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Agnes Heller’s Existential Ethics and Bare Life

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~ JOHN GRUMLEY ~

10 ABSTRACT *The following paper explicates and critically analyses the existential ethics of the reflective postmodernist phase in the work of Agnes Heller. Beginning with a brief summary of the biographical and theoretical roots of her development, it goes on to analyse the meaning of her key slogan of “turning contingency into destiny.” After elaborating her version of the “existential leap” and her later attempts to refine her position in An Ethics of Personality, the paper will employ some literary lives from W. G. Sebald and J. M. Coetzee to test the general viability of Heller’s model.*

Ka knew very well that life was a meaningless string of random incidents.
—Orhan Pamuk, *Snow*

15 From the very beginning of Agnes Heller’s philosophical career, ethics has been at the centre of her preoccupations. However, she has avoided the modern fascination with meta-ethical inquiries into the nature of the good and has focused on the priority of the practical, the existential task to activate the human capacity for freedom by making conscious choices. The reasons for this preoccupation are largely biographical. Heller’s own youth
20 was clouded by the monstrous reality of the Holocaust in Europe. Her father’s own courageous efforts on behalf of imprisoned Jews and his own tragic death in the last year of the war provided both a shining example of individual goodness and self-choice and the riddle of a catastrophic mass moral collapse that required philosophical illumination. Her own later experience of the Soviet “dictatorship of needs” only reinforced the urgency of
25 these questions. In the immediate wake of the Hungarian Revolution, her close association with Lukacs cost her her first academic position, and her continued testing of the regime’s political tolerance finally led to exclusion from Hungarian cultural life in 1973.¹

30 During this period, Heller fought from within the Lukacsian “renaissance of Marxism” to combat the dead hand of dialectical materialism and its economist understanding of history to find a place for ethics and for individuality within Marxism and the so-called socialist societies of Eastern Europe. The ultimate failure of these efforts, however, and her transformation from internal dissident to political émigré only reinforced the urgency of these questions. Even if the immediate totalitarian threat to



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35 freedom quickly receded, the imposing “iron cage” of modern bureaucratic institutions
and quasi-autonomous, purely functional sub-systems raises this ethical question to a
universal significance. Free from the straitjacket of Marxism, Heller brings the
contemporary task of practical ethics to a formula—transforming contingency into
40 destiny—that supposedly allows contingency and context to be given their due, while, at
the same time, reasserting the existential priority of the individual and the challenge to
live in a conscious and reflexive manner in relation to all dimensions of the lifeworld.
While this formula of the task confronting the modern individual seems compelling, it is
also far from clear what it means or implies.

The following paper elaborates this meaning, Heller’s later efforts to clarify her
45 position, and then sets out some critical objections. Firstly, I will question the priority her
formulation accords to individual autonomy. This argument will be substantiated by
drawing on two fictional characters found in the novels of J. M. Coetzee and W. G.
Sebald. Finally, I will question the proposed universality of Heller’s existential leap.

THE EXISTENTIAL LEAP

10 Once Heller had emigrated to Australia and quickly freed herself of all excess Marxian
terminological baggage, it did not take long for her to restate her overriding concern for
ethical responsibility and authentic individuality in the language of existentialism. She
proposes the existential choice of “transforming contingency into destiny” as the ethical
task that confronts the modern subject. This is a uniquely modern predicament. Unlike the
15 pre-modern individual whose character and behaviour options was largely predetermined
from birth and tradition, Heller understands the modern individual as having to find her
character through a choice of destiny or self-making. Despite the obstacles that an
increasingly more differentiated and functionalist society have placed in her way and the
need to manoeuvre in institutions and make money, Heller judges that the prospects of real
20 individual self-realisation have been much enhanced.² She designates this choice of self-
making as the *existential* choice because the choice actually *constitutes* the self with an
irrevocable self-chosen destiny. Such a choice is irrevocable by definition because
revocation would mean loss of self and lapse into contingency.³ The existential choice is a
metaphorical moment of life-changing revelation that is not always manifest in a single
25 gesture. It is the result of a series of intentional acts that lead to increasing moral rationality.⁴

30 However, the idea of existential choice does not mean artistic self-creation as an act
of moulding raw material into a pre-designed shape. Emphasising the conditionality of all
human action, Heller acknowledges that the individual actor is already the bearer of
infinite determinations of which she is neither creator nor responsible. Nor can such a
choice be assimilated to the model of rational choice where steps are chosen rationally in
35 accord with a predetermined goal or life strategy. While this choice can be rendered
plausible in terms of psychology, personal history and moral reasoning, the actual choice
itself cannot be reduced to rational explanation (292). Heller prefers the classical paradigm
of “knowing thy self” as the template of self-choice. The character chosen as a personal
40 destiny is not a product of mere introspection but the result of action; this is a “proving”
or a “becoming” whereby the self reaches out to find the kind of actions appropriate to
the self-chosen character and destiny. This is the meaning of the idea of choosing “to
45

become the person you already are.” This framework allows the individual to continue making consecutive choices bound by the *telos* of the initial existential one. In this sense, *existence* precedes *essence*.⁵ The individual is already the bearer of an envelope of genetic and social *a priori*s. Yet, it is only with the choice of all these determinations that she assumes full autonomy and pursues a personal destiny that is beyond contingency and external determination. This account reveals the crux of Heller’s defence of the idea of modern subjectivity against its post-modern critique. Against a vision of a palimpsest identity where the emphasis is on forgetting, experimenting and disassembling shapes,⁶ she opts for a model where gradual or life altering learning constitutes an authentic personal continuity.

The notion of authenticity comes to the centre of discussion in the twentieth century with the demise of traditional virtue and increasing consciousness of contingency. Beyond moral virtue, authenticity is a personality term.⁷ The authentic person is characterised by the unity of existence and essence. How is this unity achieved if the existential choice involves choosing all previous determinations? Heller relies on the metaphors of “dying” and “resurrection.” The existential choice itself is a *timeless* moment of isolation after which everything is both the same and different. Paradoxically, the choice of all determinations is supposed to be a release from the past insofar as from this point on the individual assumes full responsibility for all her actions. However, this does not mean that everything in the personality and past is taken as a value.⁸ Everything is different because she now evaluates and acts from the perspective of the chosen attributes and their affiliated values. Confronted by infinite possibilities, the authentic person raises herself by “her own hair.” By contrast, the inauthentic person avoids the choice, remaining “fake” and not “real.” Heller wants to avoid the aristocratic connotations associated with the notion of authenticity. Her commitment to the modern universal value idea of freedom means that the existential choice is open to all.⁹ Yet democratisation of the notion of the existential choice raises some key problems that we will return to in the conclusion.

105 DIFFERENCE AND UNIVERSALITY

Heller’s idea of existential choice entails a self-chosen destiny that has to be realised in a series of challenges and subsequent choices put to the character of the individual. But this self-choice is multi-faceted. In one dimension it concerns developing personal endowments into talents. This is the existential choice according to *difference*. Of course, moral goodness is one aspect of the good life but not the good life itself. In large measure moral capacity is a negative element that resists the transgression of moral norms.¹⁰ But in the choice of difference, the chooser distinguishes herself from, rather than uniting with, others.

For Heller, positive virtuosity and accomplishment plays a significant part in any understanding of the “good life.” All humans have a variety of endowments. If the “good life” connotes human flourishing, it is essential to explore the full range of potentialities. Only this pole of existential choice fully elevates the distinctive capacities of the individual from the domain of contingency and nature into the realm of a distinctive ipseity and reflective developmental project. In this gamble on difference, the individual

120 is especially exposed to the external powers of good and bad fortune. For instance,
without the defensive armour of moral limits, the choice of difference is easily poisoned,
she writes in *A Philosophy of Morals* (12). The personally chosen destiny may be pursued
with absolute single-mindedness to the point of moral transgression. Such single-
mindedness may also seem irrational or unethical to the external observer if not to the
125 actor herself in other moments.

One of the most important aspects of the transformation of endowments into talents
involves the unfolding of non-rational potentialities.¹¹ Heller's emphasis on essential
difference facilitates the full exploration of human richness. This is a point of profound
continuity with her early Marxist anthropological investigations and its celebration of
130 human richness. This includes not just cognitive but also emotional and creative
dimensions of the humanity that until recently have received little attention.¹² The
importance of these dimensions is illustrated by the fact that she designates the
development of *deep emotional attachments* as another crucial component of the good life.
The corollary of a rigorous Enlightenment preference for *rational faculties* was the
135 misconceived aim of *absolute freedom*. The emphasis placed on *autonomy* tended to
eliminate *heteronomy*. Heller now views this ambition as overblown and dangerous. The
desire to fortify self-reflection and bolster the capacity for both cognitive acuity and moral
autonomy cannot be bought at the cost of stepping beyond the human condition (312).
This means an acknowledgement of the fundamental inter-subjectivity that makes us
140 essentially social beings and points to the increasing depth of Heller's embrace of human
difference and contingency.

Clearly there are real risks in emotional commitment to others that demand a degree
of self-abandonment. The regulative idea of pure mutuality in personal attachment is
rarely attained or often only of short duration. Moreover, personal attachments always
145 involve a degree of psychological subordination that easily passes over into the destruction
of the good life (320). Yet, as a crucial aspect of the good life, these personal attachments
are worth the risk. No amount of public recognition is a substitute for love and its deep
personal affirmation. To be the subject of such love does not make us better or freer
individuals but it does make us more human. Therefore such private happiness must be
150 viewed as a necessary constituent of the good life. This choice is self-affirming as long as
the object of love is not also endowed with a resultant social power or the degree of self-
abandonment contravenes morality (318).

While the existential choice of difference underlines the moment of reflection and
personal responsibility, its openness to moral transgression is a serious weakness. It is
155 primarily this moral concern that motivated Heller to adumbrate the other dimension of
existential choice orientated to the category of the *universal*; this is the choice of *goodness*.
While the existential choice of difference implies that not everybody will make the same
choice or possess the same level of endowments, the existential choice under the category
of the universal is open to *all* individuals.¹³ This is a choice of morality. As a staunch
160 defender of modern subjectivity, Heller rejects the view that sees "selfhood" as an
expression of domination, repression and power. While not discounting the idea of
repression in the constitution of the subject, she believes selfhood is no socially imposed
straitjacket but the real bearer of human freedom.

The idea of completely releasing the self from normative regimes is not a journey
165 into pleasure but into unfreedom.¹⁴ The "unmade self" of post-structuralism shares with

170 the rational, self-interested and the aesthetic self, the mistaken conviction that there is “no bond binding all (humans) together in the name of which you should say ‘no’” (305). Heller refers to this bond as the moral standpoint that defines the existential choice of the decent person. The great danger of exploring non-moral endowments is the potentiality to homogenise the self in a way that loses sight of this ultimate moral bond. This ensures that the moral temptations linked to choosing uniqueness can be extinguished at their source. The good person consciously chooses goodness over evil and adopts the maxims of personal behaviour equally valid for all. While the fate of the individual existentially choosing difference is subject to the vagaries of luck, the good person can never be led to regret their choice by fluctuations of fortune. Habituation to the good is the perfect inoculation against the poison of fate. However, the existential choice of universality does not render the chooser universal. She keeps all the determinations of her concrete singularity. But this does not mean that general principles, norms and virtues are purely formal: they do at least offer moral guidance if not prescribing exactly what to do in every situation. The content of this moral direction remains general and requires further specification. As each way of life carries its own yardstick of measurement, general principles and norms should be sufficiently general to allow mutual toleration and to permit decent persons to be “good” in their own way (305).

185 Heller’s strategy is to de-radicalise the notion of existential choice by making it compatible with everyday experience and a variety of philosophical perspectives. She insists that this is a choice of the good person that *already exists*. While such a choice is undoubtedly transformational, the fact that it is a choice of all determinations reinforces the concreteness and idiosyncrasy of the personal history at the same time as allowing no trace of external determination to impugn the freedom and personal responsibility of the good person.¹⁵ The existential choice is not a metaphysical condition but a historically situated option in modernity. It presupposes the modern condition of *contingency* and the absence of pre-given ways of life. Moreover, it depends upon the specific historical attainments of subjective moral reflexivity and the increasing autonomy of cultural value spheres that allowed moderns to distinguish between excellence and goodness (18). These cultural achievements allow the modern individual to combine these two choices despite their ultimate irreconcilability.

200 Heller’s concern for morality is not moral absolutism. In a cultural universe of struggling deities no single choice can bring closure. However, hierarchising choices at least allows for the autonomy and talents of the individual. She insists that the two modes of existential choice can be combined as long as the distinction is maintained between the *absolute* and *fundamental* choice. This distinction allows that, in instances of existential clash, the *fundamental* will be subordinated to the *absolute* (19–20). While the ethical remains *absolute*, the individual is able to relinquish the objects of choice when morality is threatened. However, giving absolute priority to difference releases individual development from ethical precautions and may risk the moral dissolution of the personality (21). Heller argues that the only way beyond this apparent dilemma is to embrace both moments of the existential choice. The individual must be prepared to adopt the moral point of view in choosing herself as a good person. With this moral confidence, it is also possible to navigate the various subsystems and spheres of culture testing their norms while, at the same time, fully developing individual talents. With this yardstick, individuals can act without viewing these spheres as embodiments of

domination and power. That discourse can assume the form of domination does not mean that all cultural forms are inherently so. Forms can be appropriated and distinctive endowments transformed into talents without inevitably succumbing to the grip of domination.¹⁶

The existential choice of goodness remains an exercise in radical autonomy. This choice requires moral categories and draws on the good that already exists in the person as a potentiality. Yet, as the advice of conscience can always be rejected, this is not determination. Here autonomy and morality lie in a precarious balance that befits the paradoxical character of modernity. The condition of “double contingency” leaves the modern individual “without a banister” in deciding what to do. Morality is indispensable to authentic character yet ultimately this choice lies in the hands of the individual. This explains Heller’s preference for Kierkegaard over Kant. For the latter, the moral law remains a definitive crutch in the world of dangerous and fraudulent alternatives. But this constraint is at odds with the modern freedom and subjectivisation.

The superiority of the existentialist ethics lies in its theoretical openness on this question of the ethical crutch. The ethics of the personality does not single out any ethical crutch as definitive but allows the good person to be so in her own way. Modernity has seen the demise of all former *arche*. The only remaining ethical certainty is the goodness of the decent person.¹⁷ A product of the Romantic critique of rationalist abstraction, the existentialist ethic asserts the unity of the individual and the universal in the concrete person with all their determinations. Yet, this emphatic endorsement of moral autonomy is quite compatible with the tradition of *Sittlichkeit*. The modern ethical actor remains dependent upon the quality of her moral crutch. This means that the existentialist ethic is also inherently dialogical inviting real moral discussion.¹⁸

ETHICAL HEROICS IN A MUNDANE WORLD

Just like Tocqueville who speaks of individual existence as a momentary spark between two abysses, Heller has fashioned her conception of existential ethics between another two abysses: that of Marxist Dialectical Materialism, which would reduce the individual to prisoner of laws both historical and natural, and the abyss of recent post-modern critiques of the subject, which declared the rational subject illusory, repressive and a denial of the autonomy of text, of the slippage and play of its cultural meanings beyond intention in the infinite multitude of other texts or singular historical constellations of power. Heller, who took over the concept of the human condition from Hannah Arendt with its stress on the embeddedness of all individual action in webs, certainly does not deny the importance of conditionality.¹⁹ Nor, as we have seen, does she dismiss the role played by repression in the constitution of subjectivity. However, she maintains that neither of these genuine insights into subjectivity diminishes the meaningfulness and moral responsibility of individual initiative and action as crucial ingredients of social action. Yet, however worthy these strategic intentions, her conception of existential ethics is provocative and open to fairly obvious critical objections.

Heller’s focus on strategic moments and key decisions lends to the concept of existential choice a certain non-naturalistic flavour. The insistence on viewing life as a whole with its moments integrated into a unified project with a self-chosen, singular

255 meaning adds to a stilted and quasi-romantic aura of the privileged and elite individual
tied to the idea of a personal destiny. Also Heller's insistence on choosing all the
individual's previous determinations as a confirmation of individual autonomy seems
extreme. It suggests that no contingency of a past life should stand in the way of the
260 existential model of self-creation. Yet such almost grandiose gestures to individual
autonomy tend to invite the common-sense rhetorical objection of Zygmunt Bauman
that few would change nothing in their lives.²⁰ For him regret is a natural ingredient of
any life, successful or not: there are always roads not taken, miscalculated or hasty actions
that in retrospect invite the judgement that there were better alternatives, other ways of
saying and doing that now seem far preferable.

265 In the last volume of her trilogy *An Ethics of Personality* Heller does try to clarify and
moderate the essential meaning of her idea of the existential choice and the phrase
"transforming contingency into destiny."²¹ In a late dialogue between a young woman,
Fifi, and her grandmother, she employs the mask of the wise and worldly grandmother to
clarify the notion of existential choice and to raise some objections not canvassed in her
270 earlier purely theoretical presentation of this idea. For the grandmother, the notion of the
existential choice is a beautiful metaphor. However, she is wary of it becoming a standard
against which to measure all unique personal histories. The idea of a single, life-
transforming commitment falsifies the experiential continuum between essential and
conventional living. The grandmother is convinced that we do choose ourselves, but not
275 entirely. The stark opposition between authentic choice and inauthentic indecision fails
to recognise a gradient that includes indecision and partial choice (233). The notion of
existential choice really signifies an ideal that can only be approximated, not fully realised.
The notion of existential choice under the category of difference seems to allow for only
sharp differentiations of success and failure but such clarity is often missing in judgements
280 of decency. The existence of the "good person" cannot disguise the fact that most people
live between good and evil. Nor would we want to think that anybody was beyond the
possibility of rehabilitation (267). Can any human destiny annul all contingencies? A rich
life is one full of involvements with others and things. This implies that contingency and
the possibility of our own loss of self is an ineradicable feature of the modern moral
285 universe (254).

While Heller's formulation of a more regulative conception of the existential choice
seems like a concession to the above criticisms, she is also quick to defend key aspects of
the existential model. She thinks it perfectly legitimate to focus on key strategic moments
and decisions (180–81). In her view, it makes sense to focus on life-shaping crises and
290 junctures where possibilities are narrowed down, where situations are not simply given
but dynamic, offering real choices and new options. Her affirmation in *A Philosophy of
Morals* of transforming contingency into destiny means not the embrace of every detail
but the realisation of the best possibilities (77). This choice is a *leap* into authenticity
neither determined nor directed by any external rule or norm. Authenticity signifies
295 bringing the self's empirical existence into accord with these chosen best possibilities (20).
While contingency remains an inescapable element of this context, for the actor this
choice possesses an irresistible attraction that alienates all that went before (27). She
acknowledges that choices are always made within constraints but argues these make no
difference from the moral point of view.²² The good person appraises not just ends but
300 also means and their likely consequences. Goodness is no longer simply a question of

character; it also includes values, commitments, obligations and promises that express personal values and priorities. However, in real life interest and value related actions co-exist in intricate networks. In these webs, moral consequences are difficult to fathom.

305 Heller insists that to manage without the support of full knowledge requires *phronesis* and dialogue with concerned parties (188). Modern pluralism allows for the possibility of the individual becoming a good person in her own way. It follows that we have no right to morally criticise another who comes to a different evaluation of priorities: the goals and preferences of another are beyond critique as long as they do not lead to moral infraction.

BALANCING AUTONOMY AND CONTINGENCY

310 These clarifications, refinements and concessions aside, it is worthwhile to focus on the core idea that animates Heller's notion of the existential choice. In 2005 Heller was invited to present the Ferrater Mora Lectures at the University of Girona where she outlined the key aspects of her philosophy in a series of lectures entitled "The World/
315 Our World." At the conclusion of one of these lectures, "The Two Pillars of Modern Ethics," Heller was questioned from the audience about the autonomy that she attributed to the existential leap.²³ The questioner seemed sceptical about the degree of residual autonomy that Heller ascribes to the everyday subject. Heller replied to this question by citing a news story that concerned a potential murder in a hospital ward. She alleged that in this crisis moment, one very disabled patient, who had previously appeared comatose,
320 managed to alert staff and save the day.

For Heller, this narrative exemplified the moral potential of even very disabled human beings to act even in crisis situations when it might seem that conditions and fate had robbed them of their capacity to act autonomously. For others in the audience, including myself, this example raised more questions than it answered, not least about the
325 balance between contingency and autonomy in Heller's understanding of the existential leap. While Heller was not condemning the disabled patients who were unable to raise themselves from their beds to provide assistance in this crisis, her celebration of the miraculous revival of the comatose individual left me wondering about the purported universal potential of the existential leap. There seems to be many instances when
330 contingency invades the very core of the capacity for autonomy in human beings. I'm not here just referring to physical incapacity as in the case of bedridden patients. There would appear to be a whole spectrum of instances from addiction to psychological trauma of various sorts where life history and contingency either robs or significantly impairs an individual's capacity for autonomous action.

335 To illustrate this problem I want to briefly consider two lives from contemporary fiction, which exemplify the weight of contingency in various instances on the individual capacity for autonomy. W. G. Sebald's last novel, *Austerlitz*, turns round the life of Jacques Austerlitz who as a small child was sent to England by his Jewish parents to avoid the coming Holocaust. Fostered by an ascetic Welsh minister and his childless wife,
340 Jacques was brought up without any knowledge of this European past or his parents, who did not survive. One of the most important details in this story is that even after Jacques becomes aware of the bare facts of his life, he continues to be plagued by frightful, and increasing powerful, anxiety attacks. His reason seems to have been defenceless against

345 the sense of rejection and annihilation he experienced as a child. For the rest of his life he
pursues a listless, peripatetic drifting, punctuated by episodic flashbacks of vague memory
traces and fragments. His course is almost aimless, directed only by the constant internal
wrenching caused by the vortex of past time. As Jacques sees it, the most decisive steps in
life are not the result of conscious existential leaps but “of slight inner adjustments of
which we are barely conscious.”²⁴ The novel ends with Jacques continuing his quest for
350 knowledge of his father last seen during the Second World War in Paris. He bestows on
the narrator the keys to his house where he might study the black-and-white photographs
that “one day would be all that was left of his life” (408). At the end of this narrative there
is no sense that Jacques is approaching a personally emancipatory knowledge. This
knowledge is probably now beyond recovery and Jacques himself is too deeply scarred by
355 his own childhood trauma to bring the fragments of his life into any sort of meaning.
All that will remain are moments, bleached of all colour and consumed in the past.

In J. M. Coetzee's *The Life and Times of Michael K* we meet another individual whose
life seemingly lacks all trajectory or anything approaching meaning.²⁵ We know little
about Michael K other than he was born during the Second World War in the Cape
360 Town area with a severe harelip to a single black mother; his disfigurement and mental
slowness excluded him from the school environment and he was consigned to state care
before doing a series of menial labouring jobs with municipal services. In his thirties his
life was solitary, without female company or children (4–5). Like Kafka's more famous
Josef K, Michael K is a representative figure of excluded life whose biography hovers only
365 marginally above mere biological existence. Coetzee's narrative follows Michael's
ultimately failed efforts to bring his dying mother back to her homeland in Prince Albert.
His life has been one lived in various forms of imprisonment and Coetzee follows his
attempt to escape. Michael is the “little man” who at best lives his life far away from the
grinding wheels of history but who typically is devoured beneath them. He is not in the
370 war, he has no beliefs, future or story, in fact his whole “life has been a mistake” (212).
Yet, somehow Michael's minimal life allows him to “pass through the bowels of the state
undigested” (221). This is why he appears an “escape artist” who against all the odds can
be a sort of anti-hero. In *Michael K*, Coetzee finds a corporeal life that refuses self-
preservation unless it can be delivered from all the camps (248).

375 My interest in *Michael K* is not primarily in Coetzee's moving portrait of a life
reduced to corporeality, although he does believe that it is precisely in this shape that he
has something to teach the overwhelming majority of moderns still imprisoned within
the various camps of civilisation. For me, *Michael K* stands at one extreme end of the
spectrum of lives where conditioning and contingency seem to have utterly triumphed
380 over autonomy. Michael resists but, like Jacques Austerlitz, he cannot make the existential
leap either into difference or universality. In both these cases, life seems to be impelled by
blind forces more than by individual autonomy. This seems to raise fundamental
questions about the normative status of Heller's notion of the existential leap.

385 In this paper, Heller's existential leap has been interpreted as an attempt to rescue
subjectivity from the twin perils of Marxist scientism and post-modern critiques of the
subject. From her early years within the Lukacs humanist programme for the “renaissance
of Marxism,” Heller has asserted the irreducibility of the individual, of individual action
and ethical responsibility. In her reflective post-modern phase, she has moderated this
initial anthropological optimism with the need to give due recognition to contingency,

390 plurality and self-reflexivity. We have seen how this post-modern moment impacts on
the wise grandmother's reformulation of the existential leap in *An Ethics of Personality* by
viewing it metaphorically as a regulative notion. However, we might ask whether this
self-criticism goes far enough.

To my mind the idea of a singular quest, of drawing the various dimensions and
395 possibilities of a life into a unified whole, still smacks of a romantic sensibility that
privileges one aspect (usually creation) and downgrades all the other values that lie in the
ordinary performance of life.²⁶ The idea of an existential leap, even in the wise
grandmother's attenuated form, has the tendency to homogenise the myriad sources of
400 meaning and possibility in everyday life by imposing the idea of a singular, coherent
narrative. In most lives, like those of Jacques Austerlitz and Michael K, the weight of
contingency is heavy, and the prospects for meaning must often be won from moments,
from fragmentary episodes and actions, and also from enduring care that co-exists with
the rhythms of practical necessities and their contingencies.

If this is true then the idea of an existential leap need not even be a regulative idea
405 for all. What is required is a further concession to modern pluralism that acknowledges
that the ordinary performance of life has its own meaning and values. These do not
require validation by a higher purpose or a singular narrative. In fact, the idea of radical
choice that seems so essential to Heller's idea of existential choice might often lose more
than it gains by sacrificing the rich diversity of the everyday web of life for a singular,
410 holistic meaning. We know that the post-modern spirit has abandoned the grand
narratives of history in the interests of emancipation and pluralism. Maybe it is time to do
the same for the individual life and abandon the idea of an existential leap into singularity
in the interests of inclusiveness, true diversity, and the intrinsic richness of the web of
contingency.

415

NOTES

1. For a fuller account of Agnes Heller's biography and her early Marxist works, see John
Grumley, *Agnes Heller: A Moralism in the Vortex of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2005).
2. Agnes Heller, "The Dissatisfied Society," in *The Power of Shame: A Rational Perspective*
420 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 309.
3. Agnes Heller, *A Philosophy of Morals* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 10.
4. Agnes Heller, *Beyond Justice* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 291.
5. For a most useful elaboration of this point, see Agnes Heller's unpublished paper "Ethics of
Personality, the Other and the Question of Responsibility" (1997), 18.
- 425 6. Zygmunt Bauman, *The Individualized Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 87.
7. *Ibid.*, 76.
8. *Ibid.*, 73.
9. *Ibid.*, 77.
10. *Ibid.*, 308.
- 430 11. Heller, *Beyond Justice*, 312.
12. In recent times this neglect has come to attention. Note the recent major study by Martha
Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 2001); subsequent page references are cited in the text.
13. Heller, *A Philosophy of Morals*, 15.
- 435 14. *Ibid.*, 304.

15. *Ibid.*, 14.
16. *Ibid.*, 313.
17. Heller, "Ethics of Personality, the Other and the Question of Responsibility," 20.
18. Heller, *A Philosophy of Morals*, 31.
- 440 19. Agnes Heller, "The Human Condition," in *General Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).
20. Bauman, *The Individualized Society*, 77.
21. Agnes Heller, *An Ethics of Personality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).
22. Heller, *An Ethics of Personality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 181.
23. For a video of this session which includes the full lecture but breaks before the end of the
445 questions, see <http://diobma.udg.edu:8080/dspace/handle/10256.1/108>
24. W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2001), 189.
25. J. M. Coetzee, *The Life and Times of Michael K* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1983).
26. Here I give a slightly different reading of a point made by John Burnheim in his insightful
450 introduction to his collection of essays on Heller's social philosophy. John Burnheim, ed., *The
Social Philosophy of Agnes Heller* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 13.