

# Richard J. Bernstein and the Life of the Beautiful<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

If critique is the highest form of engagement, Dick Bernstein never shied away from it, nor from offering immense moral support when most needed. In what follows, I offer my thoughts on the roles played by critique *and* support in Dick's teaching, mentorship, and friendship with his colleagues and students. I draw upon the example of his friendship with Ágnes Heller, a colleague with whom he worked over several decades as they rebuilt the philosophy department at the New School for Social Research in the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s.<sup>2</sup> As I aim to show, their friendship was based on some common ground in their life experiences and the goals of their teaching and scholarship, with several important points of mutual influence and interest. But none of this prevented Dick from expressing the philosophic truth when needed, nor from offering unconditional and exuberant sustenance to the flourishing of the life of the mind by reconsidering (revising, and sometimes abandoning) previous claims and arguments. For Dick, as for Ágnes, the life of the mind is one immersed equally in the good and the beautiful. What this meant for them, individually, and in contrast to each other, has been, for me, a generative and ongoing question.

## 2. First Impressions

I first met Richard J. Bernstein in 1995 when I entered his office seeking his signature on my entrance form into the M.A./Ph.D. program in philosophy at the New School for Social Research. He was then serving as chair of the Graduate Faculty Philosophy Department and I required his approval for my admission into the program. I had studied with Ágnes Heller in the fall 1994 semester, during which time I completed her course on "The Concept of the Beautiful" and wrote a paper on Plotinus.<sup>3</sup> The course was life-transforming and convinced me to pursue a graduate degree at the New School. When I entered Dick's office and encountered him for the first time, I was not sure what to expect. I had heard about the mythical nature of his teaching and mentoring of students, and I listened first-hand to his most incisive and trenchant questions at the department's weekly guest lectures and at the Cedar Tavern on University Place afterwards, where he would lead his colleagues, the guest speaker,

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<sup>2</sup> For reference, I served as Agnes Heller's research assistant at the New School for Social Research from 1997-2000 and continued to edit and publish some of her works for the next two decades.

<sup>3</sup> I later edited and co-published Ágnes's book on this topic. Ágnes Heller, *The Concept of the Beautiful*, edited with an essay by Marcia Morgan (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012).

and the graduate students to continue the analysis and discussion. Upon informing Dick that Ágnes supported my entrance into the program and offering him the letter she wrote on my behalf, he blurted out excitedly, “Well, if Ágnes Heller wants you in the program, then you will be in the program!”

Dick’s decades-long friendship with Ágnes came to shape their students’ work, not only through their teaching, friendship, and mentorship of scholarly pursuits, but in the way in which they modeled a life of the mind *as a spirit of a philosophy department*. It may sound rather strange during these markedly bureaucratic times of neoliberal consolidation and erasure of education (or ever) to speak of an institutional department itself as a “life of the mind.”<sup>4</sup> But together, through their rebuilding of the program at the New School, and because of their mutual influence from Hannah Arendt (who coined the phrase and promoted a remarkable independence of thinking), and in the ways Dick and Ágnes supported the well-being of their students, they created something precious and extremely rare. Their collaboration with other phenomenal professors in the department, including Yirmiyahu Yovel and Dmitri Nikulin, continued the outstanding quality and notably humane tenor of the program.

One year after meeting Dick in his role as department chair, I enrolled in his seminar on Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. It is beyond the scope of this essay to detail exactly what I gained from that seminar in terms of content—a worthy essay unto itself—but his method of teaching and, far beyond that, his careful and highly engaged mentorship of each student’s development throughout the entire semester, modeled exactly what it *should mean* to be a teacher in the true sense of a Socratic midwife. Ágnes and Dick demonstrated through their friendship and collaboration the *ethos* of taking the responsibility of a professorship as a way of life.

### 3. Foundations of a Life of the Beautiful

It should be clear, then, that their age-old debate with each other over ethics, which I will detail below, would have a profound impact on their students. Neither Ágnes nor Dick lived an easy life by any measure. Ágnes lost her father, her close childhood friend, and other loved ones to the murderous crimes at Auschwitz; she was exiled from her home in Hungary because of her protest against the Soviet occupation; and more.<sup>5</sup> Dick grew up in a second-generation immigrant and working-class family in

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<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego and New York: Harcourt, 1977).

<sup>5</sup> See Heller’s Autobiography: Heller, *Der Affe auf dem Fahrrad*, ed. János Kőbányai (Berlin and Vienna: Philo, 1999).

Brooklyn, and his older brother was killed as a soldier fighting in Germany against the Nazis. Dick was also famously denied tenure at Yale University in his early thirties, despite immense student backing, formal approval from the department, and advocacy from many contingents at the institution.<sup>6</sup> But both Ágnes and Dick mastered the art of resilience against all odds. Their “fights” over ethics therefore took on additional weight because of their lifes’ experiences. They each resisted negativity and bitterness, and stood up, time and again, for the conditions that make a life worth living. Ágnes’s focus on existentialism (in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, but also in her interestingly existential way of reading Plato’s dialogues and critical theory),<sup>7</sup> and Dick’s centering of American pragmatism’s emphasis on engagement and involvement in the public sphere in the most pluralistic of manners in everything he worked on,<sup>8</sup> created an open environment of dialogue and debate to the greatest advantage of the students fortunate enough to study with them.

In many ways, their ethical inquiries and challenges to each other were placed within the frame of Arendt’s famous question, expressed movingly in her 1964 interview with Günter Gaus while explaining the purpose of her life’s scholarship and teaching. Namely, she inquired how something like the Holocaust could be possible and indicated that such a question is something with which one can never achieve closure.<sup>9</sup> Ágnes described in an interview that her life’s work was modeled on the same question.<sup>10</sup> She felt that she had a duty to pay as a survivor, a duty she expressed as the translation of suffering into a life of the beautiful, not for herself, but as an intersubjective remedy to relieve or prevent the suffering of others. What a life of the

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<sup>6</sup> See Judith Friedlander, “Philosophy as Pedagogy: With Richard Bernstein,” in this issue.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Heller, *The Concept of the Beautiful*, *ibid.*; Heller, *An Ethics of Personality* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Richard J. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971); Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: 2010); Sheila Greeve Davaney and Warren G. Frisina (eds.), *The Pragmatic Century: Conversations with Richard J. Bernstein* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006); Bernstein, *Pragmatic Naturalism: John Dewey’s Living Legacy* (New York: Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal, 2020); Bernstein, *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986); Bernstein, *Pragmatic Encounters* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Günter Gaus, “Conversation with Hannah Arendt,” from the Series “Zur Person,” Rundfunk Brandenburg-Berlin, 1964. Published as Hannah Arendt, “‘What Remains? The Language Remains’: A Conversation with Günter Gaus” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Csaba Polony, “The essence is good but all the appearances are evil”: An Interview with Ágnes Heller, March 1997: <https://nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9807/msg00004.html>.

beautiful means, in its aesthetic-ethical orientation, is chronicled in her book on *The Concept of the Beautiful*, but the idea spans the trajectory of her entire corpus indirectly and directly, in different terms and contexts.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. The Role of Critique

Dick was one of the biggest supporters of Ágnes's work, and although he was not yet a professor in the department, he advocated for her to be brought on as chair of the reformed philosophy department at the New School. She later, then, hired him into the department as a senior professor. True to Dick's philosophic *ethos*, though, he was also rather critical of some of her philosophical arguments. He took very seriously Aristotle's dictum that we must honor the truth above our friends,<sup>12</sup> but for Dick honoring the truth *was* also honoring his friends. Dick preserved his friendships throughout his life because of the sincerity and support he provided through his honesty. I have taken up Dick's and Ágnes's ethical argument with each other in a series of presentations and guest lectures that culminated in an article, which formed what Dick jokingly referred to as "The Heller-Bernstein Debate."<sup>13</sup> The debate was first systematically articulated in Dick's critique of Ágnes's ethics in an essay in *Engaging Agnes Heller* titled "Existential Choice: Heller's Either/Or," a volume of critical and interpretive essays about Heller's life's work edited by Katie Terezakis. As Ágnes recounted in her replies to the essays in the volume:

The so-called existential choice [Heller's model of decision to choose oneself as an ethical being, influenced by the philosophy of Kierkegaard] is obviously the most controversial thought or perhaps even the Achilles heel of my work, at least judging by the testimony of

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<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Heller, *Everyday Life*, trans. G.L. Campbell (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984); Heller and Ferenc Fehér, *The Postmodern Political Condition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Heller, *Ethics of Personality*, *ibid.*; Heller, *General Ethics* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1988); Heller, *A Philosophy of Morals* (Oxford UK and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross:

<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.1.i.html>

<sup>13</sup> Marcia Morgan, "Heller's Either/Or: What Makes a Person Choose the Ethical," Hale Ethics Series, Department of Philosophy, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY, April 24, 2014; Morgan, "Heller's Either/Or: Continuing a recent debate between Ágnes Heller and Richard J. Bernstein," *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 125, no. 49 (2014): 49-65.

this volume. It was interpreted by Yerri Yovel and Amos Friedland, treated critically by John Grumley and thoroughly chewed up and spit out by my friend Dick Bernstein.<sup>14</sup>

Dick was not known to mince words with his critiques, and this was just as much the case in his rejection of Ágnes's ethical theory.

In light of Dick's rejection of Heller's ethics, in "Heller's Either/Or: Continuing a recent debate between Ágnes Heller and Richard J. Bernstein," I attempted to bring their diverging positions into closer proximity through their respective influence by Arendt, focusing on Arendt's provocative move to read Kant's aesthetic judgment as offering potential for political imagination (thus creating more of her own version of Kant).<sup>15</sup> This is an important development in Arendt's thinking that relates well to Ágnes's because, in Ágnes's theory of the concept of the life of the beautiful—her idiosyncratic counter-aesthetics against the homogenizing analytics of the aesthetics of the times—she redefines the beautiful through the life of the good, a public good which is also political. Ágnes reawakens the Platonic *kalokagathia*—in which the good and the beautiful are unified—against the flattening tendencies of the modern European calculated systems of arts and their postmodern aftermath. Such flattening resulted, in Ágnes's estimation, in a loss of heterogeneous life experiences and therefore an elimination of the life of the beautiful, which likewise depleted a life of the good. For Ágnes, as for Plato, any concept of the beautiful should be conjoined with moral and ethical obligations to self and others, and this unity has political repercussions. For Ágnes, what we take to be the beautiful, in its orientation with the good, is a value orientation with normative social-political content.<sup>16</sup>

Dick was very critical not of Ágnes's aesthetic theory taken on its own, but of the specific way in which ethical judgment takes place in Ágnes's theories across the board—ethical, aesthetic, political, and more. The reasons for Dick's rejection are rooted in Ágnes's adoption and adaptation of Søren Kierkegaard's model of existential choice. Dick explains this succinctly in his response to my article in an email:

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<sup>14</sup> Ágnes Heller, "Reflections on the Essays Addressed to My Work," in *Engaging Ágnes Heller: A Critical Companion*, ed. Katie Terezakis (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2009) 241.

<sup>15</sup> Regarding some contrasting interpretations of Arendt's reading, see, e.g., George Kateb, "The Judgment of Arendt," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, vol. 53, no. 208 (2) "Hannah Arendt, Juin 1999": 133-154; Steve DeCaroli, "A Capacity for Agreement: Hannah Arendt and the Critique of Judgment," *Social Theory and Practice*, vol. 33, no. 3 (July 2007): 361-386.

<sup>16</sup> Heller, *A Philosophy of Morals*, *ibid.*; Heller, *Ethics of Personality*, *ibid.*; Heller, *The Concept of the Beautiful*, *ibid.*

[...] I admire your attempt to discover some common ground between Agnes and myself. (I agree that in some respects we are not so far apart.) [...] Concerning differences with Agnes I am convinced that all serious existential choice [which Agnes modeled on Kierkegaard's ethics] involves some form of judgment and judgment requires or presupposes some type of thinking. And at times Agnes thinks so, too. As you rightly point out I object when she seems to suggest that decisiveness emerges out of nothingness. A fine article. I have to think more about the beautiful.<sup>17</sup>

There are two important claims in this email: Dick's rejection of Kierkegaard, which is problematic for him because he perceives it as divorced from public dialogue and social-political considerations, and his statement, "I have to think more about the beautiful." Both of these claims, as we will see, developed further in interesting and surprising ways.

## 5. Expansions and Reconsiderations

Ever since Dick's statement, "I have to think more about the beautiful," I have been thinking more about what an aesthetic theory from him might look like. In fact, he was ever and always engaged in the arts. As mentioned, he prioritized ethics and normative questions in all his work such that any aesthetic determination he would make would be impacted by such obligations, exactly as is the case in his beloved traditions of Frankfurt School critical theory and American pragmatism. But what exactly would this look like?

In 2016 I engaged this question indirectly in a chapter included in *Richard J. Bernstein and the Expansion of American Philosophy: Thinking the Plural* by doing what the edited volume intended, expanding Dick's philosophy into new developments beyond those Dick had already deployed or would be willing to incorporate in his *oeuvre*. He was delighted with the challenges presented in the volume, which collected essays written by former students. I suggested in my chapter that Dick might look to Cornel West's writing on Black music, attempting to show that what Dick had argued

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<sup>17</sup> Email from Richard J. Bernstein to the author, "Article," October 20, 2013.

in some previous lectures and publications would resonate with and open new questions by learning from West's scholarship on Black aesthetics.<sup>18</sup> This discussion continued during a filmed interview with Dick and other former students at a gathering in New York. Dick responded that although he had been critical of West's work, it was exactly this kind of pragmatist community and ethically-oriented aesthetic theory he valued and wanted to study further.<sup>19</sup> The next time I saw Dick and his wife, Carol, they both eagerly told me about their study of West's writings on music since the last time we spoke. Dick drew upon West's writing in order to counter Adorno's infamously problematic critique of jazz and talked about his own musical experiences in a pragmatist mode very much in line with what West sought to reestablish in terms of the renewed need for aesthetic community in times of isolation, fragmentation, and alienation.<sup>20</sup>

Such a process of critique coupled with an unflinching willingness to reconsider previous assessments and interpretations stands at the heart of Dick's "engaged fallibilistic pluralism," which many scholars have written about, including in the present volume and previous volumes of essays written in his honor.<sup>21</sup> And so, as it goes, upon Ágnes's retirement from her New School professorship in the early 2000s, Dick committed himself to learn and to study the existential writings of Kierkegaard—really for the first time seriously, despite his chapter on Kierkegaard and Sartre in *Praxis and Action*.<sup>22</sup> Dick decided to learn Kierkegaard intensively and much more seriously than before so that he could continue the legacy of Ágnes in the department. As a form of memory of his dear friend, Ágnes Heller, whose regularly taught course on Kierkegaard would no longer be offered, Dick also took it upon himself in the last decade of his life, in his 80s, to teach Kierkegaard at the New School. This study then impacted his monograph on *Ironic Life*, published at the age of 84. A key chapter in that book offers a powerful account about his newfound relationship to Kierkegaard in his 80s. In a chapter devoted to the Danish religious thinker, Dick wrote in defense of Kierkegaard's model of individual subjectivity:

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<sup>18</sup> Marcia Morgan, "Critique, Dissidence, and Aesthetic Emancipation at the Margins," in *Richard J. Bernstein and the Expansion of American Philosophy*, eds. Megan Craig and Marcia Morgan (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017) 83-102.

<sup>19</sup> Filmed interview with Dick in New York in November 2017 to mark the publication of *Thinking the Plural: Richard J. Bernstein and the Expansion of American Philosophy*.

<sup>20</sup> Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), "The Arts," 443-494.

<sup>21</sup> *Richard J. Bernstein and the Expansion of American Philosophy: Thinking the Plural*, *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Bernstein, *Praxis and Action*, 84-164. On this, see also Cæcilie Varslev-Pedersen, "The Art of Living: Bernstein on Kierkegaard," in this issue.



Finally, I want to return to what I have called Kierkegaard's swerve from Hegel. In Hegel's account of negativity, there is also a grand Either/Or: either sheer negativity that results in emptiness and nothingness, or determinate negation that results in mediation and universality. It is the iterated forms of determinate negation that are the essence of systematic speculative philosophy. In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard resists the Hegelian doctrine of determinate negation. But in his appropriation of Hegel's notion of infinite absolute negation, he seems to characterize Socrates as the ironist who epitomizes the sheer negativity that leads to emptiness...Consequently, Magister Kierkegaard seems to be caught in the Hegelian Either/Or. He rejects determinate negation- which leaves him with the alternative of empty negativity. Yet Kierkegaard radically swerves away from the Hegelian Either/Or. This is anticipated in *The Concept of Irony*, but becomes clear in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Kierkegaard (and Climacus) reject the way in which Hegel frames the alternatives of this Either/Or. There is another way besides sheer emptiness or the seduction of determinate negation. This is Kierkegaard's swerve to ethical passion: freely choosing what we are to become. This is no longer sheer negativity; but neither is it mediation and determinate negation. Rather, it is learning how to exist, learning what is involved in becoming a human being, learning--that is, choosing--how to live one's life. And with this we have a new and different Either/Or. One can stay frozen at the stage of sheer negativity. There is no necessity or compelling reason to move beyond this—even if it results in despair and melancholy. But it is possible for each of us as "single individuals" to freely actualize ourselves as ethical human beings, and thereby move beyond the unstable negativity of pure irony.<sup>23</sup>

In this passage Dick evokes his appreciation for Kierkegaard's ethical process of individual self-realization. Even if it is an imperfect model, such ethicality of the self arises out of a state of freedom, exactly as Ágnes insisted, and as Dick clarifies in this

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<sup>23</sup> Bernstein, *Ironic Life* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity, 2016) 101.

analysis of Kierkegaardian irony. While Dick does not necessarily agree with Kierkegaard without reservation in the selection above, his defense of Kierkegaardian irony as a productive form of resistance to the Hegelian doctrine of determinate negation marks a new direction in Dick's historical relationship to Kierkegaard.

Over the decades, Dick regularly joked, "When I grow up, I want to be just like Ágnes." She was three years his senior. Dick was never afraid to learn from others or to revise previous positions in need of reconsideration and careful scrutiny. He embodied the engaged fallibilistic pluralism and hermeneutic generosity at the center of his philosophic teaching and scholarship. Dick's life of the beautiful speaks for creativity and openness to revision, to friendship and a willingness to learn from others. One can only aspire to live such a life of the beautiful.<sup>24</sup>

## 6. Postscript

I considered titling this essay "Richard J. Bernstein's Beautiful Life," but that would have fit too easily into the Aristotelian *poietic* strictures of "a beginning, a middle, and an end,"<sup>25</sup> and if anything, Dick's life represents beginnings and middles, but not endings. Just as in his presence in the classrooms and as an audience member at guest lectures, he would repeatedly interject with a loud voice against any problematic development or pernicious trend in the argument or questioning presented: "Let's go BACK. I want to go BACK!" He would stop negative thinking in its tracks and return us to the anti-foundational openings of inquiry. In her book on *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt's epigram offers a Socratic gesture of humility, quoting Plato after having cited Cato: "Every one of us is like a man who sees things in a dream and thinks that he knows them perfectly and then wakes up to find that he knows nothing" (from the *Statesman*).<sup>26</sup> Ironically, through his bold and outspoken advocacy of philosophical truth and ethics, Dick manifested Socratic humility in his unrelenting efforts to "go back" to the positive motivating forces of our questioning, lest we lose ourselves in our own egoism and/or self-doubt. (He did, after all, write a book on *Ironic Life* close to the end of his life.)

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<sup>24</sup> In conversation with Brendan Hogan, on several occasions Dick stated that *Art as Experience* was in many ways the most profound of Dewey's texts. See John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1934).

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S.H. Butcher: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Plato, *Statesman*, trans. Benjamin Jowett: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/stateman.html>.

Dick loved to talk about Hegel's concept of *Selbstbewusstsein* early in his seminar on the *Phenomenology*. He would "volunteer" a student to elaborate the layperson's connotation of the term "self-consciousness" in English. The student would describe the sense of insecurity involved in the English meaning. And then Dick would declare enthusiastically, "Exactly! And do you know what the German phrase means? It means the opposite! To be aware of oneself, to take account of one's own consciousness in a way that is confident and assured, not in an egotistical manner, but instead resting on productive self-awareness." Dick would delight in this strong sense of what it means to be a developing consciousness attuned to the environment and one's own humbling yet emboldening context within it. Similarly, Ágnes has stated, "Wer Selbstbewusstsein hat, identifiziert sich nicht spontan mit sich selbst, er hat Distanz zu sich selbst" (A person with self-consciousness does not spontaneously identify with themselves; they have distance to themselves). Thus, as was the case in his physical life, Dick's invitations to reconsider the beginnings that initiated our thinking will continue through the multifarious ways he moved his students and friends to their own respectively unique paths whereby they can gain *Selbstbewusstsein* in this importantly Hegelian way. I changed the second half of the title to "The Life of the Beautiful" because what Dick promoted resonates unendingly in each attempt to answer the question of what conditions make a life worth living, and which seemingly prohibitive factors against such a life must be consistently confronted and overcome.

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