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Being Oneself: Encountering Ágnes Heller and the Budapest School

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Abstract: The Budapest School of philosophers and sociologists formed around the Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács in the 1960s and dissipated when many of its members went into exile from Hungary in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A number went to Australia, and the last collective works of the Budapest School were produced there just as the cooperative intellectual impetus of the group dissolved. One of the Budapest School philosophers, Ágnes Heller, took up a lecturing post at La Trobe University where she supervised the PhD of the author of this paper, Peter Murphy. The paper explores Heller's trajectory out of group philosophy into an existential view of philosophy as a "truth for me," and Murphy's philosophical relationship with Heller, with the idea of a school of philosophy, and with the notion of a personal philosophy.

Key words: Budapest School, Ágnes Heller, Georg Lukács, communism, Hungary, freedom, life, beauty, Renaissance, irony, paradox, pendulum, equilibrium, dissatisfaction, happiness, Australia

The Budapest School of philosophers and sociologists formed around the Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács in the 1960s and dissipated when many of its members went into exile from Hungary in the late 1970s, early 1980s. A number went to Australia, and the last collective works of the Budapest School were produced in Australia just as the cooperative intellectual impetus of the group dissolved.

I first heard of the Budapest School in 1978 or 1979 when I read the multi-authored Budapest School volume *The Humanisation of Socialism*, which was published in English in 1976. I also came across the name Ágnes Heller in essays she wrote for the American journal "Telos" in the late 1970s. Her article *Marxist Ethics and Eastern Europe* made a particular impression on me. It echoed a lot of thoughts that I had had, albeit impressionistically. I began to look around for a PhD supervisor after I finished my honours year at La Trobe University in Mel-

bourne in 1979. In January of 1980, I was astonished to discover that Ágnes had taken up a lecturing appointment at La Trobe. She took me on as a PhD, her first. We had an elective affinity for wide-ranging intellectual discussion. I was an omnivorous reader and an animated talker. We got on well.

In her interesting philosophical autobiography, *A Short History of My Philosophy*, Ágnes observed that the Budapest School came to end when several of its leading figures migrated to Australia, effectively expelled from Hungary. At an oblique angle, I watched the genteel fading of the Budapest School in the 1980s. It had existed as a fertile moment in the intellectual history of a small nation. While small nations lack the mass intellectual bulk and resulting visibility of large nations, some of them, and arguably Hungary is one of them, tend to punch intellectually above their weight. Switzerland, Denmark, Australia, and the Netherlands are other examples of the same phenomenon. In the case of the Budapest School, its existence was a by-product of Hungary's communist era. The School's core consisted of a group of Hungarian intellectuals connected to (and to a degree protected by) Georg Lukács in the 1960s. Lukács' philosophical persona bridged the worlds of official and dissenting Marxisms along with Western and Eastern Marxisms. As a global phenomenon, Marxism reached its peak intellectual influence around 1980. After that, it was downhill. In the 1970s the Budapest School was a nationally framed intellectual cohort, with a core and a periphery, united by opposition to the ossification of Hungarian society. The School stood for the humanization of socialism and for some kind of sociological realism about Hungarian society under communism.

In other words, the Budapest School was of its time and place. It was an episode in an unfolding national story. Like all such episodes, the existence of the School was time limited. The expatriation to Australia of four of its principals (Ágnes and her husband, the culture critic Ferenc Fehér, along with the Polish-born sociologist Maria Márkus and her husband, the philosopher George Márkus) brought the School to an end. A fifth principal, Mihály Vajda, went to Germany, the United States and Canada. Heller, Fehér and Vadja would eventually return to Hungary after the fall of the communist regime. Nonetheless, the expatriation of the core group ran against the grain of an intellectual school that was intertwined with a shifting national story. Moreover, the ubiquitous sunniness of Australia meant that it was not a place where the spirit of seeking emancipation from communist lugubriousness could be sustained.

To compound matters, the grip of the old communist world began inwardly to disintegrate at the moment its power outwardly appeared to peak. In the course of a decade, the infatuation of the world with socialism and Marxism, and their innumerable intellectual cousins, collapsed in both the East and the West. That was the story of the 1980s. The spirit of the times was changing. There was no longer a point in humanizing a previously pervasive despotic ideology that now, suddenly, was no longer pervasive. The gap between the fantasy of communism and its ugly reality became too much even for intellectuals. Almost overnight, the intellectuals who had idolized Marx – and the innumerable versions of Marx – moved on. The future turned into the past. Emancipation morphed into nostalgia. Thought became amnesiac. Old illusions were buried.

Observing her at close quarters, Ágnes seemed almost untouched by this. She had actively engaged with Marxism in the 1970s in short works like *The Theory of Needs in Marx* (1976). However, these engagements were surrogates or proxies for her own underlying worldview that was deeply rooted in the Renaissance and that she had set out in great detail in her first major work, *Renaissance Man*, in 1966. Her "Marx" was like a character who had accidentally walked into a play by Shakespeare. Accordingly, she transitioned out of the Marxist 1970s effortlessly. It left little philosophical impression on her work. The 1980s for her was a time to curate the Budapest School. Some of its collective writings were archived in collections she edited and contributed to – *Lukács Revalued* (1983) and *Reconstructing Aesthetics* (1986). Amongst the core and peripheral members of the Budapest School, old friendships born of difficult times remained. However, their erstwhile intellectual cooperation diminished and evaporated. Philosophically each person went their own way.

The impulse to "go your own way" intellectually appeared to me to be entirely apposite. I was not by nature a joiner or a team player. It never occurred to me to want to be part of a philosophical "school." I had had more than enough of schooling when I was at school. "Schooling" was something I thought was lifeless, boring and reductive. From the age of fifteen, I was instinctively attracted to thinkers – and as it turned out thinkers who possess a highly personal philosophy. Ágnes was among these. She observed late in life that Michel Foucault, whom she had a great affection for, had a personal philosophy. In hindsight, she thought that Foucault, the post-metaphysical thinker, had rejected all isms and embraced the maxim "Dare to know." Thinking back all those years, Ágnes' account of the

encounter between these two personal philosophers, herself and Foucault, rings true. I remember her talking to me animatedly about Foucault in 1982. She talked about him not without philosophical reservations but really about her discovery of another philosopher with a personal star that he followed, like her.

For myself, I never had any taste for Foucault's philosophy even though I shared Ágnes' and Foucault's love of the Stoics. What I was drawn to was not an outlook – and certainly not an ism – but rather to a capacious epic scale of thought and the willingness of a thinker to embrace coherently vast swathes of time and space, and to do this responsibly, without descending into fantasy or cruelty. I was not convinced that Foucault was a responsible thinker. I also gradually came to understand all of this in metaphysical rather than post-metaphysical terms. I read closely Ágnes' works of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. However, as she engaged with post-metaphysical or post-modern styles of thinking in the 1990s (albeit in a personalized existential manner) my interest waned. Later works from the 2000s, on Shakespeare and especially on comedy, revived my interest, though our paths had definitively branched by that stage.

Much later still, in the 2010s, I came to see significantly more of the point of the warm Kierkegaardian light that bathed Ágnes' existential works of the mid-1990s. Little by little, I came to appreciate the importance of existential truths: those edifying, soulful, deeply anchored subjective "truths for me" that animate and bleed through into each personality, each with its unique sense of destiny, difference and universality, however obliquely grasped.

I was always charmed by Ágnes' turn of expression, her way of formulating her own way of viewing the world. Her worldview was pretty consistent from *Renaissance Man* onwards. Charmed though I was by that worldview, I was never seduced by it. Ironically that was because I agreed with it, at least to the extent that I agreed – at first intuitively and only much later in theory – with Ágnes' Kierkegaardian formulation in 1993's *A Philosophy of History in Fragments* and 1996's *An Ethics of Personality* that philosophy is a "truth for me" upon which neither a school, an ism nor a movement can be built.

From day one, and at first unconsciously on some latent, deep ontological level, I acted in accord with this spirit. However, for a long time, I worried that the idea of a personal philosophy, a "truth for me," was too idiosyncratic, too relativistic, too facile. Yet I was never attracted to schools or movements – let alone to parties. Not in the slightest. Yet that only incited in me the question: how can

one meaningfully present a personal theory of the world? If I learned any fundamental lesson from Ágnes, it was how it was possible to be one's self, intellectually. In her philosophical autobiography, Ágnes remarked that "I always loved to swim against the tide." Me too. This contrarian disposition is not a desire to be perverse. It is not contrariness for its own sake. Rather it seems to go hand in hand with an inward sense that is unshakeable or inescapable. This is the feeling that one possesses a "truth for me" that is more a matter of endowment or nature than choice or volition.

In my case, to be myself intellectually, to possess a "truth for me," meant stepping back from several of Ágnes' key premises. In her Australian period, from 1979 to 1986, which was the most visceral period of my interaction with her, she introduced two key ideas: one was that freedom and life were axiomatic values in modernity. The second was the distinction between dynamic, modern, dissatisfied societies and Soviet-type societies dominated by a dictatorship over needs. The dissatisfaction-dictatorship distinction appears in 1982's *A Theory of History* and Ágnes' chapters in 1983's exilic Budapest School volume *Dictatorship Over Needs*; the life-freedom axioms appear in 1985's *The Power of Shame* and 1987's essay collection *Eastern Left, Western Left*, co-written with Ferenc Fehér.

Ágnes' dissatisfaction-dictatorship theory implied a distinctive theory of modernity. That theory had already been formulated in her 1966 *Renaissance Man* volume. Its premise was that the deepest roots of what we call modernity lie in the European Renaissance – not, as Cornelius Castoriadis, Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss among others contended, in classical antiquity. Though Ágnes made exceptions for her beloved Stoicism and Epicureanism and late in life for a kind of Leibnizian Platonism, what she postulated in her 1966 work remained her overriding view – namely, that modernity is distinguished by dynamism and that its peculiar dynamism is first observable in the European Renaissance.

As it turned out, I ended up disagreeing with the dissatisfaction-dictatorship, life-freedom, and dynamic-modernity theories, though perhaps it was more a case that I departed from them rather than I disagreed with them. And even though I departed from them, I never set out to do so. Re-reading, fourty years later, my essays from the late 1980s, two of them on Ágnes' thought,[1] I can see

[1] P. Murphy, *Freedom and Happiness: The Pathos of Modernity in Agnes Heller*, "Thesis Eleven" 1987, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 40–55; P. Murphy, *Radicalism and the Spheres of Value*, "Thesis Eleven" 1990, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 39–58.

myself struggling with the three theories, and distancing myself from them, if somewhat reluctantly.

The thing I always felt was missing from Ágnes' philosophy was the idea of happiness. Yes, I accepted that freedom and life were axiomatic modern values. But nagging away at the back of my mind was the idea that happiness also was an axiomatic modern value. I was fully aware that, as a philosophical concept, happiness has fallen out of fashion since the 18th century, and that its persistence in utilitarian and hedonistic theories was less than persuasive. However, not necessarily as an explicit philosophical concept but rather as a generic existential and social value, I could see that happiness was just as axiomatic in modern life as freedom and life were; in fact profoundly so.

It is frequently remarked that there are two kinds of people in the world: happy people and unhappy people. I'd add a third kind: people whose happiness derives from making other people unhappy. Correspondingly there are happy societies, dissatisfied societies, and dictatorships. In her work in the 1980s, Ágnes ably described two out of the three types. Against this backdrop, and for some indefinable reason, I began to tussle with the idea that there was indeed such a thing as a modern happy society. This first occurred to me while I was writing the PhD that Ágnes supervised. During its writing, I wrestled with Immanuel Kant's juggling of the concepts of freedom and happiness. In the end, I was not convinced by Kant's moderately low opinion of happiness.

As a consequence, after my PhD was completed in 1985, I turned to classical antiquity, first to Aristotle, then Plato, the Stoics, and the Epicureans. All of these had enduringly interesting things to say about happiness. The next step I took, though, was less obvious. I began to think that balance and equilibrium also had a lot do with happiness, both individual and social.[2] From that precept, I concluded that the establishing of an equilibrium between opposites was the key to a happy society. By 1991 I had arrived at this conclusion and I spent the next thirty years exploring the idea in numerous contexts. The concept of an equilibrium or union of opposites was developed in volumes that explored the continuities between antiquity and modernity, the imagination, creation, cognition, technology, government and prosperity.

[2] P. Murphy, *Freedom and Happiness*, op. cit.; P. Murphy, *Postmodern Perspectives and Justice*, "Thesis Eleven" 1991, Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 117–132.

If Ágnes' underlying pattern of thought was intuitively dualistic, mine was spontaneously tripartite in nature. Ágnes' theory of modern values assumed the pull-and-push of the axioms of freedom and life. In contrast, I thought instinctively in terms of a triptych of freedom, happiness and life. Happiness represents both the balance to be struck between fundamental values and the idea of balance as a valuable state-of-being that human beings seek, whether we are talking about homeostatic bodily balance, the domestic harmony of the sexes, the economic balance of supply and demand, the constitutional balance of powers, or any other of the numerous kinds of tacitly attractive social and personal equilibria.

The happiness-equilibrium idea entailed on my part a particular reading of modernity. For Ágnes, modernity entailed a spirit of dynamism that first appeared in the Renaissance. That dynamism ran parallel with and at times intersected with modernity's proclivity for dictatorship. I could see all that. Yet I thought that the dialectic of dynamism and dictatorship had something fundamental missing: namely, the drive of human beings towards homeostasis, equilibrium and happiness. Beauty figured significantly in this web of ideas as well. From this base, I gradually spun out a Janusian, antinomical, and cyclical view of the world that was different in nature from the worldview of the discontented striving "Renaissance" type of personality whose aspirations in principle were unsatisfiable and whose potential in theory was unlimited.

I thought that the most interesting and appealing bits of modernity, a period filled with greatness and awfulness, are the axiomodern parts, the bits that weave together Axial Age metaphysics, including Greek and Roman philosophies and especially Pre-Socratic ones,[3] with modern social and economic behaviours. I was drawn to the idea of an axiomodernity. This was not conceived in direct opposition to Ágnes' Renaissance-derived model of dynamic-dictatorial modernity – for much of that model, I thought, was empirically true and philosophically persuasive. And yet I also thought that the model lacked something crucial, something essential.

At times, as the 1990s rolled on into 2000s, the branching intellectual paths of myself and Ágnes re-connected in unexpected ways. In *A Theory of Modernity* in 1999 Ágnes talked about the pendulum of modernity, the propensity of modern societies to move in one direction and then in a reverse direction. I thought

[3] P. Murphy, *Civic Justice: From Ancient Greece to the Modern World*, Humanity Books, Amherst, NY, 2001.

this was an interesting way of depicting modern dynamic equilibria. Paradox briefly emerged in her thought as the answer to the question she posed: what is the groundless foundation of a foundation-less dynamic world?

Ágnes' 2005 book on comedy, *Immortal Comedy*, also resonated with me, deeply. The comic propensity for incongruity I think is a fundamental aspect of the human ability to unify opposites. This ability expresses itself through wit, paradox, metaphor and irony. At the same time, Ágnes' book on Shakespeare published in 2000 appealed to me more in principle than in practice. I do love Shakespeare. However, I was reminded when reading her book on Shakespeare that the things that I find compelling about the Renaissance are different from hers. Mine is the Renaissance of paradox and irony, and measure and beauty. Hers is the dynamic "time out of joint."

We differed because we both had a personal philosophy. We were the same because we both had a personal philosophy. I learned eventually to stop worrying that a personal philosophy is not enough. I learned gradually that each of us has to go our own way. Some of us do this in packs and groups and schools, in movements and institutions. But even then, thought is a lonely business – even if it is conducted in the middle of a crowd. At its heart, no matter how seemingly social, thought entails an ipseity, a quality of being oneself. If Ágnes modelled anything for me, above all it was the capacity to be oneself intellectually.

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