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Heda Segvic: From Protagoras to Aristotle

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Introduction ~

*H*eda Segvic died on March 12, 2003, at the age of forty-five. Her unexpected death meant the loss of an intensely loyal friend for those who knew her, and the end of the passionate philosophical engagement her friendship implied. She had published little, because she saw her role as a historian of ancient philosophy as one that required more than precise reconstructions of historical arguments through careful scholarship: she wanted to achieve a real understanding of what she took to be a still urgent set of questions about practical reason. At the time of her death, she had made public only a brilliant reevaluation of Socratic intellectualism and a provocative defense of Aristotle's theory of action—enough to make clear to those who did not know her the intensity and originality of her thought, but no more.

Since then, however, four of her papers have been published posthumously, so that it is now possible to present a representative selection of her work on ancient ethics. The six essays on Protagoras, Socrates, and Aristotle and two shorter pieces collected here were not intended as contributions to a single project. (Heda had plans for a book on Socratic intellectualism and a monograph on Aristotle's theory of practical knowledge.) But they are unified by their intense focus on a distinctive set of concerns about practical reason and an overarching historical thesis that lay behind much of her thinking about ancient ethics: Aristotle was the philosophical heir of Protagoras, as well as of Socrates. The essays develop this historical thesis indirectly through the analysis of the competing conceptions of the nature and function of practical reason in the two earlier philosophers (essays 1–3), and the elucidation of three topics in Aristotle's moral theory that reflect his revision and integration of their views (essays 4–6). The result is inevitably incomplete both as a historical thesis and as a philosophical investigation of practical reason. But the collection reveals Heda as a striking thinker—and writer—whose work merits, and rewards, further philosophical engagement.



Heda's unconventional work was the product of a complicated life. She was born on the 24th of April, 1957, in Split, in Croatia, where she had the benefit of a classical education of a rigor long since abandoned in the noncommunist world. After a brief spell at Zagreb University in Croatia, she took her undergraduate degree in Belgrade (1977–82), the capital city of her country, Yugoslavia. There she began her lifelong study of Aristotle and formed the interests

in Nietzsche and Kant that later informed her teaching on ancient philosophy. In 1982 she moved to the United States to pursue a graduate degree in philosophy, initially at the University of California, Los Angeles, but eventually at Princeton (1984–92). In Princeton, she studied widely in the history of ancient philosophy, though with a special focus on Stoic ethics, before switching to work on Aristotle's ethics for her dissertation, which she began with Michael Frede and completed under the supervision of John Cooper.¹

The influence of her teachers (and later friends) at Princeton on her work on ancient philosophy is evident from the topics she pursued through the rest of her life—Socratic intellectualism, the development of a notion of the will, and Aristotelian practical reason—and in her determination to derive philosophically rich results from the close study of ancient texts in their original languages. (Harry Frankfurt, whose work on the will became a contemporary standard against which to test her reflections on its early history, should also be listed among her mentors.) Her own influence on her fellow students at the time—certainly in her last three years at Princeton, when I came to know her—was just as strong: she shone out for her kindness and loyalty, no less than her philosophical brilliance and intensity, in a highly competitive environment.

Her life at Princeton was complicated, however, by two catastrophes: the breakup of her marriage to a philosopher and historian of philosophy who inspired her, Raymond Geuss, and the civil war in Yugoslavia, which saw her country torn apart, threatened her family, and lost her the only 'home' she ever owned—a flat in Belgrade expropriated by the new Serbian authorities. Despite all her joy in the company of friends and in the enjoyment of beauty—especially the complex and passionate beauty of classical opera—Heda did not fully recover from the long exile from Europe and emotional insecurity caused by these events until the final six months of her life.

In 1992, she took a position at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She was exhilarated by the natural beauty of the ocean and the hills, but felt cut off from Europe and the community of ancient philosophy. An initial remedy was a visiting position at Stanford (1993–94), where she benefited from the philosophical company of Julius Moravcsik. But she needed a permanent community. She thought she had found it in 1995, when she took a position in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Pittsburgh. At Pittsburgh, she gained much, especially from her colleagues John McDowell and James Allen (the influence of the former on her understanding of Aristotelian ethics is clear in her essays). But in the end she lost first her faith in academic institutions, then her health, and finally her life.

¹The degree was awarded in 1995.

Her gradual disillusionment with the department at Pittsburgh—and her increasing ill health—was alleviated by her joy in teaching Socrates, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Nietzsche, and the discovery of a series of local cafés incorporated within bookshops. (This was in the now distant era in which the pleasures of a twentieth-century European intellectual—reading or discussion, eating pastries and drinking coffee, and smoking—could still be licitly combined in public in some parts of the United States.) It was also punctuated by productive visiting fellowships at Clare Hall in Cambridge, in 1996, and at the Center for Human Values at Princeton, in 2000–2001. The latter visit had spurred Heda to publish some of her work despite her now customary ill health, and by the summer of 2001, when I last saw her, she had regained her intellectual balance, and was burning with eagerness to complete her projects on Socrates and Aristotle.

The following summer, however, her ill health suddenly overwhelmed her. She became completely incapacitated as she was attempting to escape—or ‘elope’, as her last letter to me put it—to Europe. She was denied medical leave and, subsequently, tenure by her university, and had to be rescued by Myles Burnyeat, whom she had come to know through his visiting appointments in the Pittsburgh department. Myles took her to England, cared for her through the extraordinary pain of her illness, and finally allowed her to find the happiness that had eluded her in America. (They were married in the winter of 2002.) She died in Cambridge in the early spring of 2003.²



The papers in this collection can be read as independent essays on some of the central questions in Greek ethics, with Heda’s brilliant and original essays on Socratic intellectualism and Aristotelian deliberation (essays 3 and 6) forming their philosophical core. Reading the collection as a whole, however, is rewarding because the resonances between the essays are indicative of a distinctive understanding of the development of ancient ethical theory from Protagoras to Aristotle. I can perhaps best show the direction and ambition of Heda’s work by giving a more precise sketch of her overarching historical thesis about Aristotle’s debts to Protagoras and noting its effect on the treatment of two striking themes in her work on the Socratic and Aristotelian theories.

The historical thesis is that Aristotle’s elaboration and defense of the anti-relativist ethical tradition he inherited from Socrates and Plato draws directly on some of the central Protagorean insights that Socratic ‘intellectualism’ was intended to replace. The vital consequence of this thesis is that Heda is able to explain Aristotle’s explicit and critical revision of Socratic views in, e.g., *EN*

²The cause of her death was chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy, a disease of the nervous system, compounded by undiagnosed multiple sclerosis.

III. 1–5 and VII. 1–10 as part of a broader response to his ‘intellectualism’ which rests on deeper objections to it than those that Plato had developed in the *Republic* and later dialogues. And a corollary is that it yields an interpretation of Aristotle’s ethical theory that is quite distinct from its Platonic antecedent (the first attempt to temper Socratic rationalism without sacrificing the objectivity of goodness).

The basis for Heda’s historical thesis is set out in her original and sympathetic reconstruction of Protagoras in essay 1. She presents him as the proponent of a theory of civic virtue as a form of imaginative self-expression, crafting subjective values into a coherent life within a relativist framework of societal norms. Her thesis relies on four connected features in her interpretation of Protagoras: (1) his bottom-up approach to goodness, which derives it from the subjective appearances of value that constitute the ‘moral facts’; (2) his consequent emphasis on the diversity of goods, not least the good of social recognition; (3) his stress on the subjectivity and cultural relativity of virtue and happiness; and (4) his emphasis on the necessity of rational reflection on the variety of ethical theories and societal norms for constructing a rich conception of happiness.³ (This is why Protagoras, and the Sophists generally, posed such a threat to the conservative societies of the late fifth century BC.)

The first part of the collection, essays 1–3, presents Heda’s forceful interpretation of Socrates’ rejection of this approach to ethics: his fundamental disagreement with Protagoras’ reliance on our corrupt social institutions (essay 1); the rhetorical strategies that he uses in the *Protagoras* to undermine the bewitching allure of Protagoras’ views on their contemporaries (essay 2); and the objectivist theory he developed to supplant sophistic ethics (essay 3). The second part of the collection, essays 4–6, shows the application of the historical thesis in her treatment of Aristotle’s views about goodness, the psychology of action, and deliberation. These essays suggest that some of the most distinctively Aristotelian elements of the moral theory set out in the *Ethics* are revisions of the four Protagorean claims outlined above. Aristotle’s theory is one that starts from the facts, that is, the evaluative stands that even our nonrational desires involve (essay 5); and, in explicit opposition to Platonic and Academic theories of a unitary good, it aims to reconcile the evident existence of a diversity of *per se* goods—including pleasure and social recognition—with a rationally unified life, through the agent’s overarching conception of happiness (essay 4). It is also a theory in which the agent’s conception of happiness is subjective in crucial respects: first, because it is not

³Heda’s reconstruction of Protagoras does not give a precise account of the nature of his relativism. Essays 1 and 6 suggest that she understood its historical form to have been on the lines of the social and moral relativism set out in Plato’s *Protagoras* (and thus saw Plato rather than Protagoras as the source of the universal agent-centered relativism refuted in the *Theaetetus*).

complete at any one time, but rather the product of an ongoing negotiation between the agent's current conception and desires, mediated through rational deliberation; and, secondly, because there are no external standards for deliberation or for the kind of life we should choose—the standard for correctness is the practically wise *agent*, rather than an elusive science of the good (essay 6). Lastly, Aristotle's *Ethics* are theoretical rather than practical works because they are intended to encourage rational reflection on ethical theories and norms in their readers, in order to enrich their conceptions of happiness (essay 6).

A schematic overview of this sort, however, gives little sense of the heuristic value and philosophical fertility of the historical thesis in Heda's essays. So I will supplement it with more concrete examples, using two of the most striking themes in the collection. The first is Heda's identification of the Socratic model of ethical knowledge in Plato's *Gorgias* and the Aristotelian model of deliberation in the *Ethics* as both formative and integral parts of the history of the concept of the 'will'. The central idea of Heda's reevaluation of Socratic intellectualism in essay 3 is her controversial thesis that Socrates takes genuinely rational desire (*boulêsis*) to be a factive response to recognized goodness, which is possible only when the agent is in possession of systematic knowledge. (On her view a Socratic rational desire is thus neither a *de re* desire for something good nor a *de dicto* desire grounded on a merely true belief that something is good—although she does not deny that all Socratic agents have such true beliefs.) Heda argues that if we understand Socrates' conception of rational desire in this way, we should recognize that his presentation of virtue as the only reliable form of *power* constitutes the introduction of a theory of the will. Virtue, the epistemic and desiderative disposition of an agent capable of genuine rational desire, is power, Socrates claims, because it is necessarily strong enough to determine the agent's action in every case. But a disposition that determines that all action is right action is a prototype theory of 'the good will', which we can also identify in the Stoics and find explicitly in Christian philosophers from Augustine onwards.

Heda's claim that Socrates introduced a conception of 'will' was part of an ongoing study of that complex notion or set of notions.⁴ She is careful to stress that the Socratic 'will' is more concerned with what we might consider psychological 'freedom' than its metaphysical descendents. It involves neither the context of determinism or providence that was central to later discussions

⁴Heda's views on the history of the concept of the 'will' were shaped by her long-standing debate on this issue with Michael Frede. Michael argued in his Sather Lectures that this concept is the product of a series of metaphysical assumptions that did not arise before the first century AD, some of which we, like Aristotle, are better off without. But Heda intended to show that in its vital form—the expression of practical reason—it is something that ethics and ethical agency cannot do without.

of ‘free will’, nor a distinct faculty—it is rather the virtuous state of the unitary faculty of ‘reason’. The Socratic notion is nevertheless a conception of will, she argues, since it describes a model for the rational determination of action, and a form of psychological power, which is also an ideal of freedom—the freedom of the perfectly rational agent from the constraints of false belief and ignorance. And it does so using a set of lexical items that helped to shape the concept’s history over the next thousand years (*boulêsis* [‘rational desire’] and *hekôn* [‘willingly’]).

In essay 6, Heda argues that Aristotle’s model of deliberation—a central element in his response to Socrates in *EN* III and VII—provides the second stage in the history of the ‘will’, since Aristotelian ‘choice’ (*prohairesis*) is a naturalization of Socratic rational desire. She construes Aristotelian choice—i.e., the kind of rational desire (*boulêsis*) that is the product of an ordinary agent’s deliberation about how to act—as a special form of ‘wishing’ that constitutes the effective rational determination of desire. In Aristotle’s theory, however, an agent’s rational choice of a course of action does not always determine even her immediate action, far less all her actions, as it did in Socrates’ model, since nonrational motivations may disable or bypass her rational agency.⁵ Nevertheless, Heda argues, a rational choice still constitutes an act of ‘willing’ since it amounts to a preparedness to act, grounded on the agent’s (sometimes implicit) awareness that she can determine her own action through rational desire mediated by deliberation.⁶ Aristotelian choices are thus ordinary acts of reason that shape the agent’s initial or first-order desires in accordance with her reflective goals. Heda does not argue explicitly that this transmutation of the Socratic virtue of ‘the good will’ into something closer to ‘willings’ in a more contemporary sense is a direct debt to Protagoras. But her wider discussion of Aristotle’s theory of deliberation in essay 6 suggests that it was his Protagorean sympathies that led him to loosen ‘choice’ from its Socratic anchoring in the factive perception of an objective good, as the historical thesis predicts.

A second example of the application of the historical thesis in these essays is Heda’s treatment of the ideal of the rational integration of one’s desiderative (and cognitive) states in Socratic and Aristotelian ethics. Essay 3 argues that Socrates’ paradoxical theses about virtue—that it is unitary, constituted by knowledge, and sufficient to eliminate moral error—support a theory that is far

⁵ The essays do not present Heda’s interpretation of Aristotle’s theory of emotion and ‘weakness of will’ (*akrasia*). She intended to defend his conception of the interaction between rational and nonrational desire and cognition in the *Rhetoric* and *EN* II–VII in her monograph on practical knowledge.

⁶ Heda derives the constraint on the agent’s awareness from Aristotle’s emphatic narrowing of the scope of *prohairesis* to deliberated rational desire for something within the agent’s general capacity to bring about in *EN* III. 3 and *EE* iii. 10.

richer than the historical reception of ‘Socratic intellectualism’ suggests. Socrates’ demand for moral knowledge did not undervalue the role of emotion in our lives; nor, she argues, did his proto-cognitivist theory of emotion deny the heterogeneity and irreducibility of our experience. His intention was rather to argue that desires and desiderative states are constitutive parts of reason, and hence, in the ideal case, constituents of moral knowledge. By linking the way in which we conceive or represent value with the nature of our desire, Socrates proposed to show that the particular ‘appearances of goodness’ basic to our ordinary experience are fundamental *activities* of reason—and hence subject to rational determination in accordance with our general or universal beliefs. Since we use ‘the whole of our soul’ in all our experience, moral knowledge or virtue is a disposition that characterizes all of it, or none. (Heda’s beautiful study of the erotic power of wisdom in the narrative of Plato’s *Protagoras* in essay 2 should be seen as a dramatization of her interpretation of Socrates’ theory no less than an examination of Plato’s dramatic representation of his character.)

Socratic virtue represents a model for the perfect integration of our desiderative (and cognitive) states. Heda’s historical thesis suggests that we should read essays 4–6 as presenting her argument that Aristotle retained the Socratic drive for psychological integration, but regarded it as an unrealizable ideal. She identifies two Protagorean limitations on the ability of Aristotelian agents to achieve the Socratic ideal. The first is Aristotle’s acceptance of nonrational appearances of value, and of nonrational desires, as presenting us with irreducible ‘moral facts’ about the diversity of goods.⁷ One consequence is that even in the case of a virtuous person, the best we can hope for is that her nonrational desiderative or cognitive states will be *shaped* by reason: they remain irreducibly discrete—and perhaps inherently unstable—states.⁸ Another consequence is that the integration of our desires in the form of a happy life is an ongoing process of negotiation between discrete goals; but since the successful realization of some of our goals is contingent on external events, their integration requires continual adjustment and is never complete (essays 4 and 5). The second limitation is that the Aristotelian mechanism of integration—his theory of deliberation—depends on the agent’s subjective understanding of her final goal. But, Heda argues, our conceptions of happiness are always only

⁷ Essay 5 gives an interpretation and philosophical defense of Aristotle’s theory of intentional action that identifies the appearance of goodness under some description as its fundamental trigger. Essay 4 examines his recognition of ‘external’ *per se* goods, and its impact on his views on deliberation and the way we conceive of happiness.

⁸ The essays do not assert the view that even virtuous Aristotelian agents are permanently liable to ‘weakness of will’ (*akrasia*); nor do they advance the weaker thesis that the ability of such virtuous agents to resist aberrant nonrational desires always requires their active attention. But Heda’s Protagorean interpretation of Aristotle perhaps suggests something along these lines.

partially explicit, vague in some respects, gappy, and developing in the face of new situations, new considerations produced by past deliberation, and reflection on other agents' actions and motivations (essay 6). Hence, the problem of integration is one that we can never perfectly resolve.

These Protagorean limitations on the Socratic ideal do not undermine Aristotle's adaptation of it, as Heda construes it, since his aim was precisely to refashion it into a form realizable by human agents. Aristotelian virtue, on her reading, is constituted, as it is in its Socratic model, primarily by the agent's set of actual desires and desiderative states, when they have been shaped by reason through deliberation. A virtuous action is thus one that is in accordance with the agent's choice in the sense that it derives from a sensitivity to the salient moral features of the situation, which in turn derives ultimately from deliberation. But Aristotle's recognition of nonrational desiderative and cognitive states means that this sort of sensitivity is not immediately a matter of having the correct general beliefs about actions, even in the ideal case: it consists in the immediate, often nonrational appearances generated by the agent's overall disposition. As a result, Heda argues, chosen, and hence virtuous, action is not always or even usually the consequence of a process of calculation or so-called practical reasoning—though in such a case, it remains the *expression*, if not a direct act, of the agent's reason. So Aristotelian virtuous action is produced by 'the whole soul', too, despite its discrete forms of representation and motivation.



A reading of the collection as a whole of the sort sketched above shows, I hope, something of its ambitious scope and philosophical richness. The achievement of the historical thesis uniting Heda's independently forceful essays is that it yields a brilliantly original and suggestive view of ancient ethics—if one that is inevitably incomplete as a systematic interpretation of its Socratic or Aristotelian forms. Heda's premature death forestalled her plans to elaborate the consequences of her reappraisal of sophistic ethics, Socratic intellectualism, and her distinctively Protagorean view of Aristotle's revision of his Socratic inheritance. But a second achievement of the collection is to have outlined a series of vital historical and philosophical questions for further research. The most significant historical question is perhaps the task of identifying in more detail how Aristotle's response to relativism differs from Plato's. Heda locates the difference in Aristotle's recognition that nonrational appearances aim at genuine goods, his specification of the practical function of rationality through the theory of deliberation, and his advocacy of a form of objectivity that does not require one to ignore situational or societal difference. She did not have time to show why Plato did not take this approach, or, perhaps, the extent to which we can see that his later work pointed towards it.

The most pressing question, however, in Heda's view, was a philosophical one: can an Aristotelian theory—or her Protagorean interpretation of Aristotle's own theory—ultimately leave room for the objectivity of goodness that Aristotle was concerned to defend? She was confident that it can; and she intended to show that in Aristotle's case it did, by defending the objective conception of rationality that underlies it.⁹ The posing of such questions, and the opportunity to resolve them, is her bequest to the reader.

A third achievement of the collection is that the set of individual essays reveals not just a powerful and original thinker, but an approach to the practice of ancient philosophy that justifies the enterprise as a search for real understanding. The complexity of her essays, their precise attention to linguistic detail, and the remarkable elegance of their English (Heda's third language) are the result of her intense reading of the texts in their original languages under the stimulus of a passionate search for philosophical insight.¹⁰ She had a rare talent, of a sort we perhaps do not cherish sufficiently in our scholastic age.

Charles Brittain

ὁ μακάριος δὴ φίλων τοιούτων δεήσεται (*EN* 1170a 2).

⁹ She intended to defend this position in her monograph on practical knowledge by a detailed study of Aristotle's dialectical method in the *Ethics*, and perhaps of its epistemological and metaphysical underpinnings in his other works.

¹⁰ Her exceptional sensitivity to English nuance was itself the result of an intense reading and study of English literature, of a sort that is increasingly rare among native speakers in our philosophical community. Essays 2, 7, and 8 are brilliant demonstrations of its value, the first in capturing the literary enchantment of the *Protagoras*, the second in comparing three translations of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the third in explaining our evidence for Socrates to a lay audience.