The role and the place of Hannah Arendt in Ágnes Heller’s *Theory of Morals*

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**RESUMEN**

El artículo trata de dos aspectos de la conexión entre la posición ética de Hannah Arendt y la de Ágnes Heller (limitadamente a la *Theory of Morals*): la noción de la condición humana y la concepción del juicio estético-moral, con referencia a las diferencias y a los paralelismos entre las dos filósofas. Estas diferencias y estos paralelismos contribuyen a la definición del concepto de vida buena de Heller, ejemplificado por la persona real de Hannah Arendt, como expresión de la síntesis entre el aspecto moral y el estético de la ética, y como el símbolo de la relación filosófica entre las dos pensadoras.

**Palabras clave:** Heller, Ágnes (1929), Arendt, Hannah (1906-1975), Condición Humana, Juicio Estético y Moral, Ética de la Personalidad, Filosofía del Siglo XX

**ABSTRACT**

The paper concerns two aspects of the connection between the ethical positions of Hannah Arendt and Ágnes Heller (limited to the *Theory of Morals*): the notion of the human condition and the conception of moral-aesthetic judgment, with reference to the differences and parallelisms between the two philosophers. These differences and parallelisms contribute to the determination of Heller’s conception of the good life, exemplified by the living person of Hannah Arendt, as an expression of the synthesis between the moral and the aesthetic aspect of the ethics, and as a symbol of the philosophical relationship between the two thinkers.

**Keywords:** Heller, Ágnes (1929), Arendt, Hannah (1906-1975), Heller, Ágnes (1929-) *Theory of Morals*, Theory of Judgment, Moral Aesthetics, Philosophy of XX Century.

**Introduction**

Given the difficulty concerning the analysis of the complex and multifaceted relationship that binds the two philosophers Hannah Arendt and Ágnes Heller, an analysis is proposed here of a specification of the general relationship. This specification refers to the role and the place of Hannah Arendt in a particular place of Heller’s production: her Trilogy of Morals, constituted by the works *General Ethics*, *A Philosophy of Morals*, and *An Ethics of Personality*. By this effort, it would be possible to present with a deeper analytical spirit the link between the two thinkers, and try to propose this analysis as a mirror, a symbol of the general, whole, “holistic” relationship.

The present essay is divided in three parts. The first two are devoted to the analysis of two common themes of the two thinkers: the human condition and the relationship between spectator and actor within the ethic-aesthetic kind of judgment. The third part tries to present a synthesis between the parallelisms and differences resulting from the first two parts, with reference to Heller’s interpretation of the biographical figure of Hannah Arendt presented in the final pages of *An Ethics of Personality*, as the exemplification of the good life of the modern person.

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1. The Human Condition and the Existential Choice

Heller’s Trilogy of Morals can not be fully understood without reference to the formal ground of the Theory, represented by an insight on the “human”. Morality has to do with human action, i.e. it refers specifically to the human: for that reason, as Heller states in the first chapter of General Ethics\(^2\), the quasi-totality of the moral thoughts of the past started with or referred to a particular conception of human nature. This conception could concern an axiological judgment (human nature is good or bad, or neutral, adiaphor), within or without a topological division of it (tripartition or bipartition).

But given the plurality of different conceptions of human nature proposed by all the authors of the history of philosophy – i.e. given the pluralism of the concept of human nature itself – Heller prefers to eliminate this kind of ground for her moral theory, and substitute for it the concept of human condition, preferable to the former by the reference to an intrinsic “historical” conception of the human, based, finally, on the concept of “destiny”\(^3\). At this point, for the first time in Heller’s Theory of Morals, Hannah Arendt makes her appearance: Heller refers to her as someone who has “already made a strong case”\(^4\) for the interpretation of the concept of “human condition” as fruitful ontological ground for answering the fundamental question of the moral theory: “How are good persons possible?”.

In fact, in parallel with Heller’s negation of the concept of human nature, at the beginning of The Human Condition Arendt states very clearly that “The problem of human nature, the Augustinian quaecstio mihi factus sum, seems unanswerable in both its individual psychological sense and its general philosophical sense”\(^5\). A human being can not say anything concerning its own nature – “only a god could know and define it”\(^6\). Heller clearly shares with Arendt the same skeptical conception, concerning the fact that it would be extremely hard that a very concept of human nature could ever be determined by human beings\(^7\).


\(^3\) Then, the reasons of Heller’s switch from the concept of human nature to the concept of human condition are two: the first one refers to the “polymorph” of the first metaphor (cf. ibid., p. 16). The second reason refers to the introduction of the possibility of a relationship between the human individual and his or her destiny: “No great sophistication is needed to discover that ‘human condition’ can be associated with the age-old notion of ‘human destiny’. […] The concept of ‘human destiny’ elicits images of ‘being destined to something’ or, alternatively, ‘living up to our destiny’” (ibid., p. 17). This relationship between the individual and his/her own destiny plays an extremely important role for the foundation and characterization of the notion of “existential choice”, expressed in a very Nietzschean way by Heller with the quasi-paradoxical statement prescribing the transformation of one’s necessity in one’s destiny. Putting in short a long conceptualization, the human condition is constituted by the notion of contingency, i.e. the fact that man and woman are “thrown into the world” by chance: they received by chance a bodily and a social position. Given that the modern human is characterized by the awareness of the own contingency, the existential choice represents the effective ground of Heller’s moral theory as theory of the contemporary human condition.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 17.


\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) A plurality of commentators, confirming the already explicit debt of Heller towards Arendt concerning the assumption of the notion of “human condition”, interpreted it under the sign of the abandonment of the prior anthropological project concerning the determination of a hypothetical “human nature”. Consequentially, the effective nature of Heller’s debt towards Arendt’s background of ethics seems to refer to a specific change in the theoretical prospective of Heller’s philosophy – a change inaugurated with Theory of History, and arriving at the dismiss of the determination of a sort of “philosophical anthropology”; Cf. Grumley, John, Agnes Heller. A Moralist in the Vortex of History, London, Pluto Press, 2005, p. 181: “The central focus of her [scil. Heller] Marxist work in the late 1960s was philosophical anthropology. The works on values, instincts, feelings, needs and history […] were contribution to this unfinished project. This is now finally abandoned. Under the auspices of Hannah Arendt, she opts for a new conceptual foundation to her ethics. The notion of the human condition is no mere synonym for human nature, but its explicit critique”. The gesture of assuming the concept of human
But, as Heller herself is ready to recognize, the determination of the human condition is not quite the same in the two thinkers. On one hand, Heller’s position is structured around the notions of contingency of the human being as determined by the participation of two conditions: one physic-genetic, the other social. Heller calls these determinations the two “a priori” of the individual: the genetic a priori refers to the fact that every human being receives from birth the sum of bodily contingencies: capabilities, health, external aspect, attitudes and ineptitudes; the social a priori refers to the fact that the individual is thrown from birth into a social, political and economic world. In the modern situation, the human condition is charged of another aspect: the self-awareness of the contingency, which produces the indetermination of the direction the life of the individual would or should assume after birth. The individual must then choose the tēlos of his/her life, the end of the life, given that the life itself does not receive any tēlos from birth: this choice is called by Heller the “existential choice”.

On the other hand, Arendt’s position about the human condition presents the well-known double and mirror tripartition of “Vita Activa” (in Labor, Work and Action) and “Vita Contemplativa” (in Thinking, Willing, Judging) – but these six conditions are in fact sub-conditions of the human existence’s most general ones: “natality and mortality”, at least as common references for all the determinations of both Vita Activa and Contemplativa. In fact, each of the different internal divisions of both vita activa and vita contemplativa has to do with the function of rendering-meaning of the natality (like the introduction of the new-born in an organized world of the plurality, or, more simply, the betterment of the birth’s condition), and in a certain sense with the overcoming of the mortality (for instance, by the sustaining of the human life, or the creation of artifacts that would last more than the creator’s life).

Anyway, the differences and parallelisms concerning the two positions could be analyzed more deeply, beyond the mere discordance in terminology. At least two different features could be proposed as elements of comparison between the two authors’ thoughts: first, the notion of “being conditioned”; second, the possibility of the introduction of a novelty in the world.

The first concept is negatively derived from Arendt’s position: she clearly states that the human condition could only be radically modified by a reduction of the degree of the “being conditioned” characterizing human life – for instance, after the migration to a human-shaped world. This reduction would annul both “Vita Activa” and “Vita Contemplativa” – and, therefore, the two conditions of the human being should be objects of a totally new philosophical reflection; in other words, the human condition would be deeply reshaped by this change of conditions. But – and here stands the point of interest – this change would never annul the “being conditioned” itself of the human being: it can then be stressed that the most primordial element – the Urphänomen – of Arendt’s conception of the human condition is the epiphenomenon of a deeper change, placed on the ontological ground of the theory of morals: the choice of the concept of human condition stands for the choice of a conception of the human, opposed to a prior one.

8 In other terms, the fact that the contingency, in modernity, is not justified by a kind of Weltanschauung, a vision of the world which has the task of rendering meaning to the contingency itself – e.g. myths or legends that could render an heteronomous justification of the status quo the individual is placed in.


11 Cf. ibid., p. 10: “The most radical change in the human condition we can imagine would be an emigration of men from the earth to some other planet. Such an event, no longer totally impossible, would imply that man would have to live under man-made conditions, radically different from those the earth offers him. Neither labor nor work nor action nor, indeed, thought as we know it would then make sense any longer. Yet even these hypothetical wanderers from the earth would still be human; but the only statement we could make regarding their ‘nature’ is that they still are conditioned beings, even though their condition is now self-made to a considerable extent.”
is the fact that, necessarily, the human being is conditioned. This position is quite similar to Heller’s, concerning the fact that the human being is conditioned by the two a priori: it can then be inferred from this position that, for Heller, the possibility of an absolute autonomy does not pertain to the human condition – or, otherwise, if the absolute autonomy is wanted and searched for by a human being, this will and this search will end with the creation of a monster, i.e. with a non-human being, trying to eliminate the contingency of the two a priori.

Putting aside the (only apparent) circularity of this argumentation, the image of the human presented by both thinkers is quite similar: the human being is not fully autonomous, neither on a general point of view (some contingent elements and facts determine its presence on the world, like its own body and its own place in the society – i.e. the human is not the creator of his own life), nor on a moral point of view (some external prescriptions or norms determine its action in the world, some internal elements concur with the constitution of this particular good person – i.e. the human is not characterized by an unlimited freedom). The human being can not give to itself its own laws: there are conditions (factual or prescriptive ones) that could not (or better that should not) be eliminated from human life. The element of similarity between the two positions refers, in the final analysis, to the finitude of the human being – a finitude that, in both cases, is the condition per quam of a meaningful human life, i.e. a political life for Arendt (but, as it will be seen further, not the whole human life, because of the presence of the absolute autonomy in the faculty of thinking), and a good life for Heller.

At the same time, both authors conceive the possibility of a modification or a possible limitation of the general “doom” of “being conditioned”. For Arendt, on one hand (the “hand” of the Vita Activa) humans can reshape their conditions by the possibility of a life elsewhere than the Earth, but always within the framework of a Universe (i.e. the totality of facts) which is external and not created by humans; on the other hand (the hand of the Vita Contemplativa), the faculty of thinking is the condition of the presentification of the absolute autonomy of the individual, the faculty of willing is the absolute autonomous creation ex nihilo of the direction of one’s life, and finally the faculty of judging is the possibility for the individual to reach the absolute autonomous level of humankind in his/herself. For Heller the existential choice consists in the choice of the two a priori of the individual, the double choice of the genetic set and of the social world: all heteronomous determinations are then chosen by the individual as his/her own destiny. This transformation of the contingency in necessity is by no means a gesture of absolute autonomy, given that the existential choice does not annul the two conditions: they are positively recognized as conditions, and chosen as necessities. The individual elicits its own authenticity, i.e. the form of its uniqueness, by this choice – but,

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12 This circularity refers to the fact that the impossibility of absolute autonomy is derived from the notion of human being, which is, on its turn, defined by the absence of absolute autonomy. This circularity can even be extended to Arendt’s argumentation concerning the concept of (even limited) “being conditioned”. But, with a more attentive look, this fallacy is only apparent: in fact, in both cases the notion of human being is prescriptive and not descriptive – i.e. it is not defined by the non-absolute autonomy or the non-absolute a-conditioned of the human being: these concepts are rather the specifications of the general prescription of “How to be a human being”. The prescriptive nature of both Arendt’s and Heller’s definitions of human condition is evident by the following elements: in Arendt by the hierarchy among the three parts of the Vita Activa (where the Action takes the upper position, and the Labor the lower) and the consequential criticism (that Heller would call “culture criticism”) referring to the reverse of the hierarchy in modern times; in Heller the prescriptive rather than descriptive nature of the concept of human condition is linked to the fact of recognition of contingency – i.e. with the possibility for an individual to be aware of his or her own contingency: given that it is question of possibility, the individual may also fail in recognizing the contingency and, consequentially, in performing the existential choice; the result is a non-authentic human being. In short, for Heller the human condition of contingency is more a level of self-awareness the individual must reach in order to be fully human, than a metaphysical and necessary definition of the human being in itself.

13 According to the prescriptive nature of both Arendt’s and Heller’s positions. Cf. precedent note.
as it will be seen further, Heller proposed a strict limitation to the absolute autonomy of the existential choice, and this limitation is nothing but the condition itself of the realization of the choice, and of the happiness of the individual.

The second element of similarity between the two conceptions of human condition is represented by the novelty that every single human life is potentially able to introduce in the world. For Arendt, this element is strictly linked to the precedent condition of natality – and, as a consequence, it is one of the elements of the human condition: there is a “new beginning inherent to birth”\(^{14}\), expressed by the uniqueness of the individual\(^{15}\). For Heller, the novelty is represented by the uniqueness of the individual resulting from the two kinds of existential choice, under the category of the difference and under the category of the universal. The first kind concerns a specific vocation – a *Beruf* – by which the individual attributes to its own life a direction different for every human being; the choice under the category of the difference is the choice of one’s destiny – the kind of exister performing this choice is called by Heller, following Nietzsche, the *lucky throw of the dice*\(^{16}\). The second kind refers to the choice of oneself as decent person: it is the moral choice; this kind of choice is under the category of the universal, given that no difference with the rest of humankind is elicited: the decent person intends to act as every other decent person would act. But the qualification of universality does not negate the element of specificity in the decent person’s goodness: as Heller states clearly, “Once you choose yourself as a good (decent) person existentially, you choose under the category of the universality, for you choose something everyone else can also choose – but you choose no one but yourself”\(^{17}\). “Everyone is good in *his* or *her* own way, idiosyncratically[...]; and *everyone* can be good in *his* or *her* own way”\(^{18}\).

It can be anyway recognized an extremely important difference between the two positions, referring to the different nature of the “novelty” introduced by the individual. In Arendt the individual expresses its element of novelty through *action*: the action, the fact of acting, represents the way the individual has to introduce this novelty – or better, to express the unexpectedness of its own life: this new beginning “can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting”\(^{19}\). Consequently, action and birth are strictly co-related: the impulse of action is one with the natality of the individual – and as the natality introduces something (or better someone) new in the world, so action coincides with the beginning of the novelty, and is the last and true expression of the possibility of creation of the unexpected. “It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins. [...] The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world”\(^{20}\).

In Heller the unexpected is expressed by actions, but actions are only the epiphenomenon of a deeper cause – a sort of *efficient cause* of the actions: the quality of novelty carried by the actions is derived from the original novelty of this efficient cause of the actions. This cause is

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15 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 175-6: “Only man can express this distinction and distinguish himself, and only he can communicate himself and not merely something—thirst or hunger, affection or hostility or fear. In man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings”.
the existential chooser, the person who chooses himself existentially: the idiosyncrasy of the individual is expressed by its actions realizing and manifesting his/her existential choice – i.e. the actions for the accomplishment and realization of the specific Beruf, and the good deeds the decent person performs. Therefore, the novelty and uniqueness of the actions are consequences of the idiosyncrasy determined after the existential choice – the “difference” of the Beruf for the lucky throw of the dice, and the idiosyncratic kind of goodness of the specific good person. In general, every single action introduces something new given that every single human being is different from the other – according to the specificity of the two a priori. But the novelty acted by the individual is the effect of the idiosyncratic nature introduced in the individual life by the existential choice. As a corollary, the novelty the action introduces in the world is rich in meaning, i.e. it can be understood by the other human beings, and recognized as novelty and not as a crazy and arbitrary gesture, only under the framework of the existential choice. The person who has chosen him/herself existentially is then understandable as the causa efficiens of the novelty, the uniqueness and the unrepeatability of the action.

Following this possibility of a totally and unexpected novelty intrinsically present in every human life, both authors introduce the concept of the promise as the only necessary element capable of limiting a negative transformation of this novelty and unpredictability into the perpetual arbitrary and meaningless action of the unexpected. In fact, the character of novelty the actor introduces in the world is unexpected only as far as the person is unknown. After the acquaintance, this novelty becomes the expression of the idiosyncrasy of the person: consequentially, this person can be understandable to the other persons – i.e. can be recognized as a person: in other terms, the unforeseeable becomes foreseeable. Once the person is met, all the actions performed by the person enter in a framework of previdibility, of constancy, which gives shape and meaning to the person in the eyes of the others.

In both authors the faculty of keeping promises is strictly linked with the question of the identity.

Arendt is extremely clear – and even quite poetic: “Without being bound to the fulfillment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man's lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocalities — a darkness which only the light shed over the public realm through the presence of others, who confirm the identity between the one who promises and the one who fulfils, can dispel”22. The faculty of making and keeping promises allows every human being to be able to understand the reasons and the wills of others’ acts, and, therefore, to be able to formulate an idea, a judgment, about the personality of the other as a whole.

Heller links very strictly the promise with the truth of the existential choice: only the person who is able to keep his/her promises can be trusted as a true “exister”. There is a double link between promise and existential choice: on one hand the capacity to keep the promises refers firstly to the capacity to be true to oneself – i.e. to not lie about the content and the object of the choice; on the other hand, the fact that the person is an exister is manifested by the fact he or she is able to keep a promise. This capacity of the person is strictly linked to the “virtue” of authenticity: authenticity means “to be true to oneself”23, “to

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21 This is the reason why, before meeting a person for the first time, we do not know how to act – and we refer to general and impersonal rules of behavior, called bon ton – while, after the acquaintance, we know already some element of the personality of the other, and according to this knowledge we fine tune to the other's idiosyncrasy, pushing or limiting our involvement and intimacy, on the basis of a supposed constancy in the other’s personality.
being true to one’s leap, to the [existential] choice of oneself\textsuperscript{24}, and the everyday gesture of keeping the promise of being true to one’s existential choice shows the authenticity of the person – i.e. the fact that a person is that person, is that individual who made that specific existential choice. Given that the existential choice is existential because it can be made only once in one’s life, and can not be changed in order to have a true existential value, the capacity of keeping one’s word, and without changing the mind, could present a very clear insight to the truthfulness of one’s existential choice. For that reason, the promise is, for Heller, strictly related to the prospective responsibility\textsuperscript{25}, a kind of responsibility the existential choice refers to: the prospective responsibility refers to the maintaining of a task or duty one decides to be committed to. It is the kind of responsibility concerning the future. Applied to the existential choice, it refers to the exister’s (the person who performs an existential choice) willingness to be devoted to his/her own choice, and to endure it in everyday life. Finally, given that the existential choice determines the place and the role of the individual in the human world, and given that via the existential choice the individual becomes a personality, a uniqueness, and given that the capacity of being true to this own personality has its everyday analogon in the capacity to keep a promise, the promise is strictly related to the question of the identity of the individual\textsuperscript{26}.

2. The Spectator, the Actor, and the Judgment

The character of uniqueness is not the only element of parallelism both conceptions of action share. In fact, for both thinkers, the human action is also irreversible. This parallelism is confirmed by the common reference to the Goethe’s dictum: “Der Handelnde ist immer gewissenlos, es hat niemand Gewissen als der Betrachtende”\textsuperscript{27}. Heller quotes in fact this dictum in the translation proposed by Hannah Arendt in her Denktagbuch\textsuperscript{28}: “The actors are always guilty, and only the spectators are innocent”\textsuperscript{29}.

It is an incontestable fact that every action can be imputed to each and every human qua agens – and then, that every actor can be guilty for his/her action, without attributing to the adjective “guilty” any axiologically negative qualification. At the same time, it is an incontestable fact that no action can be imputed to each and every human which covers the position of mere spectator – the spectator is, then, not “guilty”, i.e. he or she is placed beyond any kind of negative, positive or even adiaphoric imputation, with the obvious exception of the action of observing.

\textsuperscript{25} Cf. Ead., An Ethics of Personality, cit., p. 60.
\textsuperscript{26} In conclusion, in both authors the importance of keeping the promise is taken from Nietzsche. In Arendt, cf. Ead., The Human Condition, cit., p. 245: “Nietzsche, in his extraordinary sensibility to moral phenomena, and despite his modern prejudice to see the source of all power in the will power of the isolated individual, saw in the faculty of promises (the ‘memory of the will,’ as he called it) the very distinction which marks off human from animal life”. Also Heller refers to the Nietzschean concept of faculty of promise as sign of distinction of the human being: “[For Nietzsche] man is an animal with the [capacity] to make promises” (Ead., An Ethics of Personality, cit., p. 55: cf. ibid., p. 304 note 108: “I preferre my translation ‘the capacity to make promises’ to the ‘right to make promises’ of Kaufman”). In Heller, the presence of Nietzsche is particularly significant in An Ethics of Personality, where she treats the connection between the capacity for keeping promises and the possibility of the decent person: In fact, the third volume of the moral trilogy is consecrated specifically to “the lucky throw of the dice”, and its connection with the existential choice of the morality.
\textsuperscript{27} J. W. Goethe, Maximen und Reflexionen, W. Von Hoyer (Ed.), Leipzig, Dichterich, 1953, Nr. 241.
\textsuperscript{29} Heller, Ágnes, An Ethics of Personality, cit., p. 14; very significant the note 11 at p. 298: “Hannah Arendt liked this Goethian aphorism; she was also inclined to accept an ethics of personality rather than any other kind”.
What seems at first sight an extremely banausic proposition opens to an important analysis of the action in two senses: on one hand, concerning imputation, on second hand on the difference on observation and action.

As far as the first aspect is concerned, the judgment of guilt – i.e. the imputation of the action – is presented by a human being which is not the actor; it is a fact that the actor is always guilty for his/her own action, and this fact is presented to the actor by a person who is not actor, but spectator of the action. Of course, the spectator who imputes the action can be the same person who acts, but not as actor; this is because, for the actor, the action does not exist already, given that the actor still did not accomplish his/her action – so the object of the spectator’s (or better, of the actor-mutated-into-spectator’s) judgment (i.e. the action) does not exist already. So, the person can only impute his/her own action to him/herself only after the action has been accomplished – consequentially, this auto-imputation may apply to the subject, but only qua spectator, in other terms only once the role of actor left the place to the role of spectator in the same subject. As a last consequence, it can be concluded that: first, there is the necessity of another role (or eventually another person) beside the role of the actor in order to produce the imputation of the action itself; second, the individual can always switch from the position of the actor to the position of the spectator – and this, as we will see, is a point of difference towards Arendt’s position.

Following these conclusions, the second aspect can be introduced concerning the difference between observation and action. If the imputation requires another person who is not actor, the observation is not an action, or at least it is an action which is different from all other forms of action – i.e. the spectator is not accomplishing an action as the one performed by the actor. The difference between observation and all other kinds of action consists in the passivity of the former opposed to the activity of the latter: an action is qualified as “action”, and for consequence a person is an “actor”, if the action introduces itself in the world, and if, following this introduction, it produces a modification in the world itself. In short, an action exists as far as it is possible to speak of consequences. In opposition, the observation does not introduces the spectator in the world, does not modify the framework or the display of the environment where one is placed, does not produce any consequence of the action. Obviously, the act of observing can be imputed to a spectator, and this imputation may be even morally or legally negative\(^{30}\), but even in this negative case the observation presents itself as the absence of an action. Then it can be concluded that observation and action represents a sort of practical aut-aut: the one who acts does not observe, the one who observes does not act.

To sum up: actor is the person whose action modifies the world, producing in it some direct consequences. This is the reason why the actor is always “guilty”: he or she is always guilty not for the action (i.e. the imputation of the action is not, of course, always negative), but more generally of the action (i.e. this action can and must be imputed to him/her). Therefore, the actor is always responsible for his/her action, responsible for the modification of the world status, following up the action, as consequence of the action\(^{31}\) - and only the spectator is not responsible.

This position is clearly reprised from Arendt: “That deeds possess such an enormous capacity for endurance, superior to every other man-made product, could be a matter of pride if men were able to bear its burden, the burden of irreversibility and unpredictability, from which the action process draws its very strength. That this is impossible, men have always known. They have known that he who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes ‘guilty’ of consequences he never intended or even foresaw, that no matter how

\(^{30}\) For instance if the observation stands for an omission of help.

\(^{31}\) Cf. Ead., General Ethics, cit., chap. 4. Cf. also Grumley, John, Agnes Heller. A Moralist in the Vortex of History, cit., p. 184: “Actions have irreversible consequences. For Heller the admission of responsibility it is simply the recognition of this fact”.
disastrous and unexpected the consequences of his deed he can never undo it, that the process
he starts is never consummated unequivocally in one single deed or event, and that its very
meaning never discloses itself to the actor but only to the backward glance of the historian
who himself does not act32 33. The “backward glance” of the observer produces anyway a
consequential gesture which is an action: judgment: the task of the observer is then the
production of a judgment upon the action, a judgment that does not refer only to the
imputation of the action: the judgment is passed on the action following the sensus communis
the spectator belongs to, and it is eminently a political judgment – following Heller’s
interpretation Arendt’s position on “Vita Contemplativa”34.

Anyway, Heller’s conception of the task of the observer is quite different from the
theorization of Arendt. In fact, Heller introduces the topic of the judgment of the spectator
and its relationship with the actor in the last part of An Ethics of Personality, dedicated to the
so-called moral aesthetics. The role of the observer, and the judgment produced by him, are
placed within an ethic-aesthetical context: the spectator observes and judges the beauty of the
other person.

In the third volume of the moral trilogy, Heller speaks about the judgment distinguishing
between good and bad faces, as application of Goethe’s other dictum that a person after the
age of thirty is responsible for his/her own face35. The reference to the responsibility excludes
immediately the possibility that both Heller and Goethe refer to the mere phenomenal form of
the face; Heller refers rather to the expression that one wears, the attitude, revealed by the
face, the person “wears” towards others. Heller distinguishes between two different attitudes:
there are good faces that “are open, they offer themselves to scrutiny, to be seen by the
others” and bad faces that “show a cruel or an utterly vain, wicked, but at any rate extremely
suspicious soul”36. The person is free to have configured his face in his/her own way (no
matter if a good or bad one), and for that reason it is possible to speak of responsibility:
responsibility of one’s own attitude towards the others. Anyway, what is important is that, for
Heller, from a judgment referring to the aesthetics of the face it is possible to derive a
judgment upon the fundamental ethical character (not on the whole character)37.

The good face could in fact be the manifestation of at least two different ethic-aesthetic
modalities of the individual: the beautiful one or the sublime one. These two forms are
determined by different “patterns” of freedom: the sublime one is characterized by a
fundamental kind of freedom, whereas the beautiful character is constituted by a plurality of

33 Following the concept of irreversibility, and of moral risk within the performance of an action, both authors
introduce the concept of forgiveness. For Hannah Arendt, cf. ibid., p. 237: “The possible redemption from the
predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not,
have known what he was doing—is the faculty of forgiving”. For Ágnes Heller, cf. Ead., A Philosophy of
one’s action retrospectively in the case of moral failure. To say ‘I am sorry’ is a simple but magnificent human
invention to cope with moral mishap. It stands for ‘I did not mean it’ or ‘I did not intend it’ or ‘I did not mean it
to happen that way’. […] The ability of a ceremonial statement such as ‘I am sorry’, ‘Forgive me’ or ‘I forgive
you’ to change reality is of crucial significance, because it proves that the perception of something to is reality”.
In the note at the passage, Heller refers directly to Arendt’s analysis of forgiveness.
34 Cf. Heller, Ágnes, “Hannah Arendt on the ‘Vita Contemplativa’”, in Ead., Fehér Ferenc (Eds.), The Grandeur
and Twilight of Radical Universalism, New Brunswick, Transaction, 1991, p. 432: “Although judgments are
passed by spectators, they are passed on actors. The faculty of judgment judges political actions. […] Although
judgment is passed by the spectator […] it is passed from the vantage point of the sensus communis”.
35 Cf. Ead., An Ethics of Personality, cit., p. 238: “Goethe once wisely said, I do not know where, that everyone
over thirty is responsible for his or her face”.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., p. 249: “In the ‘good face’, ‘bad face’ game one makes a judgment of the fundamental ethical character
and not on the whole character, not even on the whole moral character”
kinds of freedoms\textsuperscript{38}, or better by the harmony of the equilibrated coexistence of this plurality\textsuperscript{39}. Now, the beauty of a character is a direct consequence of the existential choice: the beauty of the character stems from the uniqueness of the harmony, and this uniqueness is the manifestation of the idiosyncratic nature of the existential choice – better, the fact that the idiosyncrasy of the person has an existential meaning. The beauty of the person is a matter of cultivation, exactly like the existential choice: as the existential choice must be confirmed and practiced in everyday actions, so the beauty must be the object of particular cares: “Beauty is something that one normally cultivates. The cultivation of beauty entails, among other things, the cultivation of emotions, especially of emotional intensity and density in our relations with others”\textsuperscript{40}.

This little summary on the moral aesthetics has been necessary to introduce the role of the observer in Heller’s \textit{An Ethics of Personality}. Like Arendt, Heller attributes to the observer the capacity to produce judgments – but, unlike Arendt, the relationship between producer of the ethic-aesthetic judgment and object of this judgment is different.

First of all, Heller distinguishes between two different modalities of producing the judgment: one internal, the other external. The first one refers to the self-perception of one’s own beauty – i.e. the harmony between the different kinds of freedom. Heller states quite clearly the character of incompleteness of this judgment: in fact, this internal modality of judgment would be produced only if the individual reflects upon his/her actions, but this fact would imply that the actor stops his action and sets himself in the position of the pure observer. But this fact never happens: the individual never enters in the position of pure observer\textsuperscript{41} – and, consequentially, the self-awareness of the own harmony could only be approximate.

The second modality refers to the perception of the harmony of another person – but also this modality has its own difficulties, given that in that case “the world ‘observer’ is wrong: [the harmony of freedoms] presents itself rather to the other, to the other person”\textsuperscript{42}. The beauty exists, and it is a matter of the other to be aware of that or not. Moreover, the fact that a judgment on the link between the ethic and the aesthetics of the other person is made, tells something about the actual ethical character of the observer and judger. In fact, the observer must be characterized by a “passionate involvement”\textsuperscript{43} towards the emotions, the fate, the life of the other. In the name of this emotional involvement, the observer transcends its condition of passivity, being ready and prompt to act for these persons’ sake, and then to pass from the position of the observer to the position of the actor\textsuperscript{44} - and this passage obviously happens for

\textsuperscript{38} Heller enumerates some of the different possible kinds of freedom: autonomy, freedom as spontaneity, recognition of the necessity, determination by law, play of imagination, self-realization, freedom of the existential choice (cf. \textit{ibid.}, p. 139); moral autonomy, choice, clearing, spontaneity, self-realization… (cf. \textit{ibid.}, p. 244).

\textsuperscript{39} Cf. \textit{ibid.}, p. 240: “What I call harmony is the coexistence of different – many, perhaps even all – kinds of openness, of freedom”. This harmony of the beauty character is compared by Heller to the harmony of a quartet, where each instrument plays its own music, and the beauty of the composition consist only in the harmony between the different musics (cf. \textit{ibid.}, pp. 255-6).

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 272.

\textsuperscript{41} Cf. \textit{ibid.}, p. 241: “It would be odd even to say that that we feel ourselves harmonious and beautiful after having stopped acting, given that we are never in the position of pure self-observation or self-reflection”.

\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 248.

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 268.

\textsuperscript{44} Cf. \textit{ibid.}, p. 269: “In passing aesthetic judgment on the other in real life, the readiness to switch from the attitude of the observer to the attitude of the actor needs to be omnipresent. Actually, this is the decisive moral aspect to the attitude of a real-life spectator”.
every single person (not only for the beautiful ones)\textsuperscript{45}, given that the disposition to the observation itself coincides with the openness toward the other.

An important conclusion can then be proposed: the observer who judges the beauty of the beautiful persons, and takes pleasures from this vision, is then characterized by the same openness characterizing the external ethic-aesthetic beauty of the decent person. Therefore, the observer itself, \textit{qua} gifted, endowed with this attitude of openness towards the observed people, is in turn a beautiful person: he or she has an “open face”. It is even possible to specify in a better way the nature of the conjunction between observer and observed: it has been seen before that the beauty is the result of cultivation of emotional refinement – the same emotional refinement that is a condition (and apparently the most important one) of possibility of the ethic-aesthetic judgment. Heller states in fact how this judgment is not constituted by the free game of faculties (given that it is not as simple as a mere aesthetical judgment), but principally by “life-experience, moral taste, refinement, especially emotional refinement”\textsuperscript{46}.

Consequently, emotional refinement and depth characterize both poles of the ethic-aesthetic judgment: the observed, because his own beauty is the result of this depth; the observer, because his disposition towards the others’ beauty is the manifestation of the emotional involvement towards them.

This emotional involvement characterizing the observer consists, at last, in the love towards the persons he or she finds beautiful. In fact, the observer is disposed to observe them in the name of the potential friendship that stems from the beautiful person: the “open face”, \textit{qua} belonging to a person open to the others, is the face of a person naturally disposed to friendship\textsuperscript{47}. A double emotional movement bounds both observer and observed: the observed is open to other persons so that they could appreciate his/her openness and disposition to friendship; the observer, in order to be able to appreciate this moral beauty, must be the vessel of the same openness and, then, a pair source of inspiration to friendship.

This emotional relationship does not bind in a mono-directional way the observer to the beautiful person: it is also the case of the opposite direction. In fact, the beautiful person is characterized by the attitude of openness towards the other persons, and this attitude implies the fact that the beautiful persons “find pleasure in the other(s)”\textsuperscript{48} – better, they find pleasure in the unique and unrepeatable beauty of the others, a beauty that stems from the meaningful idiosyncrasy of the person who chooses him/herself existentially. The beautiful persons “choose others (just as they choose themselves) as they are; they do not pre-fabricate them”\textsuperscript{49}. In other words, they love the freedom of the others persons, exactly as the observer producing the ethic-aesthetic judgment\textsuperscript{50}. So, both the observer and the actor – or better, the observer and the observed – are linked by an emotional relationship based on love. Therefore, the beautiful persons and the person who can produce a judgment concerning the beauty of the first are the same person – or better they constitute a community of beautiful persons, united and bounded by the mutual love towards the peculiar and unrepeatable beauty of the other.

As Heller specifies, the kind of love concerned in the appreciation for the beauty of the other (for the observer) and determining the emotional involvement towards the others (and therefore, for the observed, his/her own beauty) is the erotic love. Erotic love is intended by

\textsuperscript{45} Cf. \textit{ibid.}: “We should not forget, that if we switch from the attitude of the observer to the attitude of the actor, it will be no moral relevance whether the person who cries for our help is a beautiful personality or not”.

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 252.

\textsuperscript{47} Cf. \textit{ibid.}, p. 248: “The good face is the face of a person who is morally upright, or closet o that, who is reliable as a friend”.

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 270.

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{50} Cf. \textit{ibid.}, p. 249: “If one loves liberty one loves the condition of the freedom of individuals. What one really loves are those free individuals”.

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Heller as involvement towards the singularity of a specific being\(^51\). This emotional disposition is the condition of the constitution of an absolute relationship\(^52\) of symmetric reciprocity, characterized by the mutual disclosure between the components of the relationship itself\(^53\). Thanks to this character of symmetrical reciprocity, this relationship based on erotic love is the vessel of the ethics\(^54\).

Anyway this relationship, as Heller underlines, is limited to a number of two persons. This specification is extremely important, because it contains another element of difference – and of implicit criticism – towards Arendt’s position. In fact, as Heller states, “The center point of ethics is not the conscience of the single person, neither is the humankind in us (or in others), but the relationship between two persons. Neither One not All: *Two is the moral number*\(^55\). This position is clearly and explicitly reprised from Kierkegaard: the vow of marriage between the Judge William and his wife is the realization of an absolute relationship between two persons\(^56\) and, *qua* choice that determines existentially the life of both persons at the same degree, *qua* element of transformation of two contingencies into necessities – given that both of them choose the partner as he or she is, loving his/her idiosyncrasy and idiosyncratic degree,

between the Judge William and his wife is the realization of an absolute relationship between two persons. Neither One not All: *Two is the moral number*\(^55\). This position is clearly and explicitly reprised from Kierkegaard: the vow of marriage between the Judge William and his wife is the realization of an absolute relationship between two persons\(^56\) and, *qua* choice that determines existentially the life of both persons at the same degree, *qua* element of transformation of two contingencies into necessities – given that both of them choose the partner as he or she is, loving his/her idiosyncrasy and idiosyncratic beauty – the choice of the other person as fellow of the life-journey is a part (the ethical manifestation) of the general existential choice of the decency\(^57\).

This means that the ethical does not manifest fully (i.e. also aesthetically) in the solitude – and not in the loneliness\(^58\) – of the person; rather it is in the relationship of two persons that

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\(^51\) As stresses with passion the character of Sophie Meller, in *ibid.*, pp. 283-4: “You love Judith, although Judith, just like my dog, will not win a beauty contest […]. Do you love her because o something? Because of her body, her spirit, her soul? […] You certainly love her coloring, her gaiety, her mannerism, her voice, just like her common goodness, her humor and much else. You simply love her. And this is it. But this is not all that I wanted to say. Do you love beauty in loving Judith? Your love to her is a beautiful love; it is also the love of beauty”.

\(^52\) Heller is aware of the fact that an absolute relationship does not exist but in an utopian conception of the human bounds. It is a question of approximation the center: “The absolute relationship of two persons is the moral center – we approximate this center”.

\(^53\) Cf. *ibid.*, p. 172: “An absolute relationship is absolute because the two persons in the relationship make themselves transparent to each other […] as they can; perhaps they will be more transparent to themselves while they disclose themselves to the other. Transparency stands for absolute confidence, trust...”, and *ibid.*, p. 173: “In ethics the absolute relationship is entirely symmetrical; this is why disclosure is also mutual”.

\(^54\) Cf. *ibid.*, p. 174: “Erotic love is not the basis, not the foundation, but the vessel of ethics. It is the lifeline of ethics. Do your duty – this is far off from the image of the green crown of the golden tree of life! But the golden tree of life of decent persons who love one another erotically is – verily – green.”

\(^55\) *ibid.*, p. 170.

\(^56\) Cf. *ibid.*: “Judge William – so he says – is nothing without his wife, and his wife – so he says – is nothing without him. I choose myself as a decent person absolutely in-and-with the absolute relationship; we two together become what we are – decent persons. There is only one history: that of becoming what we are, and this is the lived history of the absolute relationship”. Cf. also *ibid.*, p. 284.

\(^57\) In fact, the relationship is made absolute by the existential choice: “In the orchestration of Judge William, choosing ourselves existentially as decent persons is tantamount to choosing the absolute relationship. It is unconditional precisely because it has been chosen absolutely, unconditionally. You become what you are – one of two persons in an absolute relationship” (*ibid.*, p. 171).

\(^58\) Heller is perfectly aware of the difference between loneliness and solitude, in reference to the position of Arendt concerning the inner dialogue of the individual with him/herself. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 170: “I agree with Hannah Arendt that loneliness – in contrast with solitude – is something essentially anti-ethical and unpolitical”. In particular, the problematic of loneliness seems particularly present in the work *A Philosophy of Morals*; the loneliness of the modern men and women, and in specific the loneliness the human being are subjected to in metropolises, is linked by Heller with the loss of an important constituent of the human goodness: the possibility of discussion with and suggestion given by realizable persons, i.e. by friends or lovers, concerning moral problems or morally problematical actions. Cf. *ibid.*, chap. II § 2, and p. 175: “it is wise to spend some of the time available for decision discussing the problem (the choice) with a ‘third party’ or with impartial judges of the matter. In bygone times there was always a friend, ‘the natural counsellor’, to offer advice; nowadays, the lamentable loneliness of people, particularly in big cities, is in part caused by the disappearance of such friends. ‘Professional counsellors’ fit their place”.

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the ethics reaches its highest point: in fact in this kind of relationship the moral aspect is not the result of compulsions self-imposed by the individual, but it springs freely and spontaneously from the mutual emotional involvement between the two persons. The mutual trust between the objects of the relationship does not derive from the actions performed by the other but is rather confirmed by those actions; moreover, here, ethics is not based on producing actions, on respecting norms and rules, but on the movement of becoming the specific and idiosyncratic decent person a person is; and this movement can not be, without this relationship of mutual disclosure, of approximating absolute trust, with another person.

Therefore, the individual has a positive ethical disposition, could become the decent person he or she is, not only or principally if he or she cultivates the inner dialogue within him/herself. This is rather the well-known position of Hannah Arendt, principally in *The Life of the Mind*, where she tries to understand the nexus between the faculty of thinking and the distinction between good and evil\(^{59}\). Arendt claims that thinking – i.e. the inner dialogue of me and myself, the so-called “two-in-one” – is the cause of the determination of the moral conscience: in fact, the two-in-one consists of a silent partner to whom the individual responds concerning his/her own actions\(^{60}\), and in the light of this inner dialogue, of this differentiation within the individual’s identity, the moral conscience results as a “by-product”\(^{61}\). Therefore, the faculty of judging is nothing but the external manifestation of this inner dialogue\(^{62}\) – of the cultivation of the faculty of thinking; the two faculties are then the two faces of the same token: both of them relate to the distinction between good and evil concerning performed action, but if the former produces a judgment upon the action accomplished – or better, the possible accomplished action – by the individual him/herself, the latter judges the action produced by others.

Now, it is possible to deepen the elements of difference between Arendt’s and Heller’s positions on this topic, by analytically dividing the problem of judgment in three aspects.

First of all, it has been seen how Heller’s position differs from Arendt’s concerning the distance between judgment and action – i.e. the distance between observer and actor. If Arendt already seeks a link between the two dimension in the fact that the judgment is a medium between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* by referring on actions, Heller deepens this relationship, until proposing the union between the actor and the observer: both of them are determined and characterized by the same dispositions (openness, emotional refinement, love towards the beauty of the other), and then both of them share the same condition of equilibrium between the two aspects of the matter (the observer must be always ready to switch from a passive attitude to an active one, and the action of the observed is nothing but the self-presentation to the observation of the other).

Secondly, this equilibrium between the two dimensions of action and observation is true even in the case of the individual him/herself, in his/her loneliness. This seems also to be the position of Arendt: the individual, if he/she is ready and willing to cultivate the faculty of thinking, could become the good judge of his/her own actions. But Heller pushes the connection between the two aspects even farther, by stating – as seen – the impossibility for the individual to be in the position of the pure observer – i.e. the impossibility to be in the situation or in the attitude of pure thinking. Now, given that the position of the pure observer could be realized only by interrupting the action, it can be concluded that the attitude of pure


\(^{61}\) Cf. Ead., *The Life of the Mind*, cit., p. 193: “Thinking — the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue — actualizes the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its by-product”.

\(^{62}\) Cf. *ibid.*: “Judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always too busy to be able to think. The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful form ugly.”
thinking is unrealizable because of the fact that the individual never stops acting – never stops being an actor. The person is always in the position of the actor, even if he or she does not accomplish any specific action, because of the movement of the realization of the existential choice – a movement, an action, that is not equal to the sum of all singular actions of the individual, but that is the matrix of determination of all possible actions, past, present and future. For that reason, the conception of the individual Heller proposes could positively overcome all the analytical differences between action and observation (even though always recognizing them): both attitudes have their only meaning in the movement of the existential choice – because the existential choice is nothing but the expression of the human condition.

This conclusion if finally confirmed by the last aspect concerning the connection between actor, spectator and the faculty of judgment: the fact that the moral conscience is not the by-product of the two-in-one, the inner Selbstdenken, but of the relationship between two persons. As Heller states: “Sören [Keirkegaard] would not subscribe to Hannah Arendt’s suggestion that a decent person converses within himself with his own other self as Socrates did[63]. Socrates was en exceptional man, the Judge would tell you, but we are not exceptional people, we are just common men and women. We do not conduct ethical discussions within our soul with our other self, we need another flesh and blood person, another exister. Two separate persons, two existers in mutual disclosure and trust replace the dialogical relations of ‘two-in-one’. Not ‘two-in-one’ but ‘one-in-two’. With ‘two-in-one’ there can be suspicion, but with ‘one-in-two’ there cannot, for these two love one another."[64] So, the ethical dimension is expressed by the relationship of mutual disclosure and trust between two persons; the decent person can become what he or she is – i.e. this idiosyncratic beautiful person – can develop his/her own virtues and limit his/her own weaknesses, can cultivate his/her own emotional refinement principally by the absolute relationship of erotic love.

It is then confirmed the hypothesis that Heller presents a community of beautiful and decent persons interwoven by a relationship of erotic love, as the closest mimesis of the symmetrical reciprocity. So, what is the utopia on the political level, the realization of the gesellige Geselligkeit among the individuals in the framework of an objective Sittlichkeit, could become reality in the private sphere, in the narrower dimension of the cycle of friends and lovers. In this community, the individuals are mutually judged and appreciated on the basis not of their specific actions, but of their meaningful idiosyncrasies – i.e. of their existential choices. The disclosure is mutual, because all the individuals share the same condition: all of them have chosen themselves existentially, all of them could realize their own choice by the contribution of the others, all of them recognized each others as existers, exactly as the observed and the observer, the actor and the spectator, recognizes him/herself, understands him/her own beauty and the goodness of the own existential movement in the openness to the other. Then, in the harmony between the two dimensions of the passivity and of the activity, in the balance of what is nothing but different forms of freedoms (i.e. the constituents of the beauty of the decent person), the individual could become what he or she is, could reach the maximum of self-realization, and attain the happiness the decent person deserves – a happiness that, for Heller, has its true exemplary model in the lived person of Hannah Arendt.

3. The happiness of Hannah Arendt

The second and third part of An Ethics of Personality concern also the problem of the happiness of the decent person. One of the aspects of happiness consists exactly in the

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63 [The reference is very probable to Ead., “Thinking and Moral Considerations”, cit., pp. 29-30.]
64 Heller, Agnes, An Ethics of Personality, cit., p. 173.
relationship of one-in-two, as mutual openness between two persons: the utopia of the symmetrical reciprocity is then realized in the everyday relationships of deep friendships and love. Both kinds of the absolute relationship are determined by erotic love, i.e. by the appreciation of and by the emotional involvement with the idiosyncrasy of the other; both love and deep friendship are instituted by persons able to recognize the beauty of the other person and its own intrinsic value, and to love it for its own sake. This kind of relationship is the place for the decent person to flourish, because of its intrinsic ethical nature qua founded on the mutual recognition of the other as having in him/herself his/her own value – i.e. the other is recognized and treated principally as an end in itself.

Now, given that in an (approximated) absolute relationship each person cares about the other and is emotionally involved in his/her destiny and life, one of the consequences is the mutual help and action for the good of the other. This action is not only represented by the help given to the other in particular difficult moments, but it should resort in a constant guide for the determination of the better movement of self-realization of the other. This movement of self-realization is nothing but the transformation of one’s gifts into talents, and the practice of these talents – i.e. the accomplishment of the existential choice under the category of the difference. In fact, the development of one’s gifts into talents presupposes the knowledge of these gifts, and the selection of the best ones as characterizations of the person – and this knowledge is greatly improved by the mutual disclosure between the persons involved in the absolute relationship. So, the emotional involvement towards the other person in this kind of relationship is the cause of an action for the other’s happiness – and given that one of the forms of the happiness of the good life is the transformation of the gifts into talents and the practice of these talents, this action consists in the fostering of the development of the other’s talents – if this development does not coincide with a mere instrumental use of the other human beings. Moreover, the beauty of the beautiful person is derived from the self-education, the refinement of one’s own emotional sphere, the development of the aesthetic taste and the tact – in short, the qualitative richness of the person; but this richness is nothing but the cultivation of one’s own idiosyncrasy by the harmonization of the different positive elements of one’s meaningful (i.e. existentially chosen) unrepeatability; then, if the beautiful person acts for the happiness of the other in an absolute relationship, this action is nothing but the manifestation of the practice of the talents of this person.

65 Cf. ibid., p. 202, where Joachim, a fictional character created by Heller in order to illustrate the case of a decent person within a Kantian matrix, confesses: “I desire for the miracle to happened, I am longing for someone, for one single person, t do the impossible, to ease my resistances, to make me transparent to himself, and through himself, to myself. I see what felicity could be: Judge William and his wife, ‘one in two’ instead of ‘two in one’, the lived history of shared experience”.

66 Erotic love has different intensities depending on the nature of the relationship: in the relationship between two persons the erotic component plays a more important role than in the case of a friendship. Anyway, it is clear that with “erotic love” Heller does not mean the mere physical attraction, because this attraction is based on physical appearance, and therefore the former weakens within the fading of the latter. On the contrary the erotic love does not diminish, but rather becomes stronger with time – proportionally with the deepening and the improvement of the mutual knowledge of the persons involved in the relationship; cf. ibid, p. 175: “The judge says that for him his wife is the most beautiful of all women, and he also says that her beauty increases with age”. In the relationship based of physical attraction, the object of love is only a part of the person – his/her physics –, but in the relationship based on erotic love the object of love is the idiosyncrasy of the person in its totality: the other person is loved within the multiplicity of his/her aspects – and the progressive unconcealment of those aspects is the nature of the mutual disclosure. Moreover, authentic friendship is one of the forms of the relationship based on erotic love: “In friendship there is desire, eros” (Ead., The Beauty of Friendship, “The South Atlantic Quarterly”, 97, 1 (1998), p. 10), and “Friendship without erotic attraction (though not in the sense of exual attraction) is just camaraderie, which has very little to do with first friendship” (ibid., p. 17). Therefore, also (true and deep) friendship has an ethic-aesthetic meaning, linked (as for the relationship of erotic love) to the free choice of the other(s): “Friendship is the most beautiful emotional attachment because it is freely chosen, freely cultivated; it flourishes in reciprocity, mutual possession, and mutual self-abandon” (ibid., p. 10).
Then the two forms of happiness – being involved in emotionally rich relationships and developing gifts into talents and practicing them – are strictly linked: the happiness of the good person coincides with the action for the development of the other’s gifts into talents, and this action, qua consequence and confirmation of the openness of the beautiful person, contributes to the development of the talents of the beautiful person. Vice versa, the development of one’s own talents coincides also with the happiness of the other person, given that it presupposes the creation of a (approximating) symmetrical relationship, and this development, qua expression of the beauty and the richness of the person, and therefore of his/her own openness, represents the condition of the possible creation of an absolute relationship, and consequently the happiness of the person. Each one of the two forms of happiness exists only in union with the other, given that each one is promoted by the other: the deep emotional relationship is (as much as possible) absolute if the persons involved contribute mutually to the development of the other’s talents, and the existence and practice of these idiosyncratic talents are the reason for the erotic love between the two.

This conclusion could conduce to a new consideration of the relationship between the two kinds of existential choice – under the category of the difference and of the universal – and present a deep connection of the two as equi-condition of the good life. This hypothesis is in fact corroborated by the last form of happiness stated by Heller in *An Ethics of Personality*: “Never to find out whether you have chosen yourself under the category of the universal or under the category of the difference” 67. If happiness consists in avoiding the discovery of which form of choice has priority over the other, if happiness consists in never scarifying a kind of choice on the altar of the other, then it can be deduced – positively interpreting what is stated only negatively – that happiness is the harmonious co-existence of the two kinds of existential choice: until the hierarchy between the two forms will not be manifested, then both of them contribute mutually to both adiaphor and moral enrichments of the person, to the creation of the good life, and to the happiness of a satisfied life.

For Heller, a life worth living, if it is to be lived fully, is one in which the individual lives with deep emotional involvement in the relationship with other persons, if the qualitative richness of talents informs his/her life, if he or she has the chance to live the two forms of happiness (creation of deep human attachments, and knowledge and practice of one’s own talents). But given that all these elements are nothing but the expression of the existential choice – or better of the co-presence of the two forms of it – the meaning of the life, its maximum value, derives from the existential choice. A person is then satisfied by his/her own life if this life is determined in an autonomous way by the existential choice 68. If one has the courage to perform the leap of the existential choice, the life will be a moment of happiness, even in the moments of unhappiness.

One of the incarnations and the model of this form of existential happiness, and therefore of this form of satisfied life, is Hannah Arendt 69. The happiness of the life of Hannah Arendt

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68 Cf. Ead., “On Being Satisfied in a Dissatisfied Society – I”, in Ead., F. Fehér, *The Postmodern Political Condition*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1988, p. 34: “If someone succeeds in transforming his/her contingency into his/her destiny, if someone can reiterate Luther’s words: ‘here I stand and I cannot do otherwise’, if someone is aware that his/her existence makes a difference, that he/she leaves a trace on the face of the world, such a person will be satisfied with his/her life as a whole and can say that he/she has become what, in the light of available possibilities, he/she was able to become”.
69 Cf. Ead., *An Ethics of Personality*, cit., p. 275: “Jane Austen, George Sand, Rosa Luxemburg, Hannah Arendt. None of these women can be said ‘happy’ in an ordinary sense. They were all exiles, either in fact, or in a metaphorical sense; they all had a difficult life. None of them lived out their life in full […]. Still, they were beautiful – and they were happy! They were not suffering form the malaise of insecurity, they were noble characters, they constantly kept their freedoms in balance balance. All these four women surrounded themselves with beauty, they loved beauty, as tey al they also? loved good conversation and good company. They were
coincides, for Heller, with the affirmation of the direction given to the life itself, according with the suggestions and the cares of the beloved persons. Her happiness, as exemplification of the happiness of the beautiful, rich, existential person, stems from the plenitude of her life, the nobility of her spirit, her love towards beautiful persons and things, her involvement with other persons, chosen as they are, in their idiosyncratic beauty. Given that this happiness coincides with the fullness of the life, it longs even through the moments of suffering: the unhappiness is not opposed to the happiness, but is a component of the good and happy life; the suffering is rather the proof of the difficulty of the realization of the existential choice.

Here can be determined an element of parallelism and an element of difference with the thought of Hannah Arendt. The moment of parallelism refers to the fact that for both philosophers the good life is the life which consists in actions that are ends in themselves. The happiness consists, in fact, of the performance of actions that confirm the existential choice, and that then contribute to the person’s richness in virtues, in emotional refinement and in talents – an action that follows the virtue of the authenticity: authenticity towards one’s own “ipseity”, referring to both idiosyncratic goodness and Beruf, both the specificity of one’s goodness, and the totality of one’s talents; happiness is then the action of practicing one’s talents only for this practice’s sake, and the action that rises from the loving involvement towards the authenticity of the other. Both forms of action are ends in themselves, given that both of them are unconditioned: the talents are chosen as they are, between the totality of gifts the person received from birth; the other persons are chosen as they are, between the totality of persons one could meet; in both cases, the object of the choice is intended as possessing its own value in itself: the talents are chosen in order to gain by their practice nothing else than the practice, and the other is chosen for his/her own idiosyncrasy, in order to gain nothing than the pleasure of his/her company. So, happiness, qua nothing but an action, an action that has its own end in itself, is then energeia, a force whose reality and meaning consists in its own practice and not in what it produces. Happiness is the realization of actions that follow and are determined and justified by the existential choice – and for that reason, given that the existential choice is a form of energeia70, the happiness is nothing but the production of actions that are ends in themselves. Therefore, a life is satisfied and good, if it is conceived as an end itself – i.e. as the time of realization of an end in itself, the happiness of the existential choice. For Heller, Hannah Arendt would totally agree with the conclusion that the goodness of life derives from its being an end in itself71.

The moment of difference pertains to the nature of this “end in itself”, and to the condition of its realization. In fact, the movement of realization of the existential choice is only an approximation: the contingency is never completely transformed into destiny, the certainty of the direction of the life is never absolute. The practice of this “end in itself” is subjected, in all its forms and specifications, to the human condition of finitude: no aspects of the human life are possible in the absolute autonomy: the observation presupposes an observed; the actor presupposes a world of norms (Sittlichkeit) and a world of other persons (Geselligkeit); the judger coincides with the judged, qua both causa efficiens and causa finalis of the aesthetic-ethic judgment; and, finally, the pure thinker needs the confirmation or at least the confrontation with another person, in the absolute relationship of erotic love. The autonomy of the individual is never absolute: it always must confront itself with a kind of heteronomy.


70 Cf. Tormey, Simon, Agnes Heller: socialism, autonomy and the postmodern, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2001, p. 173: “[The existential choice is] a choice of what kind of person we are to be. It is a choice of our Being or, following Aristotle, energeia: the choice of ourselves as an end or telos”.

71 Cf. Ead., “Hannah Arendt on the ‘Vita Contemplativa’”, in Ead., Fehér Ferenc (Eds.), cit., p. 437: “Arendt says, ‘life is good’, for life is an end in itself, and whatever is an end in itself is good”.

loyal friends and they also cultivated friendships, emotional attachments and sentiments. Naturally, they also loved the beauties of nature. They were women of emotional density and richness”
But even this necessity of relative autonomy within the human condition is an object of choice for the individual: this finitude is in fact nothing but the possibility of the happiness itself. In the company of the chosen beloved ones, the individual has the opportunity to practice his/her moral and adiaphor talents, to act for the good of the others, and to receive advice concerning the right direction of the life. Therefore, the autonomy of the practice of talents and faculties and the heteronomy represented by the other persons (i.e. the two forms of existential choice, the two forms of happiness) are strictly co-related: the relationships could no more be a source of happiness if they negate the practice of one’s talents, and this practice could be a source of loneliness (and not solitude) if it denies the freedom of the involvement with the other persons. Neither the autonomy nor the heteronomy are sources of happiness in themselves: the happiness is one as synthesis of the two moments – it is the practice of one’s talents and faculties within emotionally deep relationships. Finally, the finitude of the human being, i.e. what was a necessity on the level of the human condition, becomes a chosen possibility on the level of the existential choice: the autonomous development and practice of one’s talents and faculties should not be absolutely autonomous, or it would negate itself, conducing to an existential failure, to a non-multi-sided, non-rich human being; and on the other hand the condition of being a multi-sided human being, i.e. the heteronomy of the deep human attachments, should only be relative – i.e. should be chosen –, or the person would lose his/her idiosyncrasy and authenticity, becoming an existential void.

The happiness exemplified by the life of Hannah Arendt is, finally, this synthesis between autonomy and heteronomy – this chosen limitation of the autonomy, and this chosen involvement with the heteronomy. The transformation in prescription (the human being should want his/her own finitude) of what was a description in the first part (the human being is necessitated by a condition of finitude)\(^\text{72}\) is realized and justified by the meaning of the human life, i.e. the practice of actions that are ends in themselves – and in the last resort in the confirmation of one’s existential, meaningful, idiosyncratic uniqueness. But this practice is never absolutely autonomous – and this is the foremost difference between Arendt’s and Heller’s thoughts: some aspects of the human life can be considered as absolutely autonomous, it can also be lived and practiced as absolutely autonomous – such as the faculty of thinking in Arendt\(^\text{73}\) – but, for Heller, the full meaning of these aspects are in the mutual relationship with other (descriptive and prescriptive) elements, other practices, other aspects, other lives. The energëia of the human life reaches then its most complete and pure peak within this quest of the wanted and loved confirmation of the finitude of the human condition.

There is a lesson, proposed by Arendt, with which Heller seems to agree, as a prescription for the happiness of actors, spectators, thinkers, judges, and in general human beings of modern times: “Act in such a way to inform your life as an end in itself”.

There is then another lesson, proposed not by the thoughts of Hannah Arendt, but instead by the model of her life – a lesson that stems from Heller’s interpretation of the happiness of Hannah Arendt, and that becomes the lesson Ágnes Heller herself proposes for the happiness of modern human beings: “Act in such a way to choose your heteronomy (choosing other persons, similar to you, to love), and to limit your autonomy (developing your talents according to the advices of the beloved persons)”.

The two lessons are not in contrast, for they define each other, they mutually give meaning to each other; only in mutual connection could they insert the human being into its own condition – i.e. into the finitude that presupposes the existential choice, and that is always confirmed by the possible failure of the movement of the existential choice. This human

\(^{72}\) Or better, of what was only at first sight a description: cf. supra, note 12.

condition is then chosen by the individual, and loved, because it is its recognition, and its confirmation, the source of the only possible and true happiness of the human life. A happiness that is confirmed in every single action that is an end in itself – an action that, by its own nature, has the gift and the task of reintroducing the individual in the Geselligkeit as most gesellig as possible.

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