask the question "why" but rather asks "what" ... he queries and then he describes. And he poses his questions for us as much as for himself' (p. 6). Inspired by Wittgenstein, Heller envisions the sincere thinker unencumbered by the weight of the canon or the disputes of her contemporaries; this thinker simply sits down to question aloud and to record her findings as directly and methodically as possible. Inasmuch as it fails to concern itself with contemporary discussions, *A Theory of Feelings* is also true to Heller's Wittgensteinian ideal; its mode of direct address and use of everyday language are consistent with this standard.

*A Theory of Feelings* is likewise a post-metaphysical work, in that it steers away from grand narratives about the origin and ultimate purpose of human feelings. Rather,

its focus is on the idiosyncrasies of feeling, and on the permeation of feeling with social and historical contingencies. Heller begins with foundational principles: she establishes that feeling may be defined in terms of involvement and she shows how our involvements support the homeostasis of both body and 'ego' or 'self', as well as the expansion of the latter. Heller then offers a broad phenomenology of feelings, at its most interesting where she addresses the evolution of instinct-remnants and affects and the definitive sociality of emotion. The descriptive chapters are followed by a historically based sociology of feelings, which culminates in a series of arguments tying that analysis into a critique of the compartmentalization of public and private emotions. Heller closes with a call to revision 'humanity' as a problem and therefore a constitutive principle for our practical undertakings. Clearly, then, while eschewing traditional metaphysics as much as any formula separating feeling from the privileged world of cognition or the moral will, *A Theory of Feelings* proceeds systematically, from axiological definitions through to the ability of the recipient of the theory to act on its conclusions, tackling as it does a range of human experience from affects to intellectual passions.

When it was originally published in English in 1979, *A Theory of Feelings* came out in conjunction with *On Instincts* and the books were generally reviewed together. Heller writes that she decided against a second edition of *On Instincts* because the thrust of the work was polemical, and those against whom it polemicized have since ceased to be read. She also explains (in her Introduction to the second edition) how the trajectory of works she planned in the late 1970s actually developed after the publication of *A Theory of Feelings*. Instead of pursuing the project of philosophical anthropology as she first intended, with a theory of needs and then of history, Heller terminated the mission of philosophical anthropology. She realized that she had already put forward her own theory of needs in the *Theory of Need in Marx* (1976) and she saw no need for its repetition (p. 8). Heller is advising us to understand her early repossession of Marx's treatment of needs to be the animating force of her subsequent, indeed lifelong occupation with human needs and their convergence with feelings – from their role in this work, to her concerted criticism of the *Dictatorship Over Needs* (1983), to the radical needs she takes up in *Radical Philosophy* (1984) and the role of needs in everyday life (*Everyday Life*, 1984), and then more subtly, to the function of needs and feelings in *The Power of Shame* (1985) and in her various treatments of the modern individual vis-à-vis social and political modernity (1990, 1999).

This is a key acknowledgement, though it passes within a few paragraphs of Heller's Introduction and otherwise must be reconstructed from her diverse works. The acknowledgement is important because, on the one hand, it answers a familiar set of criticisms of Heller's work, all to the effect that Heller's unabashed embrace of the ideals of philosophical modernity, and even her adoption of 'Man' from the Marxist tradition or of 'species-essence' from Lukács in particular, amount to a naïve acceptance of transcendental or crudely ideological constructs, since deconstructed and pluralized in late- and post-modern evaluations. Heller's project is routinely labelled 'utopian', in the sense of its perpetual orientation toward a freer, more ethical future, and insofar as its assessment of the present consequently appears puerile.

Yet in recognizing the way that the analysis of needs unfolds in her system, even while dissociating that analysis from an explicit philosophical anthropology, Heller highlights how her treatment of the 'problem' of humanity remains committed to the examination of our species-being, precisely in terms of the inherent plasticity of the self-creating individual. Heller has remained true to Marx, and to her own, apt defence of Marx's humanism, or his portrayal of the abilities and needs of a concomitantly creative and social being. So Heller is acknowledging that her work remains dedicated to the task of exploring the nature of the human being who animates the Marxist theory of value, precisely insofar as her work replaces the ideological subject-object of history and the simplistic understanding of labour with a vibrant theory of personality, history, and ethics. While Heller does go on to publish *A Theory of History* (1982) as well as *A Philosophy of History in Fragments* (1993), 'my anthropology', as she comes to render it, becomes a historical reflection on the psychology and conditioning possibilities of the morally good, critically engaged individual.

The life of this individual is one of ready adaptation to and evaluation of social and historical contingencies; moreover, success at tempering given instincts and affects and the unremitting education of emotion form the core of the individual's ability to confront both herself and her times. Personality, for Heller, involves consciousness and self-determination at the very root in its involvements. Likewise, freedom shows up in the ever-situated ability to work on what appears to be given in human nature, and to respond critically to given relations of power. Thus, although we must read *A Theory of Feelings* in light of Heller's introductory disclosure of the dead end of philosophical anthropology, we must also take seriously the case made for the capabilities that allow the individual to meet shifting existential and political challenges. This work belies the designation of Heller's project as 'utopian' as much as it resists the charge that that project relies on insufficiently critical notions of human essence and history, for although Heller remains optimistic about the revisability and moral potential of human being, in her insistence on the historical, sensuous conditions of self-creation, on critical self-reflection, and on the incorporation of feeling in the active life, Heller proves to be a theorist of practical reason more than of regulative ideals, let alone transcendental value categories.

Heller's emphasis on practical reason is always coupled, here as in subsequent works, with her recognition of an irrevocable 'antinomy' at the heart of human existence: we are simultaneously 'dumb species essence' and 'unique organic whole'; our individual consciousness, with the personal history it records, is distinctive for each of us and it is necessarily socially conditioned and accessed (p. 23). For Heller, 'our whole human existence is the solution of this antinomy' but the solution is never finalized; the 'contradiction can never be completely resolved' though the subject is 'thrown into [this] world, or, if you prefer, thrown into freedom' from the moment of birth (p. 109). Therefore, 'fitting together' emotional concepts and feelings, or our felt experiences and our ability to understand them, to integrate them, and to empathize with others, is the existential challenge par excellence.

Here again, though the explanatory vigour of Heller's existentialism has been received with some suspicion in the literature on her work, she has maintained it without reservation and has subsequently developed it into a thoroughgoing treatment of contingency

and the modern condition. This existentialism, sustained as it is by her theory of involvements, is the ground on which Heller ultimately levels an attack on the 'intellectualist bias' in Habermas's renovation of the project of Critical Theory (especially in *The Grandeur and Twilight of Radical Universalism*, 1991); it is also the basis of her extraordinary analysis of 'emotional hypocrisy' or the inauthentic experience of emotions, along with the depiction of emotional forgetfulness as a moral problem (pp. 123ff). 'Self-choice' or the creation of one's own personality is the cornerstone of the Hellerian paradigm; though one may condemn (as commentators have) Heller's understatement of the severity of conditions under which self-development is supposed to occur, what becomes explicit in this work is the contention that personality is that with which individuals become involved in anything, and that on which and with which practical reason acts. Personality is that with which a person relates as an individual to self and world; the maintenance and development of individual personality is the telos of emotions proper, just as homeostasis is the target of our basic sentience.

Heller's account of feelings thus leads compellingly to her appeal to 'become involved in the cause of humankind' (p. 224) and to her later thinking on the role of the individual in social movements. It is certainly more truthful to describe Heller's petition and her mode of justifying it as 'optimistically practical' (or 'optimistically realist') rather than as naïve, certainly more accurate to read this project as 'normative encouragement' rather than as utopian. Yet it is also true that *A Theory of Feelings* opens and closes without situating its line of reasoning in a context that would have made its consequence more explicit. While Heller's rejection of different theories of motivation influential in the 1970s is both devastating and hilarious (pp. 45ff.), no attempt is made to update that dismissal, or even to assert that it remains operative a propos of current accounts of motivation. While she carefully eliminates any 'naturalistic' accounts of feelings (pp. 38ff.), Heller does not differentiate her pivotal notion of homeostasis from the naturalism she rejects.

Seyla Benhabib observes as much in her review of the first edition of the volume (*Telos* 44, Summer 1980) and uses the insight as a wedge into the argument that Heller, following Lukács, relies upon regressive abstractions regarding human essence and history. Given the seriousness of the charge and its kinship to later misgivings (and misunderstandings) of Heller's project, it is unfortunate to find the question of the naturalistic implications of homeostasis ignored in the second edition. Similarly, one wishes that some of Heller's remarkable suggestions, for example about the antiquation and loss of certain feelings over time and about the possibility of entirely new feelings, had been allowed further discussion in an expanded, rather than largely identical, second edition. More gravely, Heller's often trivializing distinction between the feelings of humans and those of non-human animals, and about the connection between feeling and cognition in both groups, might have been either overcome or helpfully clarified with reference to the recent plethora of animal research, or at least to those aspects of debate about it that remain controversial.

Less of the essence but still noticeably, an awkward divide remains between Heller's fluency with the philosophical tradition and her spirited command of literature, and the English translation and presentation of the text itself. One finds here an extraordinary profusion of thinkers compared and types of feelings considered. Likewise, though it

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 Fenyö 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.

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Katie Terezakis (ed.),
*Engaging Agnes Heller: A Critical Companion* (Lexington Books, 2009)

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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