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Philip J. Kain

*Santa Clara University*, [pkain@scu.edu](mailto:pkain@scu.edu)

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## Hegel, Antigone, and Women

Philip J. Kain

Santa Clara University

-I-

When Hegel turns to a treatment of culture in Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology*— as anyone who has read his early writings would expect<sup>[1]</sup>—he begins with the ancient Greek *polis*. There the human spirit first fully emancipated itself from nature as it had not, in Hegel’s opinion, in Egypt; yet it was still in perfect harmony and balance with the natural. In Hegel’s view, this was an age of beauty that produced a social community and an ethical life where citizens were free and at home. What is a bit surprising, though, is that in the *Phenomenology* Hegel does not begin his treatment of the ancient world with the heroes of Homer, the philosophers of Athens, or even with the general cultural perspective of men. He starts, in the section entitled “The Ethical Order,” with Antigone and the perspective of women. It is quite true that the perspective of Antigone and of Greek women is constructed from the perspective of men, the perspective of Sophocles and of Hegel himself, nevertheless, it is still rather surprising that Hegel begins with Antigone.

What does this mean? Could it mean that when we arrive at Greece, quintessentially the land of the master, Hegel insists on beginning with the slave? Is it fair to see Antigone as like the Hegelian slave? Many scholars—for example, Mills, Ravven, O’Brien, and Oliver—reject such a notion.<sup>[2]</sup> Nevertheless, Antigone is subordinate to Creon and *does* end up subverting him—much as the slave does the master. If we admit that women are like the slave, this would tend to suggest that while dominated and oppressed they will ultimately subvert the master, emerge as an equally significant principle, and move us toward a higher development of culture.<sup>[3]</sup> Could Hegel really be suggesting this sort of thing about women? We will be pushed toward such a conclusion if we decide that Antigone is like the slave.

But the question as to why we begin with Antigone is even more complicated than this. Oliver argues that, after the section on the Ethical Order, women are simply left behind in the *Phenomenology*— they are never resuscitated and are not preserved in later stages of the dialectical movement.<sup>[4]</sup> I think that without a doubt women are not preserved or resuscitated *adequately* in the later stages of the

*Phenomenology*, or in Hegel's thought in general, but I do not think that they are simply and completely left behind. Earlier, in Chapter V of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel took up a discussion of the *Sittlichkeit* of the ancient *polis* in order to contrast it to the sort of *Moralität* that had developed in the modern world. *Moralität* begins with Socrates<sup>[5]</sup> and reaches its high point in Kant. *Moralität* is rational and reflective morality. Individuals must themselves rationally decide what is moral and do it *because* reason tells them that it is the right thing to do. On the other hand, *Sittlichkeit* is best represented, for Hegel, in the Greek *polis* before the rise of Socratic *Moralität*. *Sittlichkeit* is ethical behavior grounded in custom and tradition and developed through habit and imitation in accordance with the laws, religion, and practices of the community. For *Sittlichkeit*, morality is not something we *ought* to realize, or something we *ought* to be, as it is for *Moralität*. For *Sittlichkeit*, morality exists—it *is*. It is already embedded in our customs, traditions, practices, character, attitudes, and feelings. The objective ethical order already exists in, is continuously practiced by, is actualized in, the individual. What we see as we proceed in Chapter VI, however, is that ancient *Sittlichkeit* left little room for individuality and that, as individuality began to arise, it caused the collapse of the ancient community and its ethical life. Moreover, it is Hegel's view that the individuality connected with *Moralität*, as it develops in the modern world, produces a rational, autonomous, and enlightened individualism, an individualism that sets out to remake its world in accordance with its rational principles, but an individualism that in the French Revolution goes too far and becomes radically destructive. Hegel wants to overcome this extreme form of individualism, but not simply by returning to ancient, undeveloped *Sittlichkeit*. He wants for the modern world a synthesis of ancient *Sittlichkeit* and modern *Moralität*—of community and individuality.

At any rate, Antigone represents the principle of individuality which in Hegel's view subverted the undeveloped *Sittlichkeit* of the ancient community and led to its collapse. In so far as Antigone is associated with this principle of subversion and the development of individualism, then, it will be difficult to deny her contribution to cultural development. Nevertheless, Hegel is not after a destructive form of individualism for the modern world, certainly not of the sort that caused the French Revolution. He is after an individualism that is compatible, and can be synthesized, with *Sittlichkeit*. While Antigone does represent the sort of individualism that subverted the inadequate *Sittlichkeit* of the ancient world, nevertheless, her individualism is not like the destructive individualism that Hegel wants to overcome in the modern world. Her individualism, I suggest, at least prefigures and would be resuscitated in the sort of individualism that would make possible a modern synthesis of *Sittlichkeit* and *Moralität*—and that is why Antigone is so important for Hegel.

We must notice from the start that Hegel's conception of individualism is quite different from the

individualism of the liberal tradition. Individuals, for Hegel, are not natural, they are not just given, they do not come ready-made, we do not just find them there in a state of nature as for Hobbes or Locke. Individuals are constructed by their sociocultural world. Nevertheless, this construction may involve conflict—individualism may even cause the collapse of culture as it did in the ancient world and again in the French Revolution. Hegel's goal is to get beyond this destructive form of individualism to an individualism formed by, in harmony with, and reinforcing the institutions of our sociocultural world.

Thus we must distinguish between two important forms of individualism. Moreover, I would like to suggest that both of these forms of individualism are at least prefigured in the section on the Ethical Order; they are prefigured in the two principles that are the foundation of the ancient world: the Human Law and the Divine Law. The first has to do with citizens, males, and their public activity in society for the community and its government. This individualism centers around warfare, wealth, property, economic interest, and so forth. Hegel says, "The acquisition and maintenance of power and wealth" that is involved here "belongs to the sphere of appetite..."<sup>[6]</sup> This is the form of individualism that Antigone's brothers possess. I do not want to suggest that this is already liberal individualism. It is still embedded in *Sittlichkeit* and thus quite the opposite of liberal individualism. Nevertheless, it involves an appetite for and an interest in power and wealth, and, as the ancient *Sittlichkeit* of which it is part collapses and as it develops in the modern world, it will come to be centered in civil society and thus develop as a part of liberal individualism.<sup>[7]</sup> Moreover, there is a certain tension between this form of individualism and the family, both in modern civil society<sup>[8]</sup> as well as, we shall see, here already in the ancient *polis*. Hegel does not want to eliminate this form of individualism, he wants to allow it a place, but it must be contained so as not to be destructive.

The second form of individualism is prefigured in the Divine Law and Antigone represents this form of individualism. It does not involve a radical standing alone, apart, in a state of nature. It is true that the individualism of her brothers, still embedded in *Sittlichkeit*, does not involve such standing alone either. But Antigone's individualism does not even involve individual appetite for power, wealth, or personal glory in warfare. Her individualism, rather, is manifested in and through acting in perfect solidarity with the family, religion, and tradition. This is the key, I think, to why Hegel is so interested in Antigone and why Antigone is so important.

The modern *Sittlichkeit* that Hegel is after stands in need of a form of individualism very much like Antigone's. Her individualism is the sort that allows a self embedded in a context of cultural relations, institutions, and common customs, traditions, and practices to develop an individual identity. Since we are all formed and shaped by our culture, if we are to become individuals and at the same time avoid the

sorts of vagaries associated with what we have come to call cultural relativism, we need a solid identity, in Hegel's view, an absolute identity. Individuals must have the sense that they are right, that while they act within a particular community, tradition, or culture they do more than simply act in accord with personal appetites, private interests, or with whatever their particular community, tradition, or culture happens to value. They must be able to think (as all Europeans have been able to think) that they as individuals are contributing to something objectively important, that the Divine or the Absolute is acting through them, or at least that they are acting in accord with the Divine or the Absolute, that it is their destiny to realize some objective truth or good, or something of the sort. This is the form of identity that Antigone has and represents. It is an identity embedded in the local and particular, within which, however, the individual is able to find an absolute reality, importance, and truth. It is a form of individualism that is not only compatible with religion, culture, and *Sittlichkeit*, but derives from them.

At any rate, Hegel wants a balance here. Too much liberal individualism in the modern world gave us the French Revolution, chaos, destruction, and the loss of an absolute identity. Not enough liberal individualism in the ancient world gave us the closed world of immediacy found in the Greek *polis*. Hegel wants a balance and harmony between ancient *Sittlichkeit* and modern *Moralität*, a balance that was at least prefigured in the balance between Divine Law and Human Law, and, we must also see, in the balance between male and female.

For Hegel, the latter are two essences. And the authentication of one occurs through the other (*PhG* 278/250). This is to say that neither "of the two is by itself absolutely valid.... This equilibrium can, it is true, only be a living one by inequality arising in it, and being brought back to equilibrium by Justice" (*PhG* 276-7/248-9). What are we to make of this rather obscure statement? I think it does indicate that at least in this section of the *Phenomenology* Hegel is not engaged, as O'Brien suggests, in history's most ambitious attempt to define humanity as simply masculine.<sup>[9]</sup> But, on the other hand, it does not seem to me either that Hegel is simply arguing for *equality* between the sexes, as Ravven seems to suggest.<sup>[10]</sup> Let us begin to examine this section in detail.

## -II-

The two main institutions of ancient Greece were the family and the community (or *polis*)—and they were intimately related in a self-reinforcing circle. The family provides men to the community. They serve in the political and governmental sphere and most importantly in war. The family raises children who as young men go off to fight war to defend the community. Reciprocally, the community, for its part, protects and preserves the family. It protects individuals and their families from the enemy, and in

peacetime it organizes and fosters property which makes possible the substance and subsistence of families.[\[11\]](#)

Each institution serves the other and each would be impossible without the other. The community owes its very existence to families and its fundamental purpose is to defend and make the good life possible for members of families. And families, for their part, could not defend themselves or prosper without the community which they must in turn serve.

However, warfare is not engaged in solely as a means to protection. For young men it is also an escape from the confines of the family and an arena in which to achieve virtue and gain public honor. And from its perspective the city must see to it that citizens do not get too deeply rooted and isolated in their concerns for property. From time to time the citizens must be shaken to their roots by war. They must be made to serve the highest concerns of the community. As Hegel puts it, they must be “made to feel in the task laid on them their lord and master, death” (*PhG* 272-3/246). On the one hand, the family is protected by warfare; on the other hand, it loses its members to the community and they die in war—the family is both preserved by the community and destroyed by it. Even this death, however, links the family and the community. Death is the highest service the individual undertakes for the community, and the individual’s burial is the highest duty of the family (*PhG* 271/245). Individuals die for the community and are buried by the family—they are honored by the community and mourned by the family.

Proper burial is most important in Greek culture. In the *Odyssey*, we see that Odysseus had to return to bury one of his men who otherwise could not have entered the underworld and found peace.[\[12\]](#) Moreover, the individual cannot simply be abandoned to the natural and to decay. The burial ceremony is caught up with the need to preserve, remember, and recognize heroic virtue—Patroclus’s burial ceremony lasts for 12 days in the *Iliad*.[\[13\]](#) The individual must be made to live on in the memory of the family and the community.

In this ideal *Sittlichkeit*, then, these two fundamental institutions, the family and the community, each preserve and produce the other—each confirms and substantiates the other.[\[14\]](#) The spiritual or cultural world is a product created by the action of each and constitutes their unity (*PhG* 264/239). Human Law and Divine Law, in this ideal, are supposed to reinforce each other harmoniously.

As we have seen, however, Hegel says, “This equilibrium can, it is true, only be a living one by inequality arising in it, and being brought back to equilibrium by Justice” (*PhG* 276-7/248-9). And, indeed, these two laws soon come into disequilibrium—a disequilibrium that needs to be restored by justice. Hegel takes up two classic examples that he finds in Sophocles. The first is Oedipus, who saves

the city of Thebes, becomes its ruler, and rules well. His actions are in perfect accord with the Human Law. However, he violates the law of the family, the Divine Law, in the worst possible way, by murdering his father and marrying his mother. He does this in ignorance, but he does it nevertheless (*PhG* 283/255). Divine Law takes its vengeance on Human Law by producing a plague in Thebes.

The second case is that of Antigone. This time we get a conflict between the two laws that is intentional. Antigone has two brothers—Eteocles and Polyneices. As would be typical, at a certain age they leave the home for the community, for politics and government, while their sister remains in the home. Eteocles, it turns out, becomes ruler of the city and Polyneices attacks it. Both die. The city recognizes Eteocles, its ruler, and condemns Polyneices, who attacked the city, as an enemy and a traitor—which seems to be in perfect agreement with Human Law. Creon, the new ruler, accords burial honors to Eteocles and refuses them to Polyneices. This is not acceptable, however, to Divine Law. Divine Law does not recognize such distinctions; both brothers are equally members of the family and Antigone must bury both—even the one who attacked the city (*PhG* 285-6/257).

Here, the community and the family are no longer in harmony. Why does this occur? How does the conflict arise?[\[15\]](#) From the beginning there has been a basic tension between the community and the family. The community, after all, draws the family member out to war and to death, thus destroying the family and breaking its happiness.[\[16\]](#) We have here a living equilibrium that will inevitably give rise to such inequalities, inequalities that must be brought back to equilibrium by justice. Thus it is bad enough that the community draws the family member out to war and to death, but for Creon to refuse to bury Polyneices is to go too far. For Antigone, Creon's action on behalf of the city is not justice, it is not the restoration of equilibrium, it certainly cannot represent a universal moral principle, it is an outrage. It can only be, in her view, the perverse decision of this particular individual (her uncle Creon) against another particular individual (her beloved brother Polyneices). So Antigone attacks, derides, ridicules Creon's action, and asserts that the commitment to her brother demanded by Divine Law is more important than the Human Law of the community, all of which seems in perfect agreement with Divine Law. The community, for its part, naturally tries to suppress Antigone and what it sees as her individualism, but in doing so only feeds it and creates an enemy in women (*PhG* 288/259). Antigone's action fractures the substantial unity of the ethical order.

### -III-

What, then, can we say about Hegel's attitude toward Antigone, women, and their equality with men? It is certainly the case that women are excluded from political life in the *polis*. Moreover, the role of

women certainly seems to be established by nature or as part of a fixed essence. And furthermore, the possibility that women might have interests other than the family never even arises.<sup>[17]</sup> At the same time, though, it is just not the case that Antigone is locked away out of the real order of things. She is excluded from the realm of Human Law, but the Divine Law is every bit as real, significant, and important. In fact it is more primordial and ultimately more powerful—indeed, it finally triumphs (*PhG* 273/246).

While there is no way that Hegel is going to cut a figure as an acceptable modern feminist, nevertheless, we would be wrong, I think, to assume that he simply sides with Creon, the community, government, and Human Law against Antigone. Furthermore, we cannot let our reading of the *Philosophy of Right*, written 15 years after the *Phenomenology*, lead us to project things back into the *Phenomenology* that are not there. I do not wish to argue that in all respects the two texts differ—or that there are two Hegel's—but the texts clearly do differ on some issues. For example, Hegel has been called the official philosopher of the Prussian state for his supposed glorification of the state in the *Philosophy of Right*.<sup>[18]</sup> While I think this is an incorrect reading even of that text, nevertheless, we should notice that the *Phenomenology* is notably free from anything resembling such glorification of the state.<sup>[19]</sup> There is certainly no glorification of the Greek state. If anything, I would say that Hegel sides with the subversive Antigone against Creon. Moreover, we find that much of this same negative or critical attitude toward the state will continue throughout the rest of Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology*. We see this in the way that Hegel treats State Power, Noble and Base Consciousness, and the Heroism of Flattery, all of which lead up to the French Revolution's overthrow of State Power, a process with which Hegel has a certain sympathy despite his opposition to the destructive individualism involved. If it is impossible in the *Phenomenology* to saddle Hegel with the view of the state that he will supposedly hold in the *Philosophy of Right*, if Hegel is more critical of the state than he will be in the *Philosophy of Right*, there should be nothing wrong with being very careful before we attribute to the *Phenomenology* the negative views of women that we will find in the *Philosophy of Right*.

Quite clearly, the *Philosophy of Right* holds a more conservative view of women than does the *Phenomenology*. In the *Philosophy of Right*, the family *must* have as its head the husband (*PR* 116/249).<sup>[20]</sup> Moreover, Hegel holds that while women are capable of education they are not made for the advanced sciences which demand a universal faculty. Also when women hold the helm of government, the state is in jeopardy, since women are not regulated by the demands of universality but by arbitrary inclinations and opinions (*PR* 263-4/247). In the *Phenomenology*, on the other hand, it is explicitly the case that the man is *not* the head of the household, “the wife remains, the head of the

household and the guardian of the divine law” (*PhG* 275/248). Moreover, in the *Phenomenology*, men and women, at least as brother and sister, are equal (*PhG* 288/259). It is true, though, that husband and wife are not equal. From this fact, however, we cannot conclude—as Tuana does—that the community and the Human Law, to which the husband belongs, is superior to the Divine Law and the family, of which the wife is guardian and head.<sup>[21]</sup> That is not Hegel’s view. For Hegel, neither has any advantage over the other—they are equally essential (*PhG* 285/256). While it is true that women are confined to the family, it is also true that the Greek family, unlike the modern family, was the fundamental economic unit of society—it was the basic unit of production and produced for itself all that it needed. To be the head of such an institution could not be, and was not considered, insignificant.<sup>[22]</sup>

The view of women found in the *Phenomenology* is definitely not as objectionable as that found in the *Philosophy of Right*. Nevertheless, I do not at all want to suggest that the *Phenomenology* treats women as *sufficiently* equal—or that it even approaches what would be acceptable. In fact, I want to argue against an interpretation of Hegel that would tend in that direction. Some commentators seem to think that Hegel’s conception of love implies equality between men and women. One certainly cannot deny that love and recognition are central and important categories of Hegel’s thought. If it can be shown that love requires, necessitates, or even pushes toward equality, then my claim that Hegel does not believe in equality between men and women would be in question. Thus we must consider Hegel’s view of love.

In Chapter VI, Hegel says, “the relationship of husband and wife is...the primary and immediate form in which one consciousness recognizes itself in another, and in which each knows that reciprocal recognition.”<sup>[23]</sup> In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel also says,

Love means in general terms the consciousness of my unity with another, so that I am not in selfish isolation but win my self-consciousness only as the renunciation of my independence and through knowing myself as the unity of myself with another and of the other with me....The first moment in love is that I do not wish to be a self-subsistent and independent person and that, if I were, then I would feel defective and incomplete. The second moment is that I find myself in another person, that I count for something in the other, while the other in turn comes to count for something in me....love is unity of an ethical type (*PR* 261/237-8).

In love I am confirmed and recognized by the other. I am real and significant in so far as I exist for another. In an earlier text, Hegel said that each intuits themselves in the being of the other consciousness and thus has a communal existence with the other.<sup>[24]</sup> Indeed, Baillie suggests that in Chapter VI of the

*Phenomenology* Hegel is following Aristotle's treatment of friendship in Books VIII and IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*PhM* 465). It is clearly Aristotle's view that friendship or love is what holds the *polis* together. In fact, friendship is more important than justice in this respect, since friends treat each other better than justice would demand and it would be far worse to harm a friend than someone else.[\[25\]](#)

I want to be quite clear, then, that I do not ignore love or dismiss it. In fact, I agree with commentators like Williams and Westphal about the importance and centrality of love for Hegel's thought. On the other hand, though, I am not convinced that love will give us the equality that these commentators seem to think it will. According to Williams, "Love seeks a union with its other, in which domination and subordination are out of place. Love allows the other to be, i.e., it seeks the freedom of the other."[\[26\]](#)

While love is quite compatible with equality, as between brother and sister, love certainly does not require equality. Love is perfectly compatible with inequality. Let me be as clear about this as possible—so as not to be misunderstood. I certainly think that in a relationship between a man and a woman equality is desirable. I also think that the relationship will be a better relationship if it is one of equality. I also think that love is a valuable and desirable thing. But I simply do not think that there is anything about love which demands, requires, or necessarily works for equality in a relationship. I do not think that love and equality are necessarily related. I think it desirable that a loving relationship also be one of equality, but just as a relationship of equality need not involve love, so we can perfectly well have love without having equality. To think that love and equality necessarily or normally go together is to romanticize love—to expect something of it which it is not. We can easily love someone we consider our inferior or our superior—God, our dog, the King or the Queen, our children, our parents. For centuries, men have been loving their wives while thinking them their inferiors—and I have no reason to believe that many of these men did not *really* love their wives—certainly *not* because there is any incompatibility between love and inequality. Certainly those relationships would have been improved by equality; but I see no reason to think that the love *as love* would *necessarily* have been deepened or made truer. Love and equality are just different things. There is nothing about loving someone that one considers an inferior that *necessarily* distorts the love. Love can be perfectly true love when it is love of an equal, a superior, or an inferior. Certainly, Aristotle did not think that love implied equality when he claimed that it was what held the city together.

Friendship, on the other hand, is a bit different. It does not require *complete* and *perfect* equality. It is possible to be friends with someone from a very different social class or economic level, or with someone with a very different level of intelligence or athletic ability. But these inequalities will rub

against the friendship. For the friendship to succeed, the friends will at least have to carve out an area in which they can relate to each other with relative equality. A poor person is not likely to feel comfortable spending a lot of time at their rich friend's country club and may well be harmed by the experience; so also the wealthy person will likely find it difficult hanging out in the inner city. On the other hand, the two could carve out an area of equality and become very close friends at the university, in the army, on a sports team, on the job, or perhaps even when engaged in the activities of citizenship in a community. Aristotle also thinks economic inequality will erode friendship.<sup>[27]</sup> Friendship, then, differs from love. Love does not require equality. We can perfectly well love someone without considering them our equal socially, politically, economically, intellectually, athletically, or in a host of other ways. On the other hand, husband and wife, besides being in love, could also be friends. If so, they too would have to carve out an area of equality, and thus friendship could be a force for equality in their relationship. But they need not be friends. They could simply be in love, and I think it is relatively easy to love someone that is in no way considered an equal and it is not necessary to carve out an area of equality around which to build the relationship. It is certainly not necessary in loving children. And in the past men have had no difficulty in loving women they in no way considered their equals. In fact, such inequality often works to endear women to men. This can obviously become quite demeaning and thus it is very important to build equality into such relationships. It is just not the case, however, that there is anything about love that pushes for such equality. The equality has to be brought in from outside the love.

The question, then, is whether Hegel recognizes that love does not require equality. I think he clearly does recognize this in the *Phenomenology*. It is only the relationship of brother and sister that is a relationship of equality. The relationship of husband to wife, which is obviously a relationship of love, is not one of equality. In an earlier text, the *System of Ethical Life*, Hegel explicitly held that the husband was the master.<sup>[28]</sup> Hegel does not actually make this claim in the *Phenomenology*. He does say, however, that the son is "lord and master of the mother who bore him..." (*PhG* 288/258-9). If that is so, it would be hard to imagine that Hegel would not also take the husband to be lord and master of his wife. In the *System of Ethical Life*, Hegel also makes a much more direct and explicit connection between the relationship of lordship and bondage and the relationship between the sexes in love, marriage, and property. They are all treated within a span of 30 pages as part of a complex developmental sequence.<sup>[29]</sup> Indeed, Hegel says outright: "the lordship and bondage relation...while this relation is only something qua apparent and external, is the [patriarchal] family."<sup>[30]</sup> In the *Phenomenology*, the master-slave dialectic is separated by more than 200 pages from the section on the Ethical Order where relations between the sexes, love, family, and property are discussed. Nevertheless, we must notice the

connection. We must see that in the *Phenomenology* too, woman, like the slave, is dominated and man is the master. Hegel is explicit in holding that the community, the sphere of males, suppresses the family and women:

Since the community only gets an existence through its interference with the happiness of the Family...it creates for itself in what it suppresses and what is at the same time essential to it an internal enemy—womankind in general....The community, however, can only maintain itself by suppressing this spirit of individualism, and, because it is an essential moment, all the same creates it and, moreover, creates it by its repressive attitude towards it as a hostile principle (*PhG* 288/258-9).

The claim that the two principles—the Human Law and the Divine Law, the sphere of the masculine and the sphere of the feminine—are equally essential is not at all incompatible with the claim that women are dominated and oppressed by men. After all, even the master dominates and oppresses the slave while the slave is just as essential to human development as the master. Like the master-slave dialectic, then, the male community dominates women; this creates in women an enemy and it feeds the development of, the progress to, a new reality—in this case individualism. Moreover, again like the slave, the woman subverts the master. She sees the universal end of government as a mere private end and sees its universal activity as the work of a particular individual. She ridicules its wisdom—the fact that it cares only for the universal. She makes the state the laughing-stock of youth and unworthy of their support. The state's continued suppression only feeds her hostility and spreads her message.

To summarize, then, in “The Ethical Order” and in “Lordship and Bondage” we have three parallel steps that are quite similar. In “The Ethical Order,” (1) from the start, family and community, Divine Law and Human Law, are taken to be mutually dependent and equally essential. Then, (2) a conflict arises between Divine Law and Human Law, and the community (which was always more powerful) comes to dominate the family and suppress women. The fact that the community and the family are in themselves equally essential is not incompatible with one coming to dominate the other—certainly not for one to take itself to be an authority over the other in certain types of cases. Finally, (3) Antigone as representative of the family subverts the authority of the community. The parallel to “Lordship and Bondage” is near perfect. (1) There too we start with two self-consciousness that are mutually dependent and equally essential. Each exists, Hegel says, only in being recognized by the other, and one is no more important than the other, indeed, they are virtually identical (*PhG* 111-3/109-11).[\[31\]](#) Certainly, one

does not dominate the other at this stage. Then, (2) the two engage in a conflict that ends up with a master dominating a slave. Then, (3) the slave subverts the master. Thus, in *both* cases we start with mutual dependence and equal essentiality, then there develops the domination of one over the other, and then the dominated subverts the dominator.[\[32\]](#)

It seems to me that we must admit that we do have a situation in “The Ethical Order” that is similar to the master-slave dialectic. The question is whether Hegel himself would agree? We have seen above that in the *System of Ethical Life* he himself connects lordship and bondage with the patriarchal family, but what about in the *Phenomenology*? The upshot of Antigone’s action is that the ancient community dissolves and we are left, as we see in the next section (“Legal Status”), with individuals facing a powerful and estranged governmental force that stands over and dominates them—Hegel calls this force the “lord and master of the world” (*PhG* 290-2/260-2). On the other hand, individuality develops, Hegel says, as the divine law emerges from an inward state into actuality—personality steps out of the life of the ethical substance. Hegel parallels this to his treatment of Stoicism earlier in the *Phenomenology* and says that just as Stoicism “proceeded from lordship and bondage, as the immediate existence of self-consciousness, so personality has proceeded from the immediate life of Spirit, which is the universal dominating will of all, and equally their service of obedience” (*PhG* 290/261). It seems to me that even in the *Phenomenology* we have an explicit admission of a parallel between “Lordship and Bondage” and “The Ethical Order.”

#### -IV-

Where are we to stand when we read the section on Antigone? How are we to react to it? Are we to side with Antigone or against her? Benhabib and Shklar, for example, seem to think that Hegel has written an apologia for Creon.[\[33\]](#) If we were to decide that Hegel is a simple sexist and the philosopher of the Prussian state, then we would probably conclude that he expects us to dismiss Antigone and side with Creon. But how can we do that? Antigone represents an *equally essential* principle. What she does is *right*—it is in full accord with Divine Law. It is the state that in repressing her brings about its own collapse. And the master must be subverted—that is the only way we progress to a higher principle. Antigone, after all, develops an important form of individualism.

Clearly the Antigone story is a tragedy. And tragedy for Hegel means the conflict of two principles both of which are right.[\[34\]](#) It means that *both* sides are justified—not just Creon, not just the state, not just men. Tragedy means the collapse of the great, the master, the whole ethical world. It also means the emergence of a higher moral principle. If the Antigone story is to be a tragedy, and it is, we cannot side

with the state and dismiss Antigone in sexist fashion. If we do, we destroy the tragic element.

However, there is also something besides tragedy going on in the last part of Hegel's treatment of Antigone. In the *Aesthetics*, Hegel explains comedy, especially Greek comedy, as a situation in which subjectivity has the upper hand. Comedy occurs in a world in which man is master, a world that destroys itself by its own folly, and that thus dissolves in laughter.[35] In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel's view is that woman is the "everlasting irony in the life of the community" and she brings it down by making it a "laughing-stock." [36] We might say that from the perspective of the male master, the collapse of the community is tragic. But from an equally important perspective, the perspective of woman—the slave—the collapse is comic.[37] And it seems to me that *both* of these perspectives are important for Hegel.

Certainly women are being treated seriously here. Women are suppressed and like the slave subvert the master. And this is positive, desirable—it allows individualism to emerge. Subversion allows us to move to a higher principle. Moreover, if we decide that woman as the enemy of the state is to be taken seriously, positively, then we may even wonder whether we should read in a somewhat different way Hegel's claim in the *Philosophy of Right* that the state is in jeopardy when led by a woman. Perhaps—at least at times and even for Hegel—that is a good thing. Likewise, when we recognize Antigone's hostility to the universal ends of government and her commitment to the particular and individual, we may also want to read in a different way the claim in the *Philosophy of Right* that women lack a universal faculty and are not regulated by the demands of universality. Perhaps—at least at times and even for Hegel—that too is a good thing (*PR* 263-4/247).

Does this mean that we can rehabilitate Hegel as an acceptable modern feminist? No, that is not possible. Hegel does not argue for the full equality of women and he holds too many objectionable views. Despite this, some feminists—like Ravven, O'Brien, Starrett, and Brown—find that he has positive contributions to make.[38] I think that despite Hegel's intentions there is a valuable conceptual possibility present in his thought—one that he does not or will not develop for women, but which nevertheless is there for our appropriation. I have argued elsewhere that no system empowers the oppressed or the marginalized as does Hegel's.[39] The Absolute, like the master, claims to be all of reality. It denies anything of significance outside itself and marginalizes what it cannot accept. It must be everything. If not, it is nothing—or at least not the Absolute. And so, as soon as the other can show itself to be something, something real, something significant, then the Absolute is no longer Absolute—it is not *all* of reality. This gives the other an extraordinary power to subvert the Absolute and to build a new Absolute with itself at the center. Whether Hegel likes it or not, whether he would approve or not, he has shown us how the oppression of women places them where they can subvert the Absolute and construct a

new Absolute that includes women at the center. And that certainly seems to be what is happening in the contemporary feminist movement.

-V-

Isn't it problematic, though, to say nothing of ironic, to be arguing that because Antigone is like the slave, therefore Hegel, despite himself, is treating her positively? Traditionally, women and slaves have been thought of as mere appendages to their masters. They are expected not to show independence or self-determination. In so far as they assert individuality, self-determination, or autonomy, they act improperly. The virtuous woman serves a man, accents him, assists him. Women cannot assert independence and be thought virtuous. Their virtue is defined by their subordination to men.

To give Hegel credit, I think we must see to what extent he is breaking from this traditional view. It is true that for Hegel a woman's virtue is still confined to the family and the service of men. It is true that the slave does not overthrow the master. Both remain in their allotted role. But both accomplish something, both subvert the master, and do so without abandoning their place. Antigone's commitment to the Divine Law never wavers. To achieve individuality she does not slacken her commitment to the family. To achieve self-determination she does not abandon tradition. She does the very opposite. She fulfills her role to the utmost. She satisfies her obligation to the family, to Divine Law, to tradition—all with a vengeance. And thereby she subverts the government and gives rise to a new individualism.[\[40\]](#)

The slave, like the woman, develops individuality and independence through the development of virtue, the unfolding of inner capacities, through *empowerment*, not, like the master, merely through *domination*, the exertion of power over of others. Slavery and service are the true models for virtue—the unfolding and development of a power within, a real inner capacity. Hegel's general view, as he puts it in the *Philosophy of History*, is that it is “not so much *from* slavery as *through* slavery that humanity [is] emancipated.”[\[41\]](#)

Antigone's individualism, then, is not at all like liberal individualism; it does not involve the sort of freedom that one finds in a state of nature, the liberty to act upon particular and selfish interests or desires. It is an individualism compatible with family, religion, and tradition. It is Human Law, society, and men that are out of line and that eventually are subverted. If they could finally be brought into harmony with this different sort of individualism, then it would be Antigone who had given Hegel the sort of principle that he needs, a principle of harmony between individuality, self-determination, and autonomy, on the one hand, and community, tradition, and embeddedness in relations, that is, with *Sittlichkeit*, on the other hand. And some would say that this principle is a *feminine* principle. It is

Antigone, then, that prefigures what Hegel is ultimately after, an individualism that is compatible with and finds its identity in the family, tradition, and religion, which, together with a compatible political community, could hopefully temper the destructive individualism of civil society and allow a modern *Sittlichkeit* to emerge, a *Sittlichkeit*, moreover, that while embedded in concrete and particular customs, traditions, and practices, nevertheless affords the individual an ultimate sense of being right.

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## [1]Notes

“The Positivity of the Christian Religion,” in *On Christianity: Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1970) and, for the German, *Gesammelte Werke* (hereafter *GW*), ed. Rheinisch-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1968 ff.), I.

[2] P.J. Mills, *Woman, Nature, and Psyche* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 11. Also see Mills’ Introduction to *Feminist Interpretations of G.W.F. Hegel* (hereafter *FIH*), ed. P.J. Mills (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), p. 4. Also P.J. Mills, “Hegel’s *Antigone*,” *Owl of Minerva* 17 (1986), 131-52. Also P.J. Mills, “‘Feminist’ Sympathy and Other Serious Crimes: A Reply to Swindle,” *Owl of Minerva* 24 (1992), 55-62. H.M. Ravven, “Has Hegel Anything to Say to Feminists?,” in *FIH*, pp. 242-5. Also, H.M. Ravven, “A Response to ‘Why Feminists Should Take the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Seriously,’” *Owl of Minerva* 24 (1992), 65 ff. M. O’Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 69-73. K. Oliver, “Antigone’s Ghost: Undoing Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*,” *Hypatia* 11 (1996), pp. 72-3. On the other hand, de Beauvoir argues that in certain respects the relation of master to slave especially applies to the relation of man to woman; see S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1952), p. 73.

[3] Mills has given us one of the most detailed and careful analyses available of Hegel’s treatment of Antigone. She is also very adamantly opposed to the notion that we can liken Antigone to the Hegelian slave. She argues that to do so we would have to “first prove conclusively” that women have the same consciousness as the slave (“‘Feminist’ Sympathy,” p. 61). I do not think we need to do this and that is definitely not the sort of approach I am taking. Mills sets out many differences between Antigone and the slave (“‘Feminist’ Sympathy,” pp. 57 ff. Also, “Hegel’s Antigone,” p. 143). I have no dispute at all with the points she makes. I agree with all of the differences she indicates. What they show is that the slave of Chapter IV of the *PhG* cannot be identified (certainly not strictly or literally) with Antigone in Chapter VI

of the *PhG*, which, generally speaking, should not be surprising. Nevertheless, the master-slave dialectic is a general model that gets played out again and again in Hegel's thought. And each time we should expect to see significant differences despite the fact that we have the same core model. I hope to show in what follows to what extent this model fits Antigone. See also note 32 below.

[4] Oliver, p. 70.

[5] Socrates, of course, lives in a society permeated by *Sittlichkeit* and his own ethical thought is by no means free of it. Nevertheless, we find the clear beginnings of *Moralität* in his willingness to make individual philosophical rationality the ultimate authority in all matters. He is even willing to call all custom and tradition, even the mythical authority of the gods, before the court of philosophical reason and to criticize and reject whatever is found wanting.

[6] *Phenomenology of Spirit* (hereafter *PhG*), trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 269 and, for the German, *GW*, IX, pp. 243. Further references to the *PhG* are given in the following form: *PhG* 269/243.

[7] There is another dimension of the Human Law, that represented by Creon, which, of course, cannot be seen as even the dimmest anticipation of modern civil society. Creon represents government—what will eventually become the political state. In what Hegel calls the Human Law of the ancient world, then, we find elements of both civil society and the political state, as yet undeveloped and not sharply separated.

[8] *Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (hereafter *PR*), trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 148 and, for the German, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. H. Glockner (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1927 ff.), VII, p. 314. Further references to the *PR* are given in the following form: *PR* 148/314.

[9] O'Brien, "Hegel: Man, Physiology, and Fate," in *FIH*, p. 179.

[10] Ravven, "Has Hegel Anything to Say to Feminists?," pp. 230-2.

[11] I prefer Baillie's translation here; see *Phenomenology of Mind* (hereafter *PhM*), trans. J.B. Baillie (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 478 and, for the German, *GW*, IX, pp. 248-9; for Miller's translation, see *PhG* 276.

[12] Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 11.

[13] Homer, *Iliad*, Book 23.

[14] I prefer Baillie's translation here; *PhM* 481/250; for Miller's translation, see *PhG* 278.

[15] For a good discussion of why conflict between the community and the family arises, see M. Donougho, "The Woman in White: On the Reception of Hegel's Antigone," *Owl of Minerva* 21 (1989), 84-6. Donougho argues that Antigone and Creon each interpret the action of the other differently than the

other does. Though Donougho does not say so, this anticipates Conscience at the end of Chapter VI of the *PhG*.

[16] See also, *PR* 209-11/433-7.

[17] J. Hodge, “Women and the Hegelian State,” in *Women in Western Political Philosophy*, ed. E. Kennedy and S. Mendus (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1987), pp. 127-58.

[18] K. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950), p. 225.

[19] See R. Norman, *Hegel’s Phenomenology: A Philosophical Introduction* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976), p. 82.

[20] For a discussion of the differences between Hegel’s view of women in the *PhG* and in the *PR*, see Ravven, “Has Hegel Anything to Say to Feminists?,” pp. 232-4.

[21] N. Tuana, *Woman and the History of Philosophy* (New York: Paragon, 1992), p. 100.

[22] Mills argues that, for Hegel, the Greek woman “does not do anything.” She is not involved in the process of work or world creating and in this way again is unlike the slave (Mills, “Hegel’s *Antigone*,” p. 143). It is true that Hegel does not dwell upon women’s work, and it is even true that the household would have slaves that would be the ones most directly involved in work, but in claiming that the woman is the head of the household Hegel is quite aware that the household of *Antigone*’s era was responsible for producing everything it consumed. It is simply not the case that Penelope in the *Odyssey*, for example, “does not do anything.” She runs what is the basic unit of production in her society—and for 20 years does so alone while Odysseus is away. That is a significant part of what it means for women to belong in the family, and it is quite relevant to Hegel’s claim that the family and the community are equally essential.

[23] Here I prefer Baillie’s translation; *PhM* 474/246; for Miller’s translation, see *PhG* 273.

[24] *First Philosophy of Spirit*, in *System of Ethical Life (1802/3) and First Philosophy of Spirit*, ed. and trans. H.S. Harris and T.M. Knox (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1979), p. 232 and, for the German, *GW*, VI, p. 302. Also *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 100 and, for the German, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, ed. J. Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1955), I, p. 119.

[25] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1155<sup>a</sup>. Love is key to community, the possibility of *Sittlichkeit*, and thus to Hegel’s whole theory of culture. In this respect I very much disagree with Kojève who dismisses the importance of love. Neither Aristotle nor Hegel would agree. Kojève argues

that one can be loved only by a few persons, whereas recognition can be universal (A. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. J.H. Nichols, Jr. [New York: Basic Books, 1969], p. 244 n.)

Of course this is true and even Aristotle would concede it (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1158<sup>a</sup>), but Aristotle does not intend to suggest that every member of the *polis* would be the personal friend of every other member; he simply means that the *polis* would be held together by an interlocking network in which everyone would either be a friend or would be the friend of a friend at some remove. Kojève also thinks that love lacks seriousness since the risk of life is absent. I do not agree with this either. Kojève makes too much of risking one's life—he overdoes a good point and fetishizes it.

[26] R.R. Williams, *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 182, also p. 184. See also M. Westphal, *History and Truth in Hegel's Phenomenology* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979), p. 131. See also B.R. Barber, "Spirit's Phoenix and History's Owl or the Incoherence of Dialectics in Hegel's Account of Woman," *Political Theory* 16 (1988), p. 9. Notice (in the passage just quoted above from the *PR*) that Hegel's definition of love is not a definition merely of sexual love. It is a definition that would certainly include sexual love but it would just as well include non-sexual love—love between parent and child, love between friends, love of God, and so forth. Basically, love is being defined as a form of recognition capable of producing a unity or bond that holds people together. This is quite similar to Aristotle who in his treatment of love or friendship also includes both sexual and non-sexual relations (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1157<sup>a</sup>). There are obviously significant differences between sexual love and non-sexual love, but for my concerns here these differences can be left aside.

[27] *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1158<sup>b</sup>.

[28] *System of Ethical Life*, in *System of Ethical Life (1802/3) and First Philosophy of Spirit*, p. 127 and, for the German, *System der Sittlichkeit*, ed. G. Lasson (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1967), p. 36.

[29] *System of Ethical Life*, pp. 103-129 and *System der Sittlichkeit*, pp. 9-38.

[30] *System of Ethical Life*, pp. 126-7 (brackets in the English text) and *System der Sittlichkeit*, p. 35.

[31] I include in the master-slave dialectic the fight for recognition, the domination of the slave by the master, and the subversion of the master by the slave.

[32] I do not wish to argue that there are *no* differences between "Lordship and Bondage" and "The Ethical Order." In fact, there are many significant differences, but they do not override the similarities. The master-slave dialectic, while it is presented in its clearest, simplest, and most imaginatively

accessible form in Chapter IV of the *PhG*, is at the same time quite clearly a general model that is so central to Hegel's thought that it gets played out again and again at more and more complex levels in other parts of the *PhG* and in other of Hegel's texts. For example, in the *Philosophy of History*, we find the same model in a very different context and stated in an especially general form,

the knotty heart of oak underlying the national temperament of the Germans—was broken down and mellowed by the terrible discipline of the Middle Ages. The two iron rods which were the instruments of this discipline were the Church and serfdom. The Church drove the “Heart”...to desperation—made Spirit pass through the severest bondage, so that the soul was no longer its own. ...In the same way serfdom, which made man's body not his own, but the property of another, dragged humanity through all the barbarism of slavery....It was not so much *from* slavery as *through* slavery that humanity was emancipated (*Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree [New York: Dover, 1956], pp. 406-7 and, for the German, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, ed. G. Lasson [Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1968], II, pp. 875).

Obviously, there are significant differences between the domination of a slave by a master, of a people by its institutions, and of women by men—yet, without a doubt, there are also significant similarities.

Despite major differences, then, this passage from the *Philosophy of History* is clearly evoking the model of the master and the slave to explain the spiritual development of a nation. The basic point is that domination produces a discipline and a higher development in the dominated. It is not by escaping this domination, but *through* this very domination, that the dominated subverts and goes beyond the dominator. This model, which it is simply convenient to call the master-slave model is played out over and over in Hegel's thought, each time in a different way and with different implications.

[33] S. Benhabib, “On Hegel, Women, and Irony,” in *FIH*, p. 40. J.N. Shklar, *Freedom and Independence: A Study of the Political Ideas of Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 82.

[34] *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), II, pp. 1196, 1212 and *Sämtliche Werke*, XIV, pp. 529, 550. For an excellent treatment of Antigone and of Hegel's theory of tragedy, see Donougho, pp. 65-89. However, I think Donougho goes too far in suggesting that what Hegel likes about Antigone is that she “calls the bluff of the patriarchal order...” and that she “uncovers...its male chauvinism...” (p. 86). As I will argue below in Section V, I think that what Hegel likes about Antigone is her traditionalism, that she sticks with custom, tradition, and religion, pushes it as far as it will go, and thus subverts the male government and gives rise to a new individualism.

[35] *Aesthetics*, II, p. 1199 and *Sämtliche Werke*, XIV, pp. 533-4. Also *PhG* 279/251-2.

[36] I prefer Baillie's translation here; *PhM* 496/259; for Miller's translation, see *PhG* 288.

[37] Of course, this is in no way to suggest that the *death* of Antigone is comic. It is the collapse of the *community* that can be viewed either as tragic or as comic.

[38] Ravven, "Has Hegel Anything to Say to Feminists?," pp. 225-52. O'Brien, "Hegel: Man, Physiology, and Fate," pp. 177-207. S.N. Starrett, "Critical Relations in Hegel: Woman, Family, and the Divine," in *FIH*, pp. 253-73. A.L. Brown, "Hegelian Silences and the Politics of Communication: A Feminist Appropriation," in *FIH*, pp. 299-319. Also see S. Swindle, "Why Feminists Should Take the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Seriously," *Owl of Minerva* 24 (1992), pp. 41-54.

[39] P.J. Kain, "Self-Consciousness, the Other, and Hegel's Dialectic of Recognition: Alternative to a Postmodern Subterfuge," in *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 24 (1998), pp. 105-126.

[40] Mills finds it curious that Hegel ignores Antigone's sister, Ismene. Mills thinks that Hegel ignores her, perhaps, because she will not fit his theory, because she does not act in accord with the "natural ethical orientation" Hegel has assigned to women—Ismene does not side with the Divine Law against the authority of Creon and the community. This is certainly a possible interpretation, but there is another possibility. If my analysis of Antigone is correct—that like the slave she subverts the master, and that just as Hegel is sympathetic to the slave he also has a certain sympathy to Antigone—then it is quite possible to put a slightly (but importantly) different spin on the fact that Hegel ignores Ismene. He ignores her perhaps because she *simply* accepts the traditional place of women, because she *simply* accepts male domination, because unlike Antigone she does not subvert the master by pushing her traditional role as far as it will go. He ignores her because she does not represent the higher principle of individuality that Antigone does (see Mills, "Hegel's *Antigone*," p. 142). Thus he ignores her because she fits all too well the traditional view of women, a view Hegel does not share. He ignores her because she fails to live up to the view of women that he is sympathetic to—the view which sees her as like the slave. Thus, while I have to agree with Mills that Ismene does not fit Hegel's theory, nevertheless the consequences of this are very much the reverse of those intended by Mills—or at least does not imply as negative a view of women on Hegel's part.

[41] *Philosophy of History*, p. 407 and *Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, II, pp. 875.