

PHILOSOPHY AS A LIVED EXPERIENCE
AN INTERVIEW WITH ÁGNES HELLER
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1. In the 50s and 60s you were among the unorthodox Marxists. Your works inspired several intellectuals to make a new interpretation of Marx. Today you no longer consider yourself to be a Marxist. You think that the era of big stories that comes with universalistic interpretations of the world has ended. In the interview with Joseph G. Feinberg, you said that in the modern world everyone develops her or his own personal philosophy. Does it mean that critical thinking has to give up any ambition to change the world?

Ágnes Heller: Philosophy was always critical, more precisely, to be critical is one of the major characteristics of the literary genre called philosophy. After all, the first philosopher, Socrates was executed for being critical, so was Seneca, Boethius, Giordano Bruno. Among all “occupations”, philosophers occupy the first place among the persecuted ones. What was termed “critical philosophy” is one philosophical school among others, characterized by Marxian criticism of modern (capitalist, consumer) society. When I said that there are no schools nowadays, yet philosophy became personal, I just describe a fact. I refer at the contemporary merger of two projects. The one by Hegel according to which philosophy is our time expressed in concept, and the other by Nietzsche according to which philosophy is autobiography. Personal philosophers are also expressing our time in concepts, yet from the perspective of their lived experience. They do not raise claim of an eternal “Truth”, of historical necessity of absolute knowing. They take personal responsibility for their theoretical claims.

Philosophers from Socrates onwards always wanted to change their world; they were all in love with politics. This love was and remained unrequited. Some traditional philosophers knew this already and so do personal philosophers. Not the interest in politics is gone, but the illusion that they know everything better, they can show the “true way” to the “just society”.

2. Karl Marx believed that the law will be useless in a classless society, because everyone will act morally. The ancient philosophers thought that laws are not needed by those who act excellently (*fronimoi, spoudaioi*). But they also realized that excellently acting people are a minority in society, and therefore create “communities of wise men” inside “community of fools”. In this sense, could we say that Marx was “romantic” while Greek intellectuals were more “realistic”?

Ágnes Heller: *Marx was a man of the romantic version of Enlightenment, a latecomer to this family. He believed in the perfection of the human nature, he shared the illusion with Rousseau or Fourier that in a “just” society people will behave like “moral ” beings. This was a kind of reaction the political realism of a Spinoza or a Kant, who knew that humans need the kind of institutions (laws) under which they would behave at least decently.*

3. The late work of Michel Foucault has shown that ancient ethics focused on individual effort to give a person’s life a certain direction. The main aim of the Greek philosophers could not explain the world, but to find ways to live in it well and happily. Do you think that philosophy in modern times has a similar role? Or otherwise, why do we need philosophy?

Ágnes Heller: *No philosopher shared the illusion to make other people happy. They just described happy people telling others what was that made them happy (the answer was normally, virtue). Whether philosophy can teach virtue remained always a debated question. They also suggested that true knowledge about the universe that can make people either happy or at least satisfied with their lot.*

Modern political philosophy raises the question not only on the individual, but also the political level. Has anyone right to make people happy against their will? Is anyone able to do that? (the answer was always “no”.)

4. Do you think that personal philosophy as conscious effort of individuals to give their lives a critical dimension can lead to a gradual transformation of the world in which they live? If we change ourselves, will we also change our world?

Ágnes Heller: *As it is the case in all literary genres (e.g. tragedy or comedy), philosophy stands also in its own tradition. Some kind of knowledge of the tradition belongs to the practice of the genre. The genre limits are far from being rigid, but they do exist. E.g. “wisdom poetry” is not philosophy, even if some philosophers wrote in verses. Aesthetics, on the other hand, is a philosophical sub-genre, just like philosophy of nature or philosophy of religion. After the eclipse of metaphysics and epistemology, they begin to occupy an almost central position.*

5. If we consider how the world has changed during the last two centuries, we should ask whether such important thinkers of modernity as Hegel, Marx or Nietzsche still have something to say to us. Do you think we need to have a

further discussion with Marx or Nietzsche if we want to understand ourselves and the world we live in?

Ágnes Heller: *Whether Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche has anything to say to us? Even Plato and Aristotle have many things to say. Philosophy is, namely not falsifiable. Better to say, all philosophies were falsified yet it did no harm them, they are and remain still sources of world understanding, and self-understanding and spiritual enjoyment.*