

The Feminist Critique Of Hegel On Women And The Family

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I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg, if there was a draft she sat in it -- in short, she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others.¹

For many contemporary feminist writers, Virginia Woolf's portrait of her own alter-ego, the "angel in the house" whose self-sacrificial impulses she routinely had to suppress before beginning her day of writing, offers a fair description of woman's disposition and virtue, as seen through the prism of traditional culture. Feminists condemn the lack of autonomy possible for women thus confined to domestic and familial roles, and argue that women's potential for a fully rational, fully human life has been systematically sabotaged by oppressive social relations -- a patriarchal structure sustained in being historically as a means of preserving the power and dominance of men. That even in our own liberated times women themselves frequently accept, seek out and even defend such confinement to the private sphere is readily viewed as a reactionary, 'man-identified' response,² rooted in social conditioning which must be drastically revolutionized before all women will be empowered to recognize and seize their rightful places as fully equal participants in human affairs.

But while feminist thinkers widely share the conviction that women have been unjustly and illegitimately consigned to a subordinate condition, there is substantial disagreement about the historical and conceptual roots of this unacceptable state of affairs, and about how best to remedy it. There have been a number of phases in the development of feminist thought, so that while the Women's Liberation Movement was a phenomenon of the late 1960's, the intellectual, social and political ideals it embodied have a considerably more lengthy history.

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Women and Writing* (The Women's Press, London, 1979) p. 79

² Mary Daly *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1978). Daly speaks of women who accept the roles assigned them in patriarchal culture as "fembots"-robotised, moronised, lobotomised "puppets of Papa" who do not realise the depths of their own degradation.

I. Varieties Of Feminist Critique

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*,³ the eighteenth century thinker Mary Wollstonecraft, writing in the light of the libertarian and egalitarian principles of Enlightenment thought, argued that there could be no logical ground for regarding women as lacking in rationality, nor therefore for preventing their participation in public, political life. She particularly criticised J.-J. Rousseau's romantic account of women's education and proper role in his treatise on education, *Émile*. While Rousseau envisions for the boy Émile an education aimed at fostering independence of mind and spirit, autonomy and self-sufficiency, his companion-to-be, Sophie, is to be educated to please Émile and so fulfill her feminine potential.

She is to be compliant and obedient, modest and chaste. Her rational faculty is to be developed only insofar as it helps her to realize these uniquely womanly excellences. Wollstonecraft rejects this distinction between manly and womanly virtue. Though Rousseau stresses that woman's faculties are not inferior to man's, only different and complementary, Wollstonecraft argues that his setting up of a separate standard of excellence for woman undermines the universality of rational freedom. If women are in fact often frivolous, swayed by emotion and lacking in "the manly virtues of moral courage and disinterestedness"⁴ as Wollstonecraft herself acknowledges, then this is not their natural character. Rather it arises solely because of educational practices and social expectations which prevent them from perfecting their latent rational capacities. If education were the same for both sexes, then these cultural variants would be eliminated.

Wollstonecraft initiated a lengthy tradition of liberal feminist thinkers who argued that female biology is accidental to woman's true humanity, rooted as this must be in her equal capacity for rational thought and action. Political freedom and equality, they insist, follow from this premise of a universal human nature. Certainly these views were reflected in the suffragist movement of the nineteenth century,⁵ and have led to significant political and social transformation, so that in western democracies today it is no light matter to question the status of women as persons, as free, rational individuals, as fully responsible moral agents and as bearers of full political rights. Despite their divergent assessments of how best to realize feminine equality, liberal, existential and Marxist feminists alike concur that underlying woman's apparent passivity, immanence,

³ Wollstonecraft, Mary, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Edited by Charles W. Hagelman, Jr. (New York, W.W. Norton, 1967)

⁴ Wollstonecraft, p.33

⁵ Jean Bethke Elshtain [see *Public Man Private Woman* (Princeton University Press, Princeton N.J. 1981) p. 229ff. points out that the suffragist movement was characterised by a very strong emphasis upon woman as bringing to the political arena her uniquely feminine virtues, which, it was argued, would illuminate the egoism and immoralism of public life with the values and ideals of private family life. Thus although the suffragists struggled for formal-legalistic equality for women, they did so on the basis of "already dominant presumptions of a particular split between the public-political world of power and action, and a private a-political realm of sentiment and feeling; they simply placed a different interpretation on the relative value of these features of the dominant ideology." (p. 229)

or lack of class solidarity, is a potential for free subjective action and thought, waiting to be liberated through some form of progressive revolutionary struggle.

For these thinkers, then, the notion that for woman 'biology is destiny' must be resisted. According to Simone de Beauvoir, and in subsequent generations, Kate Millett and Betty Friedan⁶, lives circumscribed by domesticity and child-rearing are not fully human, and women who accept the socially-constructed belief in a pre-given female nature, and hence in a determinate female destiny, are accomplices in their own enslavement. The only means beyond this self-imposed oppression is actively to seek a reversal of roles, accepting and identifying oneself with the male model of transcendence, which is traditionally presented as a neutral ideal, available universally to all human beings. Women who achieve self-liberation will do so by leaving the home to find a place in the labour market and by fully exploiting all technological means available to ensure their full transcendence of the physical and cultural exigencies of conception, reproduction and family responsibilities. Following through on this logic, the radical feminism of Shulamith Firestone⁷ envisions an androgynous utopia, in which reproduction has been entirely given over to technology, thus finally freeing woman to be the equal of man.

Yet alongside this deep focus upon the concept of woman as free individual, whose difference from man is entirely incidental, and whose authentic selfhood depends on emulating universal (male?) standards of rationality, has flowed another strong current of feminist discourse. From this perspective it is argued that women have been insidiously encouraged by much mainstream feminist thought to accept a masculine ideal of human excellence as paradigmatic, with the consequence that their own uniquely feminine characteristics and capacities have been judged inferior. It is argued that by accepting the Enlightenment notion of a common human nature or presenting female "immanence" as merely a privative "lack of transcendence"⁸ -- by seeing female biological determinants as nothing but an impediment to full human dignity -- women unwittingly acquiesce in the standards of patriarchal thought, and in so doing lose all potential to achieve dignity *precisely as women*.

This strand of feminist thought is far from advocating return to a traditional ethos, however, but suggests rather that the struggle for equality has been misconceived as a struggle for liberation *from* feminine nature. What is required is that women self-consciously celebrate themselves as women⁹ and work toward recovering an authentically

⁶ See Beauvoir, Simone de *The Second Sex* translated by H.M. Parshley (Bantam Books New York 1968); Friedan, Betty *The Feminine Mystique*(W.W. Norton, New York, 1963); Millet, Kate *Sexual Politics* (Virago, London, 1971)

⁷ Firestone, Shulamith *The Dialectic of Sex* (The Women's Press, London, 1979).

⁸ This dichotomy of transcendence/immanence is Simone de Beauvoir's; for whom woman's characteristic "immanence" is identified with her animal nature, her biological functions as child-bearer and mother, which must be subdued and transcended if she is to assume the status of a free, rational human individual, the equal of her male counterpart.

⁹ One can note in this feminist turn from the quest for abstract human equality to a demand that feminine difference be acknowledged and respected a parallel with other 20th century movements. Thus, there came a stage in the American civil rights movement when 'Negro' activists, who had sought simple racial

feminine identity, free of dependency on norms and expectations generated by male-dominated culture. Woman's unique reality must be retrieved and revalorized, such that her genuine difference from man will no longer be articulated in terms of its 'otherness', inferiority, or lack (eg. of logic, of emotional maturity, of philosophical or scientific aptitude).

But what is it to be 'truly feminine'? Where should one locate woman's significant difference from man, and how might that female nature be retrieved from beneath layers of historical and social conditioning? For a significant group of feminist thinkers, the answer is to be found in biology. Interestingly, here they share a common ground with traditional opponents of women's liberation who claim that both male and female have a natural destiny such that traditional gender roles, rooted in irreducible biological differences, must be respected. Such feminists agree that important male and female potentialities can be traced to biology, but contrast the violence and aggression resulting from male biological features with the gentle, life-affirming, nurturant qualities they see as dependent on female physiology. Thus, for example Susan Brownmiller's¹⁰ thesis that all men, by nature, are rapists, and that even though all do not rape, all benefit from the power relations arising from their shared biological capacity. Others postulate a trans-historical, but not explicitly biological set of needs and desires, characteristic of men in all ages, which has led to the systematic suppression of authentically feminine nature. The pseudo-historical concept of 'patriarchy' has been widely employed in this context to signify the universal domination of women by men. Via a complex 'genealogy' of women's oppression, such thinkers as Andrea Dworkin, Adrienne Rich, and Mary Daly,¹¹ point out how, in cultural phenomena ranging from pornography and prostitution to religion, marriage, motherhood and heterosexuality, the patriarchal culture has imposed male power on its female victims.

For those such as Mary Daly who see woman's spirituality itself as compromised by patriarchy -- which Daly describes as "the prevailing religion of the entire planet"¹² -- there is no hope of achieving freedom or dignity for women within its parameters. Thus, for women who reject the patriarchy's proffered invitation to either mimic male aspirations as "token women", (working in philosophy departments or Women's Studies Programs) or to remain in the ranks of submissive, domesticated "fembots", the only avenue of escape is to retreat into a primordial, separate female sphere where, freed of the strictures of masculinist thinking, they can encounter an independent, authentic feminine identity in which women can "cease to play the role of complement and struggle to stand alone as free human beings"¹³. Daly portrays this quintessentially female sphere as

equality, began to see themselves as having been 'co-opted by white culture' and in defiance recast themselves as 'black'. Homosexual activists similarly have appropriated the title 'gay', and promoted 'gay pride', as an antidote to patronizing heterosexual gestures of abstract equality.

¹⁰ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (Bantam Books, New York, 1975).

¹¹ Dworkin, Andrea, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (Perigee Books, New York, 1981); Rich, Adrienne, *Of woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (W.W. Norton, New York, 1976); Daly, Mary, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1978).

¹² Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, p.39.

¹³ Daly, *Mary Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1973) p.26.

embodying a style of individualism aligned with life, dedicated to opposing "...men who have sapped the life-force from women."¹⁴ In a remarkably Nietzschean, prophetic tone, she proclaims that women must take back the power stolen from them by men: "The source of the energy is women's participation in the power of being as we hear and speak forth our own new word"¹⁵ Hers is no call to a liberated, universal rationality -- rather, Daly's vision is of a redeemed individuality, rooted in nature, in life and in the immediacy of a pre-reflective feminine spiritual harmony.

One sees in this perspective the mirror image of Simone De Beauvoir's existential stress on the free, rational transcendence of womanly immanence, or embeddedness in nature -- yet each presupposes as her starting-point the ideal of woman as a (potentially) autonomous, self-sufficient individual, whose identity is to be forged in independence of prevailing socio-political expectations and institutions. These opposed visions of what constitutes woman's authentic freedom in turn grow out of competing contemporary dogmas regarding what it is to be an individual: on the one hand, the Enlightenment, liberal-revolutionary view that abstract rational equality among persons, and the capacity progressively to transcend natural limits, are universal features of the human condition which override all differences of race, class, or sex; on the other, the claim that certain natural differences are essential to individual worth, that genuine freedom is realizable only through negating the life-denying principles of abstract human equality and a common rationality, putting in their place a 'concretely lived' subjectivity, rooted in precisely those natural distinctions and capacities so devalued by the prevailing 'humanist' ideologies.

What is striking about this standoff is that both sides formulate their analyses of woman's current situation, and their recommendations for achieving her true freedom, in terms of post-speculative philosophical positions which themselves stand in extreme opposition both to one another, and to traditional accounts of the individual's proper relation to social and political institutions. They are dependent for their vitality upon other philosophical movements -- socialist/Marxist humanism, existentialism, liberal democratic individualism, Nietzschean anti-liberal individualism -- which are themselves critical responses to nineteenth century speculative metaphysics, reactions against prevailing intellectual, cultural and ethical norms in the name of a fully actualized, free humanity. It is from within one or other of these counter-metaphysical frames of reference that feminist thinkers and activists formulate their own response to the tradition. Much contemporary feminist critique of traditional philosophy must be seen, not as an unprecedented, direct confrontation with the limits of such philosophy's patriarchal understanding of woman, but as mediated through its reliance on categories forged in earlier, non-feminist critical assaults on the foundations of traditional thought. The standpoint of a radically free, finite subject, an individual fully at home in a world of his/her own making -- which is the starting-point and goal of post-speculative, post-metaphysical thought -- is thus a recurring feature in feminist discourse, further mediated however by the feminist concern that this ideal should be exhibited in its full generality, and not simply as another male prerogative.

¹⁴ Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p.173.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

II Feminist Views Of Hegel

With these remarks in mind, I turn now to some feminist assessments of G.W.F. Hegel's account of woman, since here one finds clearly exemplified the polarities which emerged in the previous discussion. Within current feminist literature there is a considerable body of commentary both on Hegel's account in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* of woman's function as guardian of the "sacred claims of the family"¹⁶ and on his analysis in the *Philosophy of Right* of the relation between the family, civil society and the state.¹⁷ Among many writers, there is a concern to expose the limits of the Hegelian analysis of female virtue and potential as being grounded in a discredited biological essentialism. Hegel, it is argued, understands woman as by nature destined to fulfill the role of passive embodiment and nurturer of family values, while her male counterpart assumes the challenge of progressively transcending natural immediacy, creating a cultural sphere of free moral action, of politics, art, science, religion and philosophy.

Citations from both texts have been appealed to by feminist authors in support of this general thesis:

...the difference in the physical characteristics of the two sexes has a rational basis and consequently acquires an intellectual and ethical significance ... man has his actual and substantive life in the state, in learning and so forth, as well as in labour and struggle with the external world ... Woman, on the other hand, has her substantive destiny in the family and to be imbued with family piety is her ethical frame of mind.¹⁸

Women are capable of education, but they are not made for activities which demand a universal faculty such as the more advanced sciences, philosophy and certain forms of artistic production. Women may have happy ideas, taste and elegance, but they cannot attain to the ideal.¹⁹

Womankind -- the everlasting irony in the life of the community -- changes by intrigue the universal end of the government into a private end, transforms its universal activity into the work of some particular individual, and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament for the Family.²⁰

¹⁶ Hegel, G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977), #474, p.287. Hegel's treatment of woman and the family occurs in the section on Spirit: (BB).VI.A "The True Spirit: The ethical order".

¹⁷ Hegel, G.W.F. *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1967); see Third Part: "Ethical Life" [Sittlichkeit].

¹⁸ *Philos. Of Right*, #166.

¹⁹ *Philos. of Right*, #166 Addition.

²⁰ *Phenomenology*, #475, p.288

When women hold the helm of government, the state is at once in jeopardy, because women regulate their actions not by the demands of universality but by arbitrary inclinations and opinions. Women are educated -- who knows how? -- as it were by breathing in ideas, by living rather than by acquiring knowledge. The status of manhood, on the other hand is attained only by the stress of thought and much technical exertion.²¹

In today's social and intellectual climate, it would seem that the proponent of such "quaintly repugnant"²² views could only be condemned as among the worst of misogynists. Yet, many feminist thinkers mine Hegel's work not simply to unearth ammunition for the war against the patriarchy, but also to help shed light on present day philosophical debates. Typical of much current feminist interest in Hegel's thought is Seyla Benhabib who remarks:

Hegel's philosophy is significant because the Hegelian problem of the relation between identity and difference that is central to his phenomenology is at the heart of the feminist project to create a free and equal society. That is, Hegel *articulates* the fundamental problem of contemporary society with which feminists are concerned even though his analysis fails when sexual difference is 'essentialized' and all that woman represents is confined to the family and 'overreached'.²³

From this perspective, the division of labour between the private (female) and public (male) spheres, central to Hegel's account of women, seems asymmetrical, illegitimately consigning women to a degraded, subordinate status inadequate to their true human worth as free, fully rational individuals. Nevertheless, Hegel's focus on logical relations between identity and difference, together with his emphasis upon the importance of the principle of subjective, individual freedom in modern society, offer contemporary feminists ample grounds for renewed reflection on his thought.

Accordingly a number of recent thinkers²⁴ have addressed Hegel's account of women's function in the ancient Greek *polis*. Of particular interest is his portrayal of Sophocles' play *Antigone* as embodying an ideal of feminine ethical virtue, which is reiterated in his later account of woman's role in the modern state. They argue that Hegel's speculative

²¹ *Philos. of Right*, #166 Addition.

²² Woods, Allen W., *Hegel's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990) p.243.

²³ Benhabib, Seyla "On Hegel, Women and Irony" in *Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory*, eds. Mary Shanley and Carol Pateman (Pennsylvania University Press, Pennsylvania, 1991), p.84.

²⁴ Cf. Seyla Benhabib, *op cit*; also: Patricia J. Mills, *Women, Nature and Psyche*, (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1987); Kelly Oliver, "Antigone's Ghost: Undoing Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit" in *Hypatia* vol. 11, no.1 (Winter 1996); Benjamin Barber, "Spirit's Phoenix and History's Owl or The Incoherence of Dialectics in Hegel's Account of Women", in *Political Theory*, vol. 16 no. 1 (February 1988); Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. G. Gill (Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca, N.Y. 1985) "The Eternal Irony of the Community", pp.214-226; Heidi M. Ravven, "Has Hegel Anything to Say to Feminists?" in *Owl of Minerva*, vol.19, no.2 (Spring, 1988), pp. 149-68; Susan M. Easton, "Hegel and Feminism" in *Hegel and Modern Philosophy* edited by David Lamb (Croom Helm, New York, 1987) pp. 30-55.

vision of Antigone (who defies the decree of the king, Creon, to leave her dead brother unburied as a symbol of his treasonous actions toward the *polis*) as nobly yet tragically representing the 'divine law of the family' in opposition to Creon's '[human] law of the *polis*', fails to capture Antigone's radical otherness, her significance as "a woman liberated from the bonds of paternal and political obedience..."²⁵ a rebel who represents the "revolt of the particular against subsumption into a universal schema."²⁶

Such commentators view Hegel's speculative account of the tensions within ethical life in the ancient world through the prism of a contemporary emphasis upon the absolute value and primacy of the morally free, subjective individual. On this basis, Hegel's analysis is praised by some,²⁷ who contend that despite his conservative prejudices in favour of the nuclear family and female confinement within it, one can find solid Hegelian grounds for woman's emancipation from such destructive, natural limitations. Others however²⁸ insist that the dialectical movement from family life to civil society and thence to the state is unavoidably predicated upon a transhistorical assumption of woman's irreducible 'otherness', as evidenced by Hegel's reference to Antigone as a model even for modern womanhood. Thus Patricia Mills, for example, who says of Hegel that he "systematically misrepresents ... [Antigone] ...as a transhistorical ideal of woman as wife and mother, confined to the family as the sphere of animal life and inaction"²⁹ Therefore, unlike even the slave of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* who can become a free subject, the equal of his master through work and risk of life, woman appears as simply a "victim of the dialectic" whose unconscious, inarticulate, natural immediacy must be suppressed as the price of male transcendence and freedom. She is the ghost destined forever to haunt the margins of Hegel's supposedly complete speculative system, the sacrificial Other whose static condition, her restriction to the passive life of the family, makes possible the development of civil society, and so the dialectical progress of modern culture.³⁰

a) Irigary on Woman as the 'Irony of the Community'

For the post-modern French feminist, Luce Irigary, it is precisely woman's status as outsider, neither master nor slave, which gives her power to "upset the order of the dialectic", to threaten the progress toward self-conscious freedom of the male members of

²⁵ Barber, "Spirit's Phoenix...", p.12.

²⁶ Mills, *Women, Nature and Psyche*, p.136.

²⁷ See Heidi Ravven, Susan Easton.

²⁸ See Benhabib, Oliver, Irigary

²⁹ Mills, op. cit. p.43.

³⁰ Oliver, op cit, "... the dialectical movement in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* that leads to the possibility of the properly political, social and ethical realm is dependent on the suppression of women and the feminine." (p.69).see also Irigary, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, pp223-4; Again, Patricia Mills: "Modern man leaves the family to move into the realm of civil society, where he emerges as a particular, but the sphere of undifferentiated universality or immediacy must be maintained. Therefore, modern woman is forced to do the family 'maintenance work' required by the Hegelian dialectic: woman is kept at home in the name of love to create and preserve the family" (pp.38-9).

the community through her unconscious, inarticulate presence.³¹ From this perspective, the only legitimate response to Hegel's negation of feminine freedom and dignity is to 'negate the negation' -- to recover Antigone, the lost feminine, from her silent, shadowy place "on the edge of city", liberating her from her ambivalent, degraded role as support for and threat to the patriarchy.³² Woman, Hegel's "everlasting irony of the community", must affirm herself precisely as the contemporary, ironic voice of radical otherness, and so create a cultural space in which genuine difference will not simply be "overreached".³³

For Irigary, such restoration of irony demands nothing less than the radical subversion of Hegel's dialectic, and indeed of all western, "phallogocentric" philosophies.³⁴ When modernist feminism tries to salvage a place for woman within the logical confines of traditional philosophies, Irigary argues, it capitulates to terms laid down by the patriarchy -- for example, the Hegelian concept of a sovereign, transcendent subject who becomes fully self-conscious through the struggle with all that is deemed Other. Thus, for example, Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of woman as the 'second sex' constructed by male consciousness as the 'objectified Other', presupposes that the ideal for all human subjects, male and female, is to move out of immanence, and so enjoy the status of universal free subjectivity. Irigary, however, while she shares de Beauvoir's view that woman has been 'exiled from subjectivity', and so must recover her own genuine subjectness, adopts a radical stance toward the identity logic she sees at the heart of

³¹ Irigary, Luce "Love of same, love of other" in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian Gill (Ithaca: Cornell, 1993) "Antigone is silenced in her action. Locked up--paralyzed, on the edge of the city. . . Because she is neither master nor slave. And this upsets the order of the dialectic." pg. 119

³² Irigary, *Speculum of the Other Woman* . Referring to Hegel's treatment of Sophocles' *Antigone* : "...the Hegelian dream outlined above is already the effect of a dialectic produced by the discourse of patriarchy." (p. 217) and further: "Woman is the guardian of the blood. But as both she and it have had to use their substance to nourish the universal consciousness of self, it is in the form of bloodless shadows -- of unconscious fantasies -- that they maintain an underground subsistence. Powerless on earth, she remains the very ground in which manifest mind secretly sets its roots and draws its strength." (p. 225).

³³ Seyla Benhabib puts this point very clearly when she says: "Hegel's Antigone is one without a future; her tragedy is also the grave of utopian, revolutionary thinking about gender relations... Repeatedly the Hegelian system expunges the irony of the dialectic, ... [yet, ironically] ... what remains of the dialectic is what Hegel precisely thought he could dispense with: irony, tragedy, and contingency... The vision of Hegelian reconciliation has long ceased to convince: the otherness of the other is that moment of irony, reversal and inversion with which we must live. What women can do today is to restore irony to the dialectic, by deflating the pompous march of historical necessity ... by giving back to the victims of the dialectic ... their otherness ... their selfhood." ("On Hegel, Women and Irony", p. 142-3).

³⁴ Irigary, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Following Jacques Derrida, Irigary views the history of Western culture as "phallogocentric". Western thought displays a distinctive form and a characteristic logic: the form of hierarchical opposition, whereby reality is divided into two opposing elements, one of which is positively valued, while the other is conceived negatively as Other. (eg. reason/emotion; mind/body; active/passive; subject/object). This form is not the self-conscious product of particular philosophical methodologies, but an unconscious and implicit structuring which underlies virtually all western intellectual positions. Derrida calls this dualist structure "the metaphysical exigency", and further holds that the binary, hierarchical structure is gender-coded: that there is a primary dichotomy such that the positive side of any metaphysical dualism is symbolised as 'male' while the negative side is 'female'. Masculine power and authority (the patriarchy) is thus constituted through maintaining these oppositions, which become manifest in a cultural order centred around the male focus on pure, abstract reason as the vehicle for achieving self-present, self-evident Truth. Derrida refers to this cultural nexus as "logocentric", but also, because of the equation between reason and masculinity as 'phallogocentric' or 'phallogocentric' -- the phallus being a key symbol for male dominance.

modern thought. If woman is to achieve subjectivity, she must reject completely the tradition's characterization of the female as 'secondary' in any sense. It is language, not metaphysics, which determines what it is to be a subject -- and for Irigary, therefore, woman becomes authentically herself when she begins to "*parler-femme*" -- to "speak woman" -- a language specific to the feminine, which therefore challenges at its roots the Hegelian concept of a universal, rational subjectivity. Irigary contends that in the feminist critiques of deBeauvoir and her many contemporary legatees, woman remains merely a creature of the process of 'saming', whereby she is grasped not as genuine Other, but merely as one side of a metaphysical dualism in which she occupies the place of lack, inferiority, the "desexualized Other of the same." Her otherness is thus overreached, contained as a "semblance of difference" within the patriarchal hierarchy which continues to function unassailed.

Irigary demands that what is specific to woman should be spoken, symbolized -- not in the language of the phallogocentric, dualist tradition, but rather through an "*écriture de la femme*"³⁵, a woman's writing which would be "excessive", a "derangement" of the male logic in which woman is always conceptualized as the negation of masculine reason and independence. If feminist critique persists in its effort to use the binary categories of logocentric thought, she asserts, then it cannot free itself from the valuation imposed on woman by that mode of discourse. What is needed is a thoroughgoing Derridean deconstruction of phallogocentric language, which would involve a re-reading of the texts of the patriarchy from a standpoint of "*jouissance*". In this mode of playful "feminine operation"³⁶ the reader adopts an attitude of independence from phallogocentric categories, does not seek to engage with or criticize metaphysical dualism, or even traditional thought's implicit sexism, but instead de-centres the conceptual order, revealing it as having no intrinsic authority, a shelter for a multiplicity of meanings awaiting release from their confines within the patriarchal system. The deconstructionist, post-modernist ideal of the liberation of language thus appears as a veritable metaphor for the liberation of woman, who is conceived by such writers as Irigary as being trapped by the phallogocentric language -- the science, the philosophy -- of patriarchy.

In her exegesis of Hegel's account of *Antigone* Irigary uses deconstructionist/psychoanalytic techniques to reveal ways in which its surface logic

³⁵ Irigary, Luce *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1977) p. 76

³⁶ Ibid. pg. 74. This feminine operation is needed in order to "jam theoretical machinery itself, to suspend its extension to the production of truth, and to a univocal sense." p. 75. Irigary here again follows Derrida, who describes his style of deconstructive discourse as a "feminine operation". He aligns himself with Nietzsche (cf. *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* trans. B. Harlow, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1978) who he says is an early feminine operator, precisely because he derides (!) the feminists of his day. Liberal-revolutionary feminist opposition to the tradition is, for Derrida, simply another dimension of logocentrism, its negative shadow. By contrast Nietzsche's celebrated misogyny appears to Derrida as part of a "feminine operation" through which he subverts the binary structure of metaphysics, substituting the cryptic aphorism "truth is a woman" (ambiguous, dissimulating, elusive?) for the ascetic ideal of absolute, rational truth. Derrida sees women as rejecting phallogocentric truth; according to the binary values of the tradition their position is therefore 'false'. But this does not mean that there should be a feminist reversal of power; this would only be to preserve the phallogocentric duality. The techniques of 'feminine operators' (whether they be male or female) are rather, like Nietzsche's, designed to deflate the pretensions of traditional ideals, while offering no substitute 'truths' in their place.

obscures hidden complexities and resonances. She suggests that Antigone represents the "maternal/feminine/fluid" which has been repressed and which must be reclaimed from its merely negative role in Hegel's phallogocentric metaphysics. She construes woman as enjoying, through her biological nature, a unique relationship to fluids and fluidity -- to all that is non-identical, in flux. Emphasis upon the female body therefore permeates her analysis of what it would be to '*parler femme*', so that she sees Antigone as the "guardian of the matriarchal blood-tie," and her sentence of death as the sacrifice of woman's "life-blood" in the interest of preserving the integrity of the male community. Yet male subjectivity, bought at the price of woman's bloodletting, becomes "bloodless", the process of "saming" generating only a weakened, abstractly universal masculinity which continues to be threatened by repressed feminine difference, "the eternal irony of the community". Irigary's re-interpretation of Hegel's *Antigone* is a call to affirm and freely articulate precisely what she sees Hegel -- and all patriarchal, logocentric philosophies-- as necessarily suppressing: woman's deep roots in nature, in unconscious, pre-conceptual being, her difference which, in the figure of Antigone, bravely resists reduction to a mere shadow of masculine self-consciousness.

b) Mills' Opposition to Hegel's Restriction of Woman to 'First Nature'.

Irigary's insistence that to speak woman, to recover woman's freedom, requires an "excessive" matriarchal identification with generations of females -- an affirmation of the plenitude of their fluid relationships -- seems to many critics, however, to evoke precisely the same biological essentialism of which feminists often accuse Hegel. In the work of Patricia J. Mills, for instance, one finds a sustained opposition to any naturalistic, reductionist basis for female difference, and an argument that condemns Hegel's conception of woman's necessary absorption in family life -- both ancient and modern -- as an example of just such a biologically grounded identification of sex and gender:

The process of mutual recognition in the Hegelian schema necessarily excludes woman. Hegel believes nature has assigned woman to the family, the sphere of first nature, and he keeps her imprisoned there on nature's behalf. Whereas man finds a self-conscious reality or second nature in community, woman remains in the sphere of immediate biological life.³⁷

By means of an "immanent critique of Hegel's philosophy", conducted from the perspective of critical theory, and particularly Adorno's negative dialectics³⁸, she discovers that despite his express intention to confine woman to the sphere of first nature, or animal existence, in the figure of Antigone Hegel *unwittingly* portrays woman as a free, ethical agent whose actions move her beyond her limited function in the Hegelian system into the realm of "second nature or self-conscious political life."³⁹ She contends

³⁷ Mills, Patricia *Woman, Nature and Psyche* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) p.12, However, see *Philos.of Right* #151, where Hegel clearly refers to family life (the ethical) as second nature.

³⁸ Mills, pp.10-11.

³⁹ Mills, p. xiii; also p.35.

that Hegel's dialectic in the *Phenomenology* therefore harbours an unacknowledged contradiction:

Woman has no contradiction to negate between herself and first nature -- she lacks negativity because she is confined within the sphere of 'mere animal life'...But Antigone becomes like a man, a participant in both spheres...By acting in the public sphere on behalf of the private sphere, Antigone becomes the precursor of the women who, in the recent past, proclaimed the personal as political.⁴⁰

In Hegel's schema, Mills argues, woman remains at the level of pre-reflective animal life; she merely "intuits" her role as the protector of the "natural ethical law of the family"⁴¹, and cannot therefore achieve even the self-consciousness of the slave, because she is not someone capable of genuinely human action. Confined as she is within the family, "... she can never know herself as a particular self: she remains one of the walking dead, an 'unreal, insubstantial shadow'."⁴²

Yet, Antigone, says Mills, confounds this Hegelian straitjacket, by moving from the private "sphere of inaction" to challenge Creon's law of the *polis*. In so doing she "transcends Hegel's analysis of the 'law of woman' as 'natural ethical life' and becomes a particular self."⁴³ Following Adorno, Mills sees Hegelian philosophy as limited by its transformation of the particular into the abstract category of particularity. When Hegel substitutes an empty concept (particularity) for the concrete forms of actual human experience (the particular), he proclaims a philosophy of identity, dominated by the universal. For Mills, this refusal of the dialectics of non-identity, of the particular, of difference, is especially relevant to the case of Antigone, who symbolizes for her the excluded forms of female experience.⁴⁴

Mills' analysis, then, criticises Hegel's account of woman *both* because she thinks it restricts her to a biologically determined destiny as a dweller in first nature, *and* because he fails to acknowledge her concrete individuality -- her capacity for a particular, free response to the confining circumstances of natural ethical life. In opposition to thinkers such as Irigaray, for whom woman's freedom -- her particularity *qua* difference, or otherness -- are manifest precisely in a deep-seated participation in primordial natural rhythms, Mills reasserts the demand for female liberation from the bonds of nature. She does so, however, not through recourse to the principle of abstract universal equality, but rather through seeking validation for the concrete individual experience of female life.

⁴⁰ Mills, p.36.

⁴¹ Mills, p.35.

⁴² Mills, p.31

⁴³ Mills, p.27.

⁴⁴ Soren Kierkegaard, the nineteenth century existentialist (1813-1855) pursued an analogous critique of Hegel's failure to take account of the particular existing subject, and offered his own existential dialectic to counter the refusal of speculative thought to acknowledge the irreducible concreteness of finite existence. Of course, Kierkegaard made no distinction between woman and man in this regard -- for him, the chief thing was to oppose Hegel's view that human thought has a speculative dimension at all, and not to complain, as does some contemporary feminism, that only men can aspire to thinking.

Thus, for instance, she characterises Antigone as an authentically existential agent, for whom 'the personal is political'. She resolutely moves beyond the family into the public sphere, and by risking her life there, in a confrontation with male authority, accomplishes that very transition from nature to free self-consciousness which Hegel denies her.

c) *Starrett: The Hegelian Family as Source of Feminist 'Empowerment'*.

Some feminist writers, however, take issue with both these interpretations, arguing that Antigone's status as ethical representative of the family cannot be so summarily revised, as Irigary and Mills each from their divergent standpoints attempt to do. It is argued that Hegel's account is rooted in a complex appreciation of the significance of family life, which is distorted if the family, and woman's identification with it, is construed negatively, as simply a limit to be transcended on the journey to authentic individual selfhood.

Thus for example Shari Neller Starrett's reading of the *Sittlichkeit* section of the *Phenomenology* leads her to the view that "Hegel has a radical and potentially empowering notion of women in the realm of the family."⁴⁵ Starrett applauds Hegel for his view of the family as a 'natural ethical community', recommending it as a valuable antidote for the sterile, male-dominated visions of societal order characteristic of contemporary culture. She interprets Antigone's courageous resolve to bury her brother, and so reclaim him from nature, as suggesting a transgenerational vision of family bonds "implicitly opening up onto those, living or dead, with whom we feel real (but not necessarily genetic) sisterhood, brotherhood, parent-child ties, or a 'marriage' of minds, bodies, spirits, wills or desires."⁴⁶ Certainly this is in accord with much current social sentiment to the effect that 'family' can no longer be defined as the nuclear, biologically-based unit of traditional culture,⁴⁷ but must widen its bounds to incorporate an infinite variety of possible human affiliations. But Starrett wishes further to argue that Hegel's analysis in the *Phenomenology* can be interpreted as illustrating how women, because of their confinement to immediate family connections, can offer an alternative model of human relation, thus posing "a critical challenge to men who have become historically and socially bound to the creation and protection of abstract rights or laws applicable to hypothetical individuals who they assume are singularly like themselves."⁴⁸ Starrett thus positions herself among those feminists who, following Carol Gilligan⁴⁹ argue that

⁴⁵ Starrett, Shari Neller "Women, Family and the Divine" in *Feminist Interpretations of G.W.F. Hegel* edited by Patricia J. Mills (Re-Reading the Canon Series, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) Ch. 11, p. 253

⁴⁶ Starrett p. 257.

⁴⁷ For Hegel, however, this amorphous contemporary concept of family would undermine rather than enhance the family's function as a vehicle for spiritual life: "In essence marriage is monogamy because it is personality -- immediate exclusive individuality -- which enters into this tie and surrenders itself to it....Marriage, and especially monogamy, is one of the absolute principles on which the ethical life of a community depends." (*Philosophy of Right* #167)

⁴⁸ Starrett, p. 257.

⁴⁹ Gilligan, Carol, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982)

contemporary 'rights-based', Kantian-type theories of morality, which focus upon the abstract equality of all human individuals, and derive moral positions on the basis of principles of universal equality, fail to recognize that women generally do not approach moral questions from this perspective. Whether the reason is biological or social, Starrett asserts that woman's way of moral thinking is in terms of "co-active, connective (and spiritual) being-with-others as opposed to individual being-for-self."⁵⁰ and she contends that Hegel's account of Antigone as critic of the law of the *polis* in favour of the law of the family supports this contemporary feminist perspective.

She further notes that efforts by feminists such as Mary Daly to develop and enhance "woman-identified spirituality" could also benefit from Hegel's vision. Although she says that "the 'spiritual entity' of the family and women's embodiment of that spiritual presence meet a tragic end in Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*"⁵¹, nevertheless Starrett thinks that modern eco-feminists can draw on Hegel's understanding of woman's spiritual difference, her trans-generational bond with the living and the dead, to resurrect an empowering "goddess spirituality". Thus Hegel serves here as forerunner of a remarkably Nietzschean vision of spiritual life, which stresses the immanence of the divine, the "empowerment experienced by people as they come to grasp their heritage and presence," and the perceptual shift which such a retrieval would evoke from the "death-based sense of existence that underlies patriarchal culture to a regeneration-based awareness, an embrace of life as a cycle of creative rebirths."⁵² Starrett claims that all three aspects of feminist eco-spirituality are manifest in Hegel, for whom women "embody the divine", are "empowered through their genealogical connections", and whose "being-toward-life...makes them powerful instruments of relational rebirth as they provide a critical alternative to the being-toward-death that is associated with men."⁵³

Starrett's interpretation therefore opposes Mills' critique of Hegel's reduction of woman and family to the sphere of 'first nature'; she celebrates woman's rootedness in nature and the family as her greatest source of freedom and empowerment. However, in clear contrast to post-modernist thinkers such as Irigaray, for whom feminine difference can be articulated only through the dissolution of all phallogocentric social/intellectual structures, she sees in Hegel's account of woman in classical antiquity positive support for a brand of 'difference feminism' which would enable women to emerge as authoritative spiritual guides amidst the confusions of contemporary life. However, Starrett makes no comment on Hegel's argument in the *Philosophy of Right*, which clearly affirms the monogamous, nuclear family as the appropriate model of modern

⁵⁰ Starrett, p. 257.

⁵¹ Ibid.. p.263.

⁵² Starrett, p. 264. She is quoting here in part from an article by Charlene Spretnak in *MS magazine*, (March-April 1993), pp136-137.

⁵³ Starrett, p. 264 Starrett here interprets the Hegelian family as the focus for a kind of romantic "nature mysticism" in which the spiritual collapses into an immediate, all-embracing harmony with nature. Its concrete manifestation is an amorphous 'extended' family which incorporates individuals living and dead, blood-related and otherwise, and is presided over by the life-affirming presence of women. But this surely is to obscure the dialectical distinction-in-relation between nature and spiritual freedom which for Hegel is at the heart of human cultural development, and which motivates his account of the tension between family and polis in Greek society.

ethical life, and which further insists that in modern culture the function of woman and the family is to facilitate the education of free individuals and citizens of the state, not to adopt the position of intellectual and spiritual leadership Starrett envisages. Thus, while Starrett enthusiastically embraces Hegel as a source of feminist insight, her account conveys scant recognition of the complex logic and nuanced analyses presupposed throughout Hegel's own texts.

d) Ravven: The Hegelian Family as Necessary Ethical Actuality.

By contrast Heidi Ravven⁵⁴ argues that while one cannot deny the vital role of family life in Hegel's dialectic, neither is it possible simply to import a revised 'Hegelian' view on the family's place in classical culture into contemporary contexts, as does Starrett. A sympathetic assessment of Hegel's position can show, she maintains, that

Although a clear advocate of the traditional bourgeois family Hegel, perhaps paradoxically, also took a critical posture toward the family [in general], identifying and formulating theoretically the nature of its oppressiveness and the -- or at least a -- route toward its transcendence.⁵⁵

Ravven seeks insight into contemporary woman's condition, based upon Hegel's theory of (male) human liberation as the transcendence of the 'unindividuated' harmonious communities of the family and the Greek city.⁵⁶ Her stance, however, unlike that of Mills or Irigary, is not simply critical or deconstructionist. While she shares the general feminist view that family life is oppressive to women, she is concerned to expose both its cultural and spiritual value, along with what she contends are its inevitable weaknesses as a modern institution.

Ravven points out that in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, far from defending a vision of male superiority based in an exclusive capacity to transcend nature by means of political action (cf. Mills' interpretation) Hegel sees the two realms of the Greek *polis* and the family as representing the same ethical phenomenon. "Each is an immediate social whole, an 'immaculate world unsullied by internal dissension'," in both, the principle of individuality, so fundamental to modern self-consciousness, is as yet undeveloped, so that whether s/he is identified with the family or the *polis*, "the particular person is 'merely a shadowy unreality'."⁵⁷ The law of the family, embodied in woman, and the law of the city, embodied in man, are equally necessary, mutually implicative moments in the ethical substance, such that "neither power has any advantage over the other that would make it a

⁵⁴ Ravven, Heidi M., "Has Hegel Anything to Say to Feminists?" in *Owl of Minerva*, vol.19, no.2 (Spring, 1988), pp. 149-68.

⁵⁵ Ravven, p.149.

⁵⁶ Ibid..

⁵⁷ Ravven, p. 150. Here Ravven is citing *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Miller tr.). paras. 463 and 464. Mills uses the same citation, but to suggest the subordinate status of woman. Unlike the male citizen of the polis, who is a particular individual, Mills argues that woman remains lacking in particularity or concrete individuality.

more essential moment of that substance."⁵⁸ These moments, then, stand and fall together: "Only in the downfall of both sides alike is absolute right accomplished, and the ethical substance as the negative power which engulfs both sides, that is, omnipotent and righteous Destiny, steps on the scene."⁵⁹

In classical Athenian society, which Ravven, following Jacob Loewenberg, calls an example of "the ingenuous society"⁶⁰, the individual's ethical personality is identified completely with membership in the social whole: s/he assumes no critical posture with respect to the institutions of the society, either familial or political, and ethical action is rooted in custom. Such a condition may be termed one of 'natural freedom', provided one does not misconstrue this to mean that the members of such a society are immersed simply in a biological, immediate form of life. Ravven stresses that Hegel uses the term 'natural' in two distinct senses in this part of the *Phenomenology*: firstly, there is a literal sense, referring simply to biological, physiological states or characteristics; but secondly, there is a 'figurative' sense, which among other meanings refers to an uncritical acceptance of a given state of affairs. These meanings overlap throughout the text, but Ravven's chief concern is to make clear that, for Hegel, membership in neither the *polis* nor the family is reducible to immersion in mere biological nature.

On this matter she takes issue with Patricia Mills, who, she argues, glosses over these two senses, and therefore systematically misreads Hegel's account of the relation between the family and the *polis*. While Mills characterises woman's life in the family as primarily aligned with 'animal nature', contrasting it with the public, political male sphere as a realm of freedom, Ravven notes that both family and polis are natural in the figurative sense. The fact that the family is also a natural, biological unity of members who are blood-relations is significant, but cannot fully determine the function of the family as a moment within the ethical substance. The human law embodied in the *polis* is still largely unexamined custom, and the relationship of the (male) citizen to it is thus 'natural' i.e. habitual and immediate. Further, the fact that the family is the repository of divine law indicates how far beyond the merely biological woman's familial duties take her. The family is an ethical being, and as such is concerned precisely with the activity of spiritualising the merely natural relations among its members:

However, although the Family is immediately determined as an ethical being, it is within itself an ethical entity only so far as it is not the natural relationship of its members, or so far as their connection is an immediate connection of separate acting individuals; for the ethical principle is intrinsically universal, and this natural relationship is just as much a spiritual one, and it is only as a spiritual entity that it is ethical.⁶¹

⁵⁸ *Phenomenology*, para. 472.

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Cf. Jacob Loewenberg, *Hegel's Phenomenology: Dialogues on the Life of the Mind*, (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1965) p.189ff..

⁶¹ Ravven pg. 154. She cites here *Phenomenology*, para. 451. Another commentator who argues against reading Hegel as a reductionist for whom the family is merely a natural, biological entity is Susan Easton, *Hegel and Modern Philosophy*, ed. David Lamb; Ch. 2 "Hegel and Feminism". Easton notes that in the

Family members do not relate to one another therefore simply as atomic individuals, nor is family feeling simply a matter of the arbitrary, personal love of one particular individual for another. As an immediate ethical whole, the family is a unity of purpose, and each family member has as his end the spiritual purpose of the whole family. Part of that purpose Hegel identifies as the symbolic transcendence of death: through rituals of burial the family takes upon itself the final duties of consigning the dead individual to the sphere of abstract negativity, thus preventing him from falling prey to the unconscious forces of mere nature:

This universality which the individual as such attains is pure being, death; it is a state which has been reached immediately, in the course of nature, not the result of an action consciously done. The duty of a member of a Family is on that account to add this aspect, in order that the individual's ultimate being, too, shall not belong solely to Nature and remain something irrational, but shall be something done, and the right of consciousness be asserted in it.⁶²

Clearly, as an ethical being, the woman who assumes this duty of thrusting back the unconscious forces of nature cannot simply be characterised as herself merely unconscious, or natural.⁶³ In fact, in the figure of Antigone, Hegel clearly presents

Philosophy of Right the family is understood as a means of transcending mere subjectivism, or the state of nature, through an institutional commitment to an ethical universalism. Marriage is thus an ethical bond, not reducible to a means of procreation or satisfaction of individuals' sexual passions. Hegel's justification of monogamy, his opposition to arranged marriage, his rejection of the Kantian model of marriage as a civil contract between persons are all predicated on his view of marriage as an ethical institution.

⁶² *Phenomenology*, para. 452.

⁶³ This view is taken however by numerous feminist interpreters of Hegel, e.g. Kelly Oliver, who notes: "Antigone's ethical act of burying her brother reclaims him for the properly ethical world of the community, yet she is not conscious of the ethical imperative upon which she acts...At the same time, Hegel maintains that Antigone suffers because she necessarily acknowledges the civil law and her guilt before it." (*Antigone's Ghost*, Oliver, p. 78). Oliver joins Irigaray (see *Speculum of the Other Woman*, pp. 223-4) in seeing this as a telling paradox in Hegel's position -- but this is so only if one falsely assumes, as do these thinkers, that when Hegel refers to the ethical law of the family as 'unconscious' he means that the individuals who embody this immediate knowledge are themselves merely natural, unconscious beings, immersed in inarticulate, passive animal life. Antigone is a tragic figure for Hegel precisely because her actions elevate her above unconscious nature, and above even a merely subjective, contingent mode of consciousness to a self-reflective ethical condition of mind-- she is no mere particular subject, but the spiritual locus of a universal principle in defense of which she is willing to assume responsibility, guilt and suffering.

In Hegel's view, tragedy presents heroes who are "self-conscious human beings who know their rights and purposes, the power and the will of their specific nature and how to assert them; they are artists who do not express with unconscious naturalness and naivety the external aspects of their resolves and enterprises...they give utterance to the inner essence, they prove the rightness of their action, and the 'pathos' which moves them is soberly asserted and definitely expressed in its universal individuality, free from the accidents of circumstance and personal idiosyncrasies." (*Phenomenology*, para. 733).

Of course, for those feminists who criticise Hegel for refusing to acknowledge the radical freedom, individuality, particularity and difference of women, his elevation of Antigone to the status of tragic heroine is only further evidence of his failure to grant her the fulness of particular subjectivity. For them, the real 'tragedy' in Antigone's plight is her paralysis at the level of mere ethical universality, and her resultant lack of concrete existential freedom.

someone who quite consciously and deliberately defies the human law of the city, and assumes responsibility and guilt for so doing in the name of the universal sway of divine law which she sees must be acknowledged and upheld in all circumstances.

Ravven calls attention to the fact that there is clear symmetry between the family and polis in ancient Greek culture -- both are ethical institutions, in both there occurs a mediation of the merely natural; yet in both, there is also an element of the habitual, the customary and (figuratively) natural, such that man and woman, each in their particular spheres, exist in unreflective identification with the good of that sphere, be it family or city. This equality of the male and female perspectives is exemplified for Ravven in Hegel's analysis of the Antigone, where he argues that it is precisely because the ethical claims of the two opposing realms do not override each other that the spontaneous but precarious harmony of Greek life is threatened profoundly when the divine and human laws are brought into explicit conflict, as they are by Antigone and Creon. There can be no reconciliation, no higher synthesis of the two however, because while they are interdependent, at the same time they are mutually exclusive. This is why, Ravven argues, Hegel speaks of woman as a potential corrupting force, an 'eternal irony' within the community:

Since the community only gets its existence through its interference with the happiness of the Family, and by dissolving (individual) self-consciousness in the universal, it creates for itself in what it suppresses and what is at the same time essential to it an internal enemy -- womankind in general. Womankind -- the everlasting irony [in the life] of the community -- changes by intrigue the universal end of the government into a private end; transforms its universal activity into a work of some particular individual and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament of the Family. Woman in this way turns to ridicule the earnest wisdom of mature age.⁶⁴

This passage is frequently cited by feminists as evidence that Hegel views woman "as a sort of societal Lilith"⁶⁵, so that the female side of this dualism must be suppressed in the interest of preserving the communal freedom of the male citizenry. Ravven disagrees, pointing out how vital family life is to this community, both as an ethical educator and religious institution. If woman and family are a corruptive force in Greek culture, this is not because of any inherent evil, or because woman is the source of merely natural, biologically-based desires which threaten male rationality, but because the very structure of the rigid dualism of family/polis is itself problematic. Woman, as representative of divine law, becomes a threatening force because of the latter's necessary suppression by the unmediated universality of the human law of the state. Lacking the modern bourgeois state's mediating principle (civil society) government and family confront one another in a tragic conflict in which neither side can be victorious. But the failure of reconciliation Hegel finds in the Antigone does not rest simply on an antagonism between male freedom and female animal passivity, (Mills' interpretation) or between the unconscious

⁶⁴ *Phenomenology*, para. 475.

⁶⁵ Ravven p.157.

particularity of woman and the rational universality of man (Irigary's view). Each side in the duality embodies a moment in the ethical substance, each has an equal claim to right, and each side ultimately becomes conscious of the necessity both of its own and the other's claim, because both are grounded in a prior spiritual unity.

Ravven's approach here has been to emphasise the opposing but co-equal roles of male and female ethical principles in the institutional life of classical Greek society. She vigorously defends Hegel against the common feminist charge that he is a biological reductionist who elevates male free rationality at the expense of female natural passivity, and argues that neither man nor woman in this context manifests the capacity for free personality and subjectivity which characterises modern culture. However, when she turns to Hegel's view of modern bourgeois woman, Ravven finds her role severely restricted: for while man emerges from classical culture as the potential bearer of full individual self-consciousness and freedom, woman remains confined to family life, where she functions at a level markedly inferior to her bourgeois male counterpart⁶⁶:

Women may have happy ideas, taste and elegance, but they cannot attain to the ideal. The difference between men and women is like the difference between animals and plants. Men correspond to animals, while women correspond to plants because their development is more placid and the principle that underlies it is rather the vague unity of feeling.⁶⁷

Here Ravven holds that by characterising feminine consciousness as physiologically 'plant-like' -- displaying an undeveloped unity of feeling, in contrast to the more active, articulated 'male' existence of animals -- Hegel denies woman access to full rationality :

Women are capable of education but they are not made for activities which demand a universal faculty such as the more advanced sciences, philosophy and certain forms of artistic production.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Certainly Hegel himself nowhere characterises woman's embodiment of the immediate unity of ethical life in the family as 'inferior' to man's role in civil society. In that sphere of extreme particularity and difference, the individual's radical self-diremption from the substantive unity of ethical life is both necessary but also abstract and in need of further development. That we today so readily conceive of this stage in spirit's progress as 'superior' to family life perhaps says more about contemporary culture's 'absolutisation' of the moment of subjective individuality than about Hegel's assessment of women's spiritual capacity. For contemporary individuals there appears to be no higher life than that of a multiplicity of 'free agents' competing and interacting in wholly contingent ways within an 'open society'. From this perspective, Hegel's insistence on the re-unification of the opposed moments of extreme individualism (civil society) and ethical immediacy (represented by the family) in the fuller life of the ethical-political community appears as a misplaced idealism which must be eradicated if all persons, male and female, are to take their places as equal members of a free society.

⁶⁷ *Philos. of Right*, #166 Addition.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* Ravven here compares Hegel to Aristotle in the *Politics*, where both "slavery and patriarchal domination of women [are justified] on allegedly natural grounds." (p. 158) She finds it amazing that while Hegel views such a defense of slavery as pre-Christian and scandalous -- a product of a state of mind not yet aware of the potentially infinite subjectivity and therefore equality of all men -- he would adopt precisely this naturalistic explanation of women's inferiority. In response to this criticism, however, one should recall that Hegel himself sees Aristotle's view as a limited Greek one, displaying the same

Why should woman fare so much better in Hellenic society than in modern culture? Is the difference simply because the Hegel of the *Philosophy of Right* is older, more conservative? Or is there a systematic ground for the distinction? Ravven points out that the *Phenomenology* compares the man and woman of the Greek world, neither of whom "have a developed sense and embodiment of their own individuality along with their unity with the social whole"⁶⁹. In the later work he contrasts the male bourgeois citizen, who has undergone "self-diremption into explicit personal self-subsistence and the knowledge and volition of free universality, i.e. the self-consciousness of conceptual thought ..."⁷⁰, with a modern version of Antigone, whose antique virtues as guardian of family piety and immediate ethical harmony remain the model for modern womanly virtue. But why would Hegel retain the classical paradigm in one case, while seeing it as something which must necessarily be transcended in the other?

Hegel characterises woman as representing "[Spirit] maintaining itself in unity as knowledge and volition of the substantive"⁷¹ -- a description which Ravven notes could as well apply to the Greek man of the polis as to 'timeless' woman. The immediate and undifferentiated reconciliation of self and other in feeling that characterised the Hellenic family is "precisely similar to the customary harmonious political life of the ancients as Hegel describes it in the *Philosophy of History*. There, Hegel writes approvingly of the reconciliation of individual and group to be seen in the political life of the ancients; he further reminds us however that that harmony was partial, one-sidedly subjective.⁷² The freedom made possible in the modern state, by contrast, is not manifest in the mere feeling of justice or the perception of harmony; it necessitates the full and actual development of individuality and differences and their subsequent mediation and channelling toward common purposes. This end is achieved through the institutions of modern society, "which embody the principle of equality, the coincidence of rights and duties. The rational articulation of freedom in both its universal and particular aspects is possible only in modernity."⁷³

Thus, while the ancient polis was, at its best, analogous to the family, in its uncritical harmony between individual and group, in modern society the development of self-conscious individual freedom occurs precisely by means of an institutional base which allows, indeed requires, transcendence of family harmony and entrance into the specifically modern arena of civil society. In the ancient world it was the attempted expression of individual self-determination which led to its eventual disintegration, to

difficulties which are the subject of Sophocles' *Antigone*. One might also wonder whether Ravven's insistence that Hegel offers here a merely 'naturalistic' interpretation of male-female difference, based on the plant-animal analogy, can be squared with his clear assertion that the Christian principle of human equality before God is fundamental to modern society.

⁶⁹ Ravven, p.159.

⁷⁰ *Philos. of Right*, #166.

⁷¹ Ibid. Knox's preferred translation of *Geist* as 'mind' is distracting; the more commonly accepted term 'spirit' is accordingly substituted.

⁷² "The subjective will is a merely formal determination -- a *carte blanche* -- not including what it is that is willed. Only the rational will is that universal principle which independently determines and unfolds its own being, and develops its successive phases as organic members. Of this Gothic-cathedral architecture the ancients knew nothing." (*Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Dover, New York, 1965), p.48.

⁷³ Ravven, p.160.

the falling apart of its two moments in unreconcilable disharmony. The importance of the modern emergence of civil society as the mediating vehicle for the proper development and containment within the state of the potentially destructive moment of individuality thus cannot be overestimated.

Yet it is in this context that Hegel's account of modern woman becomes deeply problematic for Ravven. She argues that for Hegel "the modern state is, in principle, if not yet in fact, a reconciliation of the fully manifested purposes and conflicts of (male) individuals and subgroups."⁷⁴ This means that while women remain essentially rooted in the peaceful, immediate harmony of family life, men must negate this initial unexamined harmony, moving beyond it into a public sphere of conflict where, "by submitting [themselves] to physical needs and the chain of these external necessities and so imposing upon [themselves] this barrier and this finitude" (*Philos. of Right*, #187), they can qualify themselves for entrance into a world of fuller ethical relationships, the state. Within the natural ethical harmony of the family, such true freedom is impossible. Freedom is accessible only to those who have experienced the process of self-alienation, conflict and reconciliation -- yet the condition of possibility of that process is life within the family. The family is the very ethical foundation of civil society and state, but for those destined to tend the familial hearth -- women -- it is also the foundation for their exclusion from the tumultuous sphere of individual spiritual development:

Natural, at the same time religious morality, is the piety of the family. In this social relation morality consists in the members behaving toward each other not as individuals -- possessing an independent will, not as persons. The Family therefore is excluded from that process of development in which History takes its rise.⁷⁵

The modern family Hegel describes as a realm of "mutual surrender of individual personality"⁷⁶ -- yet only woman persists in this altruistic state of ethical immediacy, while man's further duty is to enter civil society, forge there an individuated self and so realize the explicit, self-conscious unity of membership in the state. Through education, first in the family and then in civil society, the male sheds his passivity and immediacy to become a mature adult. However nostalgic he may be for the harmony and intimacy of family relations,

[t]he final purpose of education [Bildung] therefore is liberation and the struggle for a higher liberation still: education is the absolute transition

⁷⁴ Ravven, p.161.

⁷⁵ Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, p.59. Does Hegel perhaps mean that the family principle of ethical substantiality is driven into abeyance by the rule of the bourgeois principle of individual, subjective freedom which underlies and drives the historical development of the state, to re-emerge at the end of this history in the demand for a more comprehensive articulation of their essential unity? Is the rise of the women's movement (among other things) a harbinger of this post-historical mentality, which precisely because the principle of freedom is now actual in the world, demands a fuller acknowledgment and integration of that a-historical, substantive ethical principle which this very historical development presupposes?

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 42.

from an ethical substantiality which is immediate and natural to the one which is intellectual and so both infinitely subjective and lofty enough to have attained universality of form.⁷⁷

Ravven claims that it is thus woman and the family -- the sphere of ethical substantiality - - from which the male citizen needs liberation. She thinks Hegel himself saw family life, considered as an end-in-itself, as oppressive -- a danger if it prevented men from achieving self-conscious individual freedom; nevertheless, the family retains an absolutely vital function in relation to bourgeois society. The educative role of the modern family is to nurture bourgeois citizenship by offering the (male) child an immediate formative experience, a model, of what it is to live as a member within a community in which his individuality is not independent, but is grasped as subordinate to the whole. When the young man moves out into the marketplace of conflicting desires and personal choices which is civil society, he can look back to the harmonies of family life as he strives to reconcile this egoistic life with the demands of political citizenship.

Ravven maintains that for Hegel both the Hellenic cultural world (family and polis) and the modern family are moments to be superseded, as spirit moves from an immanent to an explicit recognition of its essential freedom. But the transcendence of Greek society "is (logically) possible and necessitated, from a developmental standpoint by the male universal rational capacity."⁷⁸ It is man, not woman, who achieves full self-conscious freedom, as by reflection and critical assent he shapes the social forms, the legal system, government, religion and moral values in relation to which he will live in more than merely customary submission. Thus, while Antigone is the female ideal for bourgeois and ancient Greek womankind alike, Hegel would think it utterly inappropriate for the bourgeois male citizen to aspire to be a modern Creon: "...nothing is so absurd as to look to Greeks, Romans or Orientals for models for the political arrangements of our time."⁷⁹ The stability of bourgeois society is founded not simply on its allowance for the full exercise of individuality in civil society; it is also due to its balancing of two potentially rival principles, embodied for Hegel in male and female natures: "The history of consciousness is exclusively the history of the male transcendence of Creon but the female perpetuation of Antigone."⁸⁰

Responding to Hegel's assignment of woman to perpetual ethical immediacy Ravven insists that "in Hegel's analysis lie the seeds of a more honest and liberating vision"⁸¹ of

⁷⁷ *Philos. of Right*, #187.

⁷⁸ Ravven, p.163.

⁷⁹ Ravven, p.164; here she cites *Philosophy of History*, p. 47.

⁸⁰ Ravven, p.163. Although Ravven does not place strong emphasis on Hegel's view of the state as the self-conscious reconciliation of the moments of family and civil society in an explicitly ethical community, she does present the bourgeois state as balancing the male and female principles in a way classical culture was unable to achieve. Yet she argues that Hegel cannot defend the state as resolving this classical conflict, unless he also maintains that since women do not have the same rational potential as men, they can and should always find their appropriate satisfaction within the confines of family life. If, however, he acknowledges woman's full rational equality, it would seem that perennial confinement in the family for the good of the state is simply a form of unwarranted exploitation, inconsistent with Hegel's own recognition of the universal sway of the Christian principle of absolute equality of all persons in the sight of God.

⁸¹ Ravven, p.164.

women's potential than Hegel was prepared or able to accept. Hegel rationalizes the subordination of women's selves to the family and the state because such a subordination is essential to his project of a full reconciliation of the principles of ethical immediacy and free subjectivity. Yet Ravven says that Hegel's own insistence on the universality of freedom in the modern state should have alerted him to the contradiction of both recognizing women as ethical selves, while yet insisting upon their permanent "instrumentalization" for the alleged good of others. She wonders whether such acknowledgment of women's suppression by the family would have altered Hegel's assessment of the modern state. Perhaps he would have concluded that both male and female social structures were inadequate -- civil society because it so abstractly focuses upon atomistic, isolated individual freedom, family because it provides only for a self-destructive, de-individuating communalism. She asks "Would he have advocated the entrance of women into civil society and government? Would Hegel have even conceived of the family as capable of development as a social system?"⁸² Certainly the contemporary family, along with woman's relation to it, is in a state of profound disorder such as could not be conceived in Hegel's time. In addressing the significance of this disintegrative process, Ravven thinks that feminists can usefully appeal to Hegelian principles to illuminate "our present situation as a moment in the dialectical process toward freedom and just community"⁸³, and to appreciate the possibility of critically reworking, not simply abandoning past social ideals and forms, in the light of present-day conditions and perennial rational considerations.

Conclusion

However divergent their varying assessments of Hegel's view on women and family, these four feminist commentators are united by a common concern with the question of what it means to be a female subject in the contemporary world. All approach the reading of Hegel from the standpoint of the self-evident validity and primacy of the principle of universal subjective freedom. Their competing usages of Hegel stem not from any disagreement as to woman's status as a free subject, but rather derive from divergent views as to how that essential principle might genuinely be shown to pertain to woman. Thus, some feminists who equate the liberation of women with recognition that gender is accidental to one's humanity find in Hegel severe resistance to that Enlightenment ideal, since he seems to emphasise women's difference from men, and to exclude them from precisely those domains where rational thought and action are most fully explicit. Others hold that in spite of his conservative views on women and family, there are grounds in Hegel for a more positive estimate of woman, based on the deeply liberal tendencies they discern in his thought. On the other side, those 'difference' feminists who wish to locate woman's true subjectivity in her uniquely feminine traits and potentialities -- her powers of intuition and emotion, her deeper connection with nature, her capacity for a 'caring' rather than an abstractly rational response to ethical difficulties -- find in Hegel support for this vision, by claiming that his emphasis upon significant gender distinctions offers a

⁸² Ravven, p.165.

⁸³ Ravven, p.166.

means to a genuine liberation of woman compatible with her traditional role as the centre of family life. Again, however, this view is opposed by those who find the particular feminine differences Hegel emphasises to be nothing but proof that for him women are but the inferior 'other' of free, male subjectivity.

What is one to make of this wide-ranging interest in Hegel's thought, coupled as it is with such diametrically opposed assessments of its significance for the feminist project? Perhaps the answer is to be found by locating that project within the general problematic of contemporary culture. The intellectual and practical demand throughout western societies today is for the full recognition of all individuals as equal, free subjects. Yet it is increasingly clear that this goal is an ambivalent one, since genuine freedom can mean the attainment of fully universal rational equality irrespective of natural/cultural differences among persons, but can equally mean the acknowledgment of such natural/cultural differences as worthy of preservation and respect. Debates rage as to how -- or whether -- these opposed accounts of human freedom can both be accommodated, but the result of most dialogue is the further polarisation of perspectives, such that each side asserts its right, but neither can find argument sufficient to vanquish the other position.

In the case of feminism, one finds such polarisation in numerous contexts: between 'pro-choicers' who argue that access to legal abortion for all women is the only position consistent with woman's status as a free, rational individual, and increasingly militant 'pro-lifers' who maintain that such universal access devalues the concrete human existence of both fetus and mother; between those who promote the use of all available technologies to help any woman -- married or single, straight or gay, adolescent or post-menopausal -- to conceive if she so desires, and those who argue that the use of such technologies, far from freeing women, is part of the patriarchy's effort to keep women in the socially-approved role of mother, while also degrading the natural beauty, suffering and challenges associated with motherhood and conception; between those who argue for universal daycare programs to free all women to enter the workforce, and those who insist that such wholesale abandonment of the mother's traditional responsibility for childcare is the sure road to a dysfunctional family and society. In all such contexts, the tension between two compelling visions of human freedom and dignity is evident, yet the resolution of these competing standpoints in some higher principle eludes us.

Feminist interest in Hegel can be interpreted in the light of this on-going dilemma. Faced with the sterility of contemporary discussions, some feminists have been attracted by the richness of his analysis of woman and family. In Hegel's philosophy the relation between feminine gender-specificity and universal human freedom is subtly developed, both in the context of classical Greek culture and in the modern Christian state. What one does not encounter in Hegel, however, is that abstract isolation of the principle of subjective freedom, nor of each moment within that concept, which afflicts contemporary discussions. The difficulty for the feminist wishing to draw insight from Hegel is that precisely because s/he approaches his work from within one or the other current definition of feminine identity, the same abstractions and dichotomies, the same difficulties for a consistent account of feminine freedom are 'discovered' there, as pervade

the wider contemporary culture. Accordingly one finds feminists who applaud Hegel for his liberalism, others who condemn him for his lack of it; feminists who welcome the emphasis upon the significance of gender distinctions in his account of the development of freedom, others who condemn him for precisely the same reason.

But if Hegel's thought is to shed any useful light upon current feminist reflection, what is needed is an approach which respects the dialectical integrity of the speculative project, rather than interpretations which begin from the assumption that such a project has long been discredited. A dialogue between such an open-minded feminism and the Hegelian account of women and family could well be fruitful, if one bore in mind that feminist concerns have analogues in many features of contemporary society, and that Hegel's remarks on women's identity and role occur always in contexts where he is seeking to clarify wider issues of the nature and limits of ethical life in its relation to civil society and the state.

From our contemporary perspective, it is by now abundantly clear that no simplistic deification of radical individual freedom, in whatever context, can resolve the intellectual, ethical and political aporia to which its pursuit has led; nevertheless, it is no less obvious that this principle is the spiritual foundation upon which modern -- and perhaps even post-modern! -- culture is based. What is needed therefore is a re-contextualising of this principle by means of a thinking which acknowledges its centrality to our contemporary self-understanding, while offering a means of considering its proper limits and appropriate relation to other essential moments of human reality. In the context of feminist thought, this would mean seriously raising the question as to whether the unrestricted pursuit of personal, individual freedom and rights for women, or for any other category of humanity, is sustainable as an isolated ideal, given the evident contradictions into which the general principle of subjective freedom has in practice fallen. On the other side, questions of woman's relation to family life, her legitimate aspirations to be a full member of civil society and active citizen of a state would require consideration in the light of this critique.

Current social phenomena already speak to these matters, as individuals seek solutions within their own lives to the irresolvable tensions which an uncritical adherence to the twin values of family life and individual freedom generates. Thus one finds politicians and 'REAL Women' calling for a return to 'family values', while also demanding that single mothers get off welfare and out into the workforce. Alternately, feminists agitate for financial remuneration for homemakers, trying thus to reconcile the contradiction between women's desire to be recognized as contributing members of civil society with their intuition that family life is just such a contribution. Recent mass rallies of the 'Promise Keepers' -- an evangelical Christian-based men's organization dedicated to revitalizing the husband/father's role within family life while criticising traditional male devaluation of private as opposed to public institutions -- have been looked upon with suspicion by women's groups and religious liberals who fear that such movements are harbingers of a renewed assault on women's hard-won equality.

We now find ourselves at a stage of culture where the principle of subjective freedom is fully explicit -- where 'history' as Hegel understands it has ended -- and where, as a paradoxical consequence, both life within the family and relations and institutions in the public sphere are deeply compromised. Hegel's insistence that both substantive ethical life (for him represented by woman in the family) and the sphere of free individual expression (represented by man in civil society) must be preserved if a genuinely ethical political community is to be sustained, finds scant support among feminist thinkers. Yet feminists who criticise Hegel for failing to accord women a place in the dialectical progress toward freedom, or who argue that because women are identified primarily with the family sphere they are not free, could well find grounds for a penetrating critique of contemporary values in Hegel's insistence on the dialectical interdependency of the sphere of 'natural' ethical life (the family) and those spheres (civil society and the state) where 'historical' progress toward self-conscious freedom has been enacted. Precisely because of our present post-historical condition -- where post-modern skeptics confidently deconstruct all speculative categories and where notions of feminine liberation, or significant gender difference, are themselves called into question as remnants of the history of logocentric thought -- there may be opportunities for fresh insight. Perhaps within 'post-history' alone can what Hegel saw as the 'a-historical', ethically immediate moments of modern culture achieve full recognition and integration within the historical dialectic from which women complain they have been excluded.

Hegel's outrageous remarks regarding women's lack of capacity for education or political involvement, his determination to maintain her at the dialectical level of Greek womanhood (cf. Antigone) must be seen in the context of his overall project. It would be entirely misleading to attribute these (to contemporary minds) offensive features of his thought to mere conservative prejudice, or to a sexist determination to maintain patriarchal power over womankind. Hegel was clear that women are indeed legal persons possessing abstract rights, and ethical beings capable of moral choice; they are in no way comparable to the slave, who occupies a place in the dialectic which is 'transitional' between nature and freedom, and for whom the risk of life in the struggle for recognition is determinative of his identity as free self-consciousness. Nevertheless, he argues that the concepts 'person' and 'moral subject' are abstractions, which receive their concrete actuality only when they are given real embodiment in the social institutions of modern life -- i.e. the family and civil society.

Hegel was deeply critical of the tendency to 'atomistic' individualism prevalent in his time, and eschewed any vision of a free society as a mere aggregate of private persons, all functioning as economic producers/consumers of resources: desire-fulfillers motivated by subjective considerations alone. If freedom is to be actualised the state must harmonise the demands of individual freedom and private self-interest with the notion of a common good. Thus in the fully actual state, individuals would experience themselves, not as restrained by social institutions from the realisation of their full freedom, but as sustained through those institutions in the proper exercise of that freedom.

Hegel does not deny woman the status of free spirituality, but he insists that in modern ethical life there are reconciled the equally essential principles of ethical substantiality --

embodied in social institutions emphasising habit, feeling, trust and tradition -- and modern subjective freedom -- embodied in institutions which support the pursuit of private interest and economic autonomy. Free spiritual beings must therefore fulfill two essential, different yet complementary functions, as spirit moves towards its fullest self-expression. To woman -- "spirituality that maintains itself in unity as knowledge and volition of the substantial ..." ⁸⁴ -- he allots the function of guardian of the ethically substantial as it appears in family life. In the interests of the well-being of the state as the highest ethical community, the proper vehicle of freedom, woman is required to occupy a position outside the struggles of spirit in its historical development toward that freedom. He justifies this spiritual division of labour by insisting that there are natural differences between men and women such that each by nature is suited, indeed has a vocation grounded in reason itself, for the part they play. ⁸⁵ Hegel's intention is not then to degrade women, to offer them nothing but 'bit parts' in spirit's great drama. His concern is never with mere individuality, or particular personalities, but rather with how individuals might best give expression to the actuality of spirit in the world. These sound ethical considerations validate, in Hegel's estimation, the customary exclusion of woman from the sphere of intellectual and political developments.

Nevertheless, from our present perspective, with the emancipation of women from all familial restrictions and the dismantling of many traditional social and political institutions well advanced, it may seem that Hegel's vision has nothing to contribute to contemporary debates. After all, despite his insistence upon the rational necessity for women to remain devoted to family matters, women today occupy increasing numbers of public positions, even as traditional feminine roles come under severe attack. At the same time, however, as we have seen, there is an uneasy recognition in many quarters, including among feminist thinkers, that contemporary society cannot adequately function if everyone assumes a place in civil society, entirely abandoning the realm of family life to individual caprice and contingent personal preference. The question remains as to the underlying intellectual roots of these contemporary concerns. I would argue that balanced reflection on Hegel's thought does offer the possibility of addressing such fundamentals.

Hegel's account of ethical life affirms the equal importance of both the 'substantive' and the 'reflective' ethical principles, and defends a necessary differentiation of social roles to accommodate that duality, but he further maintains that the 'reflective' principle of subjective individual freedom is the characteristic principle of the modern world, and that the realization of such freedom for modern individuals is achieved through involvement in civil society. Finally, it is important to note that Hegel fully embraces the Christian principle of the equality of all persons before God as a formative principle of the modern ethical state.

Given these three factors, one can perhaps begin to discern Hegelian grounds for contemporary woman's view that her traditional estate is oppressive. For if indeed subjective freedom is the guiding principle and actuality of present-day culture, and if the Christian teaching of the equality of all persons does still inform our post-Christian

⁸⁴ *Philos. of Right*, #166.

⁸⁵ See *Philos. of Right*, #165.

value-system, then the intellectual foundation is laid for those who are excluded from the unrestricted expression of individual freedom to conceive of themselves as unequal victims of injustice and oppression. Feminists often characterise their cultural experiences as analogous to 'slavery', and advocate a revolutionary appropriation of the power of their male oppressors as a means toward liberation. Yet clearly such an understanding of oppression can arise only on the basis of a prior certainty that women are already in actuality free, equal beings. Our present preoccupation with individual liberation -- and its obverse, oppression -- would be inconceivable, in the absence of the principles and conditions first fully enunciated in Hegel's speculative thought.

The situation for modern women is greatly complicated however by the fact that in their capacity as ethical beings who are already intrinsically free, they have traditionally functioned to create and sustain that sphere of 'ethical substantiality' without which life in civil society and the state would crumble. It is recognised still today that, the universal demand for equal access to the arena of subjective freedom notwithstanding, the political order cannot dispense with the vital ethical functions contributed by the family. Hegel was anxious to make a connection between woman's actual (in the nineteenth century) absorption in family life, and her apparently natural suitability to that 'selfless' role. Still, he was well aware of the cultural mediation of gender distinctions -- his historical writings offer numerous examples of women's involvement in supposedly 'male' roles in non-western cultures⁸⁶ Why then does he insist on fundamental gender differences in this particular context? The argument can be made that what Hegel wishes to preserve at all cost is the dialectical 'distinct-yet-interrelated-ness' of the principles of ethical substantiality and subjective freedom in modern society, not the categorical confinement of women to family contexts. In practice, someone has to occupy the station of guardian of ethical substantiality, and it should be someone whom nature best fits for that responsibility. To Hegel in his time, woman's potential appeared to have long developed in that direction; but that this someone must be woman is surely not essential to the overriding logic of his position.

In contemporary society, with its emphasis on the primacy of subjective freedom, any social role which limits or restricts the individual's potential for self-actualisation seems incompatible with a full human identity. Thus the function of 'housewife' or 'homemaker', which necessarily demands a focus on the well-being of others, and consequent diminution of personal freedom, is defined as 'oppressive', and accordingly devalued by the general society -- except insofar as, for some individuals, it may be regarded as a chosen instrument for creative self-expression. For Hegel, however, this essential principle of subjective freedom is abstract and destructive unless anchored in a substantive ethical life. This immediate ethical life -- the life of personal relationships, customary practices, trust and habitual virtue -- is the ground which sustains the abstract principle of individual (moral) autonomy and permits the fulfillment of ethical life in the state:

⁸⁶ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Intro.; trans. H.B. Nisbett (Cambridge, 1975), appendix on Africa, pp.173-90.

Ethical life is not abstract..but is intensely actual. [Spirit] has actuality, and individuals are accidents of this actuality. Thus, in dealing with ethical life, only two views are possible: either we start from the substantiality of the ethical order, or else we proceed atomistically and build on the basis of single individuals. This second point of view excludes [spirit] because it leads only to a juxtaposition. [Spirit], however, is not something single, but is the unity of the single and the universal.⁸⁷

In Hegelian terms, then, the challenge for contemporary society -- and perhaps particularly for feminism -- is to reconcile the radically explicit articulation of the principle of atomic, individual freedom with the intuition that this principle cannot stand alone as the foundation for political community.

⁸⁷ *Philos. of Right*, #156 Addition.