

## THE QUESTION OF FAMILY, SEX AND WOMEN IN THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE SPIRIT.

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### Introduction.

The aim of this paper is to perform an inquiry in to the question of Family, Sex and Women as presented in the magna opus of G.W. Hegel ***The Phenomenology of Spirit***. The latter work, can be understood as an introduction to the Science of Logic and to a greater philosophical system in which Hegel attempts to introduce the subjective principle of the older modern philosophy, wherein what is other than self-consciousness is related to it, through a reflective logic, as forms of consciousness. In short words –and understanding the risk of providing a simplified explanation of the main purpose of one of the most important philosophical works of all times- ***The Phenomenology of Spirit*** is the comprehension of the development process of the subject as certain of itself to the truth of that certainty. In a briefly manner, we can argue that in the context of Hegel's Phenomenology of the Spirit, philosophy is understood as a form of "absolute Spirit". Hegel treatment of the concepts mentioned at the beginning of this paper – family, sex and women- is indeed complicated, specially for the non-professional reader of Hegel's Phenomenology. It has been my intention by elaborating this paper to grasp a basic and coherent comprehension of the Hegelian thought regarding the mentioned issues with out –and I should make emphasis on it- having recourse in to other secondary sources. If there is a miss-understanding of the Hegelian literature in this presentation, I should be the only one to blame.

The content of this academic paper is the following: I would first explain the concept of Spirit and how Hegel links his analysis of the development of self-consciousness around the crucial beginning the master/slave dialectic. As a second order of business, I will address the notion of ethical theory and show the

importance of the concept of “*ethical life*” in which the notions of family, sex and women are developed.

### **The Obscure Concept of Spirit.**

The concept of Spirit is, nevertheless, complicated and obscure in the context of the Hegelian literature. Yet, it can be argued that there is indeed a reflective relation in the process of the appearance of what we understand Spirit to be: A creative thinking which, through the rational effort, knows its creation as itself. Absolute Spirit, as that in which historical reality and subjective freedom are united and developed, hold their reality in Spirit. The notion of a *phenomenon* is crucial if we intended to comprehend the agenda of Hegel’s philosophy and the concept of natural consciousness. Hegel argues that the development of natural consciousness towards the truth is a rational self-development process where natural consciousness develops by assuming a series of various forms and shapes –the original expression in the German language is *Gestalten* ; and eventually, this series of different shapes discover themselves to be a mere appearance of knowing.

To understand the notion of Spirit, let me quote on Hegel, from paragraph 438 of the Phenomenology of The Spirit (I have used the translation by A.V. Miller, and all quotes of the PS will be extracted from this translation). Hegel links the concept of Spirit directly to Reason, and to his idealism. Quoting on Hegel: **“Reason is Spirit when its certainty of being all reality has been raised to truth, and it is conscious of itself as its own world, and of the world as itself”** . Hegel draws a distinction between two stages of development of social existence, Spirit-as-substance and Spirit-as-subject, which is crucial for his ethical theory. The concept of Spirit is divided by Hegel into subjective spirit (individual self-consciousness), objective spirit (social existence) and absolute spirit.

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Individual self-consciousness can be grasped as a form of Spirit only in retrospect. As Hegel writes in para. 440: **“All previous shapes of consciousness are abstract forms of it. They result from Spirit analyzing itself, distinguishing its moments, and dwelling for a while with each. This isolating of those moments presupposes Spirit itself and subsists therein; in other words, the isolation exists only in Spirit which is a concrete existence. In this isolation they have the appearance of really existing as such; but that they are only moments or vanishing quantities is shown by their advance and retreat into their ground and essence. ... Spirit, then, is consciousness in general which embraces sense-certainty, perception, and the Understanding.”**

The concept of Spirit unifies three main concepts: Freedom, Reason, and self-consciousness, which are interdependent almost to the point of identity. The only interest of Spirit is to realize its own principle of true freedom, and it does this by unfolding as human history, where the consciousness of universal, rational freedom is the driving force. Before it is fully developed, ethical life is substance without being spirit. Hegel describes this undeveloped form of social existence as **“spiritual essence that is in and for itself, but which is not yet consciousness of itself”** (paragraph. 438). This spiritual essence Hegel calls 'ethical substance' (para.439). Hegel's paradigm of ethical substance is the world of the ancient Greeks, the polis. According to Hegel, ethical life in this substantial, merely sense, is not yet Spirit, because it is not yet self-conscious.

The next step in the process of comprehending Hegel's effort in the Phenomenology of the Spirit is to understand how Hegel links his analysis of the development of self-consciousness around the crucial beginning the master/slave dialectic. This is important because, unlike preceding German Idealists, Hegel does not assume that the conscious agent is self-conscious *a priori*; instead, the agent must develop this notion of self-conception through experience. Thus, self-consciousness is far from innate in terms of the individual agent; Hegel's

disassociation with the tradition in this regard seems to be in believing that self-consciousness develops out of non-self-consciousness over time in a process that is historically conditioned.

### **Ethical Theory.**

Once the main philosophical development is achieved in the process proposed by Hegel, that is, a path in which the development of Consciousness, Self Consciousness, Mind and Reason has taken place, we are presented with his notion of ethical theory in relation to the notion of the Spirit. The central concept in Hegel's ethical theory is the concept of **“ethical life”**, a term that in the German language is expressed as ***Sittlichkeit*** and derives from the term ***Sitte*** meaning customs or laws. The concept of *Sittlichkeit* it is commonly translated as the ethical norms embodied in the customs and institutions which conform the social body. *Sittlichkeit* can also be understood as a term covering any behaviour based on norms provided by the general consciousness of a particular community.<sup>1</sup> It is important to remember that, in the context of the development of the term *Sittlichkeit* a contrast should be made with the notion of *Moralität*. This word is understood by Hegel as individual morality as conceived in any other moral theory in which the primary notions are duty and individual responsibility. What I would like to set clear in my analysis of these two terms is that, although Hegel grants that *Moralität* is a higher stage of dialectical development than *Sittlichkeit*, he does not consider an error to regard *Moralität* as independent from *Sittlichkeit*.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of ethical life is explained by Hegel introducing two stages of development. At the beginning, and before it is fully developed, ethical life is substance without being Spirit and, more important, as Hegel argues in paragraph 438 of the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* it lacks social existence as **“spiritual essence that is in and for itself, but which is not yet**

<sup>1</sup> Nicolla Abagnano. *Diccionario de Terminos Filosoficos*. Fondo de Cultura Economica, Mexico. Edicion 1990.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

**consciousness of itself.** “ It cannot be denied, and it is important to clarify that Hegel's conception of ethical substance is the world of the ancient Greeks, the polis. Not mistaken reference to the modern world should be elaborated. With this in mind, let's mention the following Hegel quotations regarding the concept of ethical substance: **“ Thus what is object for consciousness has the significance of being the True; it is and it is authoritative, in the sense that it exists and is authoritative in and for itself. It is... ethical substance; and consciousness of it is the ethical consciousness. Its object is likewise for it the True, for it combines self-consciousness and being in a single unity. It has the value of the Absolute, for self-consciousness cannot and does not want any more to go beyond this object, for in it, it is in communion with itself: it cannot, for it is all being and all power; it does not want to, for it is the self or the will of this self”** (paragraph 420). In paragraph 439, Hegel labels out that **“...the substance and the universal, self-identical, and abiding essence, is the unmoved solid ground and starting-point for the action of all, and it is their purpose and goal, the in-itself of every self-consciousness expressed in thought”**.

What we can understand of the latter passages is basically that the notion of ethical substance involves a conception of collective *realite* which is, much stronger than the conception of society as the product of contractual relations between individuals. In this context of ethical substance –seems to me–, we have an ideal community where each grasps their own individual identity through the law of the community or, in Hegelian terms, in the law of the Volk . This condition of pure and strict Sittlichkeit dissolves, however, precisely because it is merely immediate: Social agents experience custom and law as an absolute given, as Hegel argues in paragraph 476: **“This downfall of the ethical substance and its changeover into another Configuration is thus determined by the very fact that the ethical consciousness is essentially oriented toward the law in an immediate manner.”** Once the notion of ethical life is fully developed, Spirit is more than ethical substance because is the actuality of the substance, and

therefore, the door is open to deliver a perspective regarding the theory of civil society and view of the state.

### **Family, Women and Sexual Desire**

Yet, although this is not the aim of Hegel's effort in the *Phenomenology*, we find, however, that the notion of the family holds a crucial position in Hegel's philosophy: it is the immediate phase of ethical life which in turn is the third, and highest, stage in Hegel's system. Hegel presents three different levels through which individuals can move as they recognize their self-consciousness. As I have argue in previous lines, these levels formulate the concept "Sittlichkeit". The first, and lowest, is that of the family, where the moment of the universal is emphasized over that of the particular. The family is the first place where one can come to have any sense of self, however, this moment is limited. A family member receives their identity through being a member of the family. As Hegel claims in paragraph 451: "**...It seems then, that the ethical principle must be placed in the relation of the individual member of the Family to the whole Family as the Substance, so that the End and content of what he does and actually is, is solely the Family.**"

In relation to the social turn, Hegel labels out a recognition to the family as the most ancient of all societies and the only one that is natural and, more important, the immediate being of community practices, rituals and unspoken rules for every community member. In order to explain the transition from family to society, R. Salomon argues that Hegel points out a tragic conflict between them -family and society- (pag. 494, of the work *in the Spirit of Hegel*) using the contradiction within the Greek world articulated in Sophocles' *Antigone*; that is, between Divine Law (natural relationships, family) and Human Law (purely social relationships).

Although the purpose of this essay is not to address the perspective regarding the problem of male domination over the female gender, an honest

effort in addressing Hegel's perspective over the concept of Family cannot avoid mentioning how the philosophical dominant paradigm in Western history has influenced academia. As one of the mayor influences in the world of philosophy, it is not possible to denied that Hegel was strongly influenced by the beliefs and social expectations of his time: He sees society as a social entity composed of a man and a woman since he acknowledges that the masculine and feminine roles are set by nature and fix for eternity. This is argued in paragraph 466, with a very obscure language: **"Now, because, on the one hand, the ethical order essentially consist in this immediate firmness of decision, and for that reason, there is for consciousness essentially only one law..."**. This heterosexual perspective of the family can also be found in the in a very interesting quote from the Phenomenology of Right, where Hegel labels out that: **'The unity of marriage, which in substance is merely inwardness and disposition but in existence is divided between the two subjects, itself becomes in the children an existence which has being for itself, and an object which they love as their love and their substantial existence.'**<sup>3</sup>

Along with the notion of the family, Hegel's approach over the concept of desire and women seems to me extremely interesting. In the case of the notion of desire, Hegelian philosophy recognizes that we can be aware of ourselves only when others are conscious of us – this is the main lesson of the master-slave dialectic-: The master is a master only when the slave desires to be master. This Hegelian perspective might also explain the reality of the sexual desire (of course, after a strong hermeneutical effort), nevertheless, when desiring to control over the other in the sexual relation, then sexual desire becomes into something like the Hegelian model of power. And the notion of sexual desire cannot be separated from Hegel attitude toward women. There are four sequential figures of women in the Phenomenology of the Spirit: a) Antigone, the virgin that does not represent the erotic female other; b) the sexually seductive woman (the erotic other is seen as necessary for procreation yet understood as

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<sup>3</sup> The Phenomenology of Right, p.210 or par.173. edited by A.Wood and translated by H.B.Nisbet,

disruptive and destructive), c) the serving girl (*Das Mädchen*) and d), Mary, the Virgin Mother of Christianity which is seen as a non-erotic woman. It seems very interesting to note that, at least for 2 of the female figures in the Hegelian Philosophy, the lack of an erotic desire in the figure of the women is the main element that provides, either the ethical consciousness (as in the case of Antigone) or, the servitude capacity to *das Mädchen* to serve men because her erotic force is dormant. It seems also interesting the conclusion in which the feminine eros is seen as difficulty for man, if not to say, to male philosophers.

It cannot be more clear after an objective reading of the Phenomenology of the Spirit what Hegel claims about women; basically, that since the community only gets an existence through its interference with the happiness of the Family, and by dissolving self-consciousness into the universal, it creates for itself what it suppresses and what is at the same time essential to it an internal enemy. As Hegel itself argues: **“...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 as a hostile principle...”** (paragraph 475). It seems not only pathetic that in the context of the Hegelian philosophy, women are not allowed to enter civil society to interact, they cannot then their self-conscious being. Yet, the situation of men is completely different, as Hegel labels out on paragraph 460 **“...The husband is sent out by the Spirit of the Family into the community in which he finds his self conscious being”**. Faithful to his style, Hegel points out when making an interpretation of Sofocles tragedy *Antigone*; that the conflict Antigone suffers **“makes her aware of her self-conscious, and this conflict is not between human and divine law, but rather, to sets of obligations, two notions of justice.”** Yet, if we make a serious reading of Hegel’s interpretation of the Antigone, **“ in the Hegelian schema woman cannot achieve the self-consciousness of the slave since she does not experience the two central elements of slave consciousness..... personal fear of death .... work on nature as thinghood.**

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... woman is represented as someone that does not do anything and therefore achieves no universal recognition of her actions” .<sup>4</sup>

### **Conclusion.**

Hegel's agenda over the concepts of Family, Sexual desire and Women is fully developed in the work ***The Phenomenology of Right***, a work that was published 15 years after the first appearance of the Phenomenology of the Spirit. The manner in which Hegel writes in the Phenomenology of Right holds a stronger political aroma, and the political connotations of his approach over the latter concepts is wide clear. Much more contemporary authors, like Jacques Derrida have taken the effort of including in their methodology Hegel's interpretation regarding this notions. As one of the most important and influential system of philosophy, the methodology proposed by G.W. Hegel and his dealing of the socio-economic phenomena (even in a mayor work where the main purpose is to explain how we became aware of our consciousness ) are of considerable importance and they consist a mayor challenge for the amateur scholar.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY.**

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia J. Mills, **Feminist Interpretations of G.W. Hegel**, pg. 72