

# Hegel, *Antigone*, and Feminist Critique: The Spirit of Ancient Greece

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Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* seems an unlikely place for debates about sexual difference, gender roles, and family relations. But in fact, Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology*, subtitled "The True Spirit. The Ethical Order," includes Hegel's discussion of these questions in his famous account of *Antigone*, a play and a character that continue to speak to us in strange and provocative ways.

My presentation will focus on the appearance of Spirit in the world of ancient Greece (PS 9:238–260.23/M 263–89). My strategy will be, first, to present a brief account of the "story" of this appearance of Spirit in these paragraphs; second, to reflect on Hegel's use of dramatic form, specifically Attic tragedy, to introduce us to Spirit; and third, to examine contemporary feminist interpretations of Hegel's account of *Antigone* in this section of the *Phenomenology*. The questions I take up include the following: Why does Hegel consider the ancient Greeks as the model for emergent Spirit in ethical life? Why does Hegel resort to literary figures, in particular to dramatic tragedy, to represent this ethical life? Why focus on Sophocles' *Antigone*? Does Hegel's treatment of *Antigone* enrich our understanding of the *Phenomenology*, or simply reveal Hegel's own deep-seated patriarchal biases? Can this section of a 200-year-old text speak to contemporary social and political issues? Questions about sexist biases, literary figures, and historical examples, I hope to show, are not philosophically tangential or irrelevant. Exploring recent feminist critiques of this section gets to the heart of Hegel's phenomenological project, and may well support a general interpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology* potentially fruitful for feminist and social theory as well as contemporary philosophy. But first, then, the "story."

In his opening remarks in Chapter VI, Hegel says that Reason becomes Spirit when it becomes "conscious of itself as its own world, and of the world as itself" (PS 238.4–5/M 263). We should understand "world" here not as a separate metaphysical or natural object but as an historical, communal space organized by practical norms governing the actions of individuals and institutions. If we had

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previously thought of Reason as detached reflection and knowledge, transcending historical and cultural circumstances, that view of Reason has been shown to be inadequate. Reason becomes or realizes itself as Spirit when the ways of reflecting and knowing are embedded within social relations in an historical community. Spirit is the practical embodiment of Reason: Spirit is at least initially manifested in “ethical life” (*Sittlichkeit*), the customs and norms holding sway for an historical community. Spirit is the “substance” and “abiding essence” of this community by allowing people’s actions to be purposeful and meaningful in terms of their communal norms (*PS* 238.8–239.39/*M* 263–4).

Understanding Spirit in this way, Hegel uses the ancient Greeks as his historical paradigm. Why? Importantly, the ancient Greeks were presented in Hegel’s own time as an idealized example of such “spiritual” harmony: The ancient Greeks, according to this picture, understood themselves in terms of their social roles, their place in the community. This social order presented the ways things *must be*, by nature or “eternal necessity.” Questions about the ultimate meaning or justification of their lives and individual actions were answered in terms of their customs and laws. Both historically and conceptually, the ancient Greek world seems the prime candidate for Spirit’s unfolding as an ethical community. In keeping with his phenomenological mode of investigation, however, Hegel will probe this world with his usual critical question: Does this form of Spirit which *appears* to be perfectly harmonious actually live up to its own conception of itself – or at least to the conception of those of Hegel’s contemporaries who deem it preferable to the alienated modern world? (Pinkard 1994, 137).<sup>1</sup>

Although the ancient Greek world appears to be a perfectly harmonious community or ethical world, it does after all contain differing institutions and laws, “a plurality of ethical moments” (*PS* 241.33/*M* 267). Hegel focuses on the binaries of divine law and human law, family and state, and women and men. For instance, there are governmental laws, laws of the state, “human laws” directed toward preserving the social order of the community. These laws are “known,” “accepted and manifest to all” (*PS* 242.18–25/*M* 267–8) because they are explicitly decreed by acknowledged political authorities. However, there are also “divine laws” felt to be eternal, “unconscious,” that is, not promulgated by particular rulers or regimes but understood by the community at large as what must be done (*PS* 242.26–31/*M* 268). These divine laws concern the “spiritualization,” or making into ethical duties, of otherwise natural factors such as birth, death, familial relations, and sexuality.

Apparently closer to the concerns of divine law, Hegel identifies the family as the “*natural* ethical community,” the “inner” or “immediate” or, again, “unconscious” sense of the ethical order which supports and yet differentiates itself from the broader, or “universal” public sphere of state interests (*PS* 242.32–243.5/*M* 268). The family belongs to the ethical order, however, not in terms of the “natural” relationships of desire, reproduction, and nurturance but primarily in terms of how *the* natural state – “*pure being, death*” – becomes “spiritualized,” or included within the ethical through rituals of burial. Burial ceremonies bind individual family members to the ancestral line, allowing them to endure as members

of the “spirit” of the family as an individual social-historical institution rather than merely a natural grouping (*PS* 244.14–245.17/*M* 270–1). Moreover, women, bound as they are to family life, are assigned the duties of burial. Men, in contrast, leave the family unit to occupy the various social – and importantly, military – positions and duties in public life. This sexual division of labor is grounded in nature, in natural differences, in the “way things *are*,” yet becomes explicitly ethical in balancing the duties and roles of society’s members, “the way things are *done*.”<sup>2</sup>

With Sophocles’ *Antigone* as his model of Greek ethical life, Hegel elaborates more specifically the differentiations internal to state and family. While the state depends on family members to sustain its activities and common goals, it recognizes the pull of familial ties and individual projects that can work against the common purpose. Thus, says Hegel, government has “from time to time to shake them to their core by war” (*PS* 246.15–16/*M* 272). In war, the ultimate “lord and master, death” intervenes in individual pursuits of happiness and wealth, reminding citizens of their dependencies on the community as a whole. On this account, war is not merely a painful necessity or intermittent calamity but, rather, a governmental institution that helps to maintain the state precisely – paradoxically, we might now say – by having its individual members die on the battlefield. The state, after all, is more than its particular members, and it benefits from their sacrifice.

The family, too, contains “differences,” or diverse relations (*PS* 246.27–247.10/*M* 273–4). Relationships between husbands and wives, and parents and children, are certainly constitutive of family life. But, Hegel argues, duties between sister and brother have an ethical dimension that distinguishes them from the other relationships based on sexual desires or natural feelings. While husband and wife might attain “mutual recognition” within their marriage relationship, still, Hegel claims, this mutual recognition – which one might have thought to be paradigmatic of attained ethical relationship – is not strictly speaking ethical at all since it is based on sexual desire and feeling. Moreover, insofar as care of children is also based on natural affection and inequality, this relationship also fails to be ethical in Hegel’s sense. Remember, Hegel has *Antigone* in mind. We find, therefore, that the relation between sister and brother, *not* based on sexual desire, is the place where a woman within this ancient society can find genuinely ethical recognition and be called to her highest ethical duty.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, her highest duty as guardian of the eternal divine law takes its concrete form in burying her dead brother, whose loss for her is “irreparable” (*PS* 248.3–10/*M* 275).

We will return to examine the logic of family relations when we take up the feminist critique. For now, we have Hegel’s sketch of the ancient Greek order as it takes itself to be – or, at least, as it is taken to be in its idealized form. “The whole is a stable equilibrium of all the parts, and each part is a Spirit at home in this whole, a Spirit which does not seek its satisfaction outside of itself but finds it within itself, because it is itself in this equilibrium with the whole” (*PS* 249.29–31/*M* 277). Man and woman, *polis* and family, human and divine: the elements are stable, balanced, “unsullied by internal dissension” (*PS* 250.20–21/*M* 278) – or so it would seem.

The subheading “Ethical Action. Human and Divine Knowledge, Guilt and Destiny” marks the unfolding of the tragic tension or contradiction buried in the social relations of ethical life. An action, a deed “disturbs the peaceful organization and movement of the ethical world” (PS 251.13–14/M 279). Actually, there are two deeds: Antigone’s burial of her brother Polynices and Creon’s promulgation of the law forbidding that burial. Antigone acts in accord with her familial duty to her brother, and thus fulfills her ethical obligation decreed by divine law. Creon acts in accord with his duty as ruler to promote public safety against traitors, and thus fulfills his ethical obligation decreed by human law. Their actions are not merely the collision of duties, Hegel reminds us (PS 251.30–33/M 279); rather, each is unwaveringly following the law assigned to them by their respective places within ethical substance, within the community. Each “sees right only on one side and wrong on the other” (PS 252.27/M 280). On Hegel’s reading, however both are “guilty,” their deeds “criminal”: in following divine law, Antigone violates human law; in following human law, Creon violates the divine (PS 253.31–254.37/M 281–3). Their actions thus bring into the open the internal tensions and conflicts implicitly contained within the harmonious whole (PS 255.1–24/M 283–4). For Hegel, “both sides suffer the same destruction” (PS 256.19/M 285). There is no possible reconciliation or synthesis here. Antigone, condemned by Creon to be buried alive, commits suicide. Creon loses his son, his wife, and his ruling power. But it is not merely Antigone and Creon as individuals who suffer. For Hegel they represent the dimensions of the Greek community only “immediately,” or unreflectively balanced and harmonious. On these terms, they are unable to reconcile their opposing positions. The Greek community splinters from within, giving way eventually to the legal individualism of Roman imperial rule, where individuals are regarded uniformly only as “persons,” merely as bearers of “rights.”

This is only the bare bones of the story. Before looking more closely at some of the moments in the narrative, let’s consider why Hegel uses Attic tragedy to introduce Spirit in this chapter.

Ever since Hegel’s presentation of *Antigone* in the *Phenomenology* and subsequent discussions in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* and *Philosophy of Right*, his accounts have served as “the whipping boy” of later interpretations (Donougho 1989, 67). Goethe may have been one of the first to object to Hegel’s alleged “reduction” of *Antigone* to an opposition of human and divine laws, but he was not the last. Some readers (e.g., Lacan 1992, Irigaray 1996) insist that the play is driven by the desire and passion of both Antigone and Creon, though in different directions. Others (e.g., Reinhardt; quoted by Donougho 1989, 73) see the characters not as representatives of ethical norms or abstract principles but as “daimons” playing out their religious fates. Still others (e.g., Nussbaum 1986, 51–82) focus on the theme of vision, of practical wisdom, or lack thereof. For the moment, however, I want to consider the question not of Hegel’s interpretation but of his use of tragedy as a form of philosophical argumentation.<sup>4</sup>

We have noted so far that Chapter VI formally introduces Spirit as a “world,” a social realm of ethical norms. People’s lives and actions are normatively struc-

tured by their places within this world. As we know, Aristotle defined tragedy as the imitation of action. But on the account of Spirit as normative social space, an action has meaning and purpose only by its embeddedness within the particular social community. The meaning of an action unfolds only against the larger social framework, and cannot be contained or understood in terms of a notion of individual intention or personal motivation, as we might interpret action in more modern terms. Moreover, the ethical consequences of an action go far beyond an individual's intention or character. Ancient Greek tragedy, portraying actions as inevitably entwined with the larger social fabric and transcendent fate, thereby provides a model for understanding human action and agency along the lines of the interactive, socially dependent theory Hegel propounds in his account of Spirit. Furthermore, Attic tragedy not only presents the transformation of consciousness of the actors – as in the recognition of the “mistake” or error of judgment, *hamartia* – it also, according to Aristotle, produces a transformation in the spectators. The experiential dimension in the spectators, whether of feelings of pity and fear or some other state, is a crucial aspect for Hegel's overall project in the *Phenomenology*. Each shape of consciousness he explores suffers a breakdown. His *Phenomenology* is famously self-styled a “pathway of despair” (*PS* 56.6/M 49). But the readers, or “phenomenological spectators,” are not to be left unmoved: they, too, must experience the breakdown in order to understand and appreciate the move to another formation of Spirit. Dramatic tragedy, more than traditional philosophical argumentation, vividly calls for such movements. If the suffering of breakdown is essential to Hegel's phenomenological method, then his use of ancient tragedy seems appropriate, especially in this chapter on the formation of Spirit, of reason as living social space.<sup>5</sup>

Recall that for Hegel this introductory formation of Spirit among the ancients is marked by “immediacy,” a certain level of “unreflectiveness” (*PS* 365.23/M 412–13): the ethical norms of the community strike its members as what *must* be done. The divine and human laws, in this sense, “predetermine” the moves available to individual agents. The tragic characters must enact their deeds, play out their roles, in their predestined world. Antigone, for example, is not caught in the throes of Hamlet's inaction; she *knows* what she must do, and she does it. A feature of the presentation of Attic tragedy calls attention to this “immediacy” of ethical knowing: the masks used in the actual performances can be said to reflect to the spectators this “pre-given” determination of action.<sup>6</sup>

If some general features of Attic tragedy fit nicely into Hegel's phenomenological schema, why did he select Sophocles' *Antigone* for his discussion of Greek *Sittlichkeit*? Aside from Hegel's personal admiration for Antigone, there are more important theoretical considerations. For example, classicists Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1981, 9) argue that the hundred years of Attic tragedy are integral to the developing social-political thinking within the *polis* and reflect conflicts between different senses of “law” (*nomos*) emerging at the time. As for Hegel, “law” here means both the law of de facto political authority and a broader sense of sacred powers. The separation of these “laws” into human and divine allows for their conflict precisely while they are seen as inseparable. For these scholars

tragedy is indeed rooted in social reality, though it is no mere reflection of it; rather, as Hegel demonstrates, tragedy calls that social reality into question. *Antigone* perhaps more than any other Attic tragedy highlights this issue of the emerging ambiguities and conflicts within social, political, and religious dimensions of law, *nomos*. Indeed, *Antigone* presents one of the earliest extant characterizations of what became known as (normative) “natural law,” the idea that there are objective, non-statutory standards of justice (Valditara 2002, §B & note 43; Ostwald 1973), a view Hegel ultimately seeks to articulate and defend (Westphal 2003, §5). But the conflict of human and divine laws within the tragedy allows for no reconciliation, no answers. Each character clings unwaveringly to his or her sense of law, blinded to the legitimate sense of the other’s use, and is thus doomed to destruction.

Vernant’s reading strongly supports Hegel’s account of the play as the conflict of human and divine laws. However, recent feminist critiques of Hegel’s *Antigone* highlight some problematic and contentious aspects of Hegel’s presentation. As suggested in my introduction, I will consider feminist critiques of Hegel not simply to expose potential sexist biases but to examine the logic of Hegel’s arguments in this focal section of the *Phenomenology*. Since Hegel’s presentation of Spirit in the ancient Greek world is tied up with oppositions of man and woman, public and private, government and family, religion and politics, these feminist examinations go right to the heart of Hegel’s important philosophical strategies.

Rather than present individual feminist critiques, I begin by summarizing the main feminist contentions against Hegel, and then examine how they are or are not borne out in the text at hand. For the sake of clarity, I will list these criticisms as ten individual points, although they overlap considerably and are not intended to be exhaustive:

- 1 Hegel “essentializes” woman’s nature, relegating her to private life within the family, and denying her access to the public sphere.
- 2 Woman “feels” or intuitively knows what she ought to do; she is insufficiently self-conscious to reflect on and understand the complexities of her position in the community. Later in his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel likens women to plants, but even here in the *Phenomenology* Hegel discredits women’s rational capacities.
- 3 Because of his shortsightedness with respect to woman’s role in the community, Hegel cannot explain *Antigone*’s public defiance of Creon. *Antigone* as a female rebel cannot be contained by the description of femininity Hegel ascribes to her.
- 4 Ironically, Hegel claims that *Antigone*’s guilt is equal to Creon’s. But this attribution of guilt to *Antigone* is not supported by the play itself.
- 5 In general, Hegel misreads *Antigone*, both the play and the character, to suit his own purposes, to impose on them the logic of his own argument about the development of Spirit.
- 6 Thus Hegel ignores the sisterly relations between *Antigone* and *Ismene*. He claims that the sister can gain recognition only through the brother, and

- denies that wives and mothers can achieve any ethical recognition within marriage and family, although they are confined to those institutions.
- 7 Since woman remains stereotypically tied to nature, family, reproduction, and death, Hegel allows woman to sink into oblivion rather than to become actualized in the development of Spirit. This development is thus revealed to be a masculinized process of overcoming the side of the dualities associated with woman: nature, body, family, the sacred, etc.
  - 8 Moreover, Hegel accepts the oppositions of divine and human, nature and spirit, woman and man, family and *polis*, private and public as natural givens, rather than historical or social constructions. Hegel treats the “otherness” of woman to man, spirit, and political life as fixed by nature rather than a difference to be dialectically mediated and overcome.
  - 9 The synthesis, mediation, or reconciliation that Hegel posits as the outcome of the *Antigone* is really just the suppression of the feminine, rather than a genuine reconciliation. While Hegel professes to be a philosopher of identity-in-difference, in suppressing the feminine, female, womanly in favor of the masculine, he subverts the core of his philosophy.
  - 10 Yet Hegel sees womankind as “the eternal irony [in the life] of the community,” somehow threatening or undermining the cohesiveness of substantive ethical life. Hegel views woman as an outsider to the progressive development of Spirit.

As noted, I will consider these objections only in relation to the *Phenomenology*, not his *Philosophy of Nature* or *Elements of a Philosophy of Right*, where they would have a different philosophical impact.

Clearly, Hegel’s account of Spirit as the ethical life of the ancient Greeks depends on the binaries of man/woman, human/divine, *polis*/family, and spirit/nature. Feminists contend that binaries are notoriously suspect for at least three reasons: one, a binary is typically an oversimplification of more complex interactive factors; two, one side of a binary is typically valued higher, or much higher, than the other; and three, binaries are often supposed to be given or “natural” rather than matters of historical or social conditions. Binaries conceal yet reinforce hierarchies. So the question is, how does Hegel treat the binaries that figure so prominently in his discussion?

Let’s start with the distinction between human and divine law Hegel uses to differentiate the “ethical powers” within the Greek world. As we have seen, human law is decreed, promulgated, authoritative for the particular community, and instantiated in government. Divine law, in contrast, reaches beyond or beneath the actual human laws in place in any community and concerns matters of life and death in a more general sense. The divine law is immutable and “unconscious”: it is not a decree of any particular ruler or authority, and has no distinct origin to be questioned or overturned. The question is: are human and divine laws equally important? Are they equally valid?

As Hegel reads it, *Antigone* dramatizes the confrontation of *equally valid laws* represented by Antigone and Creon. Their confrontation reveals the contradictions

and tensions within the Greek community. Antigone insists she *must* bury her beloved brother Polynices, not simply because he is her beloved brother, but because as her brother his burial is a matter of the divine law which *must* be obeyed. Creon as the legitimate ruler forbids that burial because he *must* protect his city against traitors, such as Polynices. For Creon, blood ties, family connections – that Polynices is his nephew, Antigone his niece – are of no consequence. He goes so far as to claim that the only genuine “ties” that he himself recognizes are those in service to the state (Nussbaum 1986, 57). Importantly, for Creon the divine law calling for the women of the household to bury their family members is also of no consequence. Initially he seems even oblivious to that divine decree, or at least he ignores it, eventually defying it. He is concerned only with the preservation of his state – and, increasingly, his own power which he identifies as the state. So, does Hegel posit a set of binaries that are questionable in their origins and questionable in their oppositions? Does he in fact privilege one over the other?

The claim made not only by feminists but by many critics of Hegel’s interpretation of *Antigone*, that Hegel imposes a reading on the play to further his own agenda, certainly seems plausible. But let’s see how it works with respect to issues of binary oppositions. The binaries are said to be cleanly opposed but equally valid. As Hegel presents it, Antigone and Creon each cling to their own ethical law but do not acknowledge the validity of the other’s. Their unwavering sense of being in the right is precisely what leads to their destruction. Antigone, Hegel admits, *knows* she is violating human law, Creon’s law, but nevertheless “commits the crime” (PS 255.30/M 284). Creon’s case seems different. At first he does not acknowledge the validity of Antigone’s claim, that of a mere woman, but in the end comes to recognize his mistake, his *hamartia*, marking him as a tragic character doomed to destruction.

But the important point here is that for Hegel the antithesis between divine and human law, tragically portrayed by Antigone and Creon, *is itself a mistake*, a matter of what I call “false consciousness.” False consciousness in the relevant sense involves instantiating a position held as true which, upon examination by the phenomenological analyst, turns out to contain a tension or contradiction which negates or undermines that position. In the case at hand, Hegel argues that the Greeks differentiate and oppose the divine and human ethical powers in merely an “immediate,” unquestioning sense, i.e., as given, a matter of fact, a matter of how things stand for them, how these laws must be upheld in their different realms. But Hegel, the phenomenological observer and analyst, sees that this “immediate,” unreflective sense of their opposition covers over deeper interdependencies:

Neither of the two is by itself valid in and for itself; human law proceeds in its living process from the divine, the law valid on earth from that of the nether world, the conscious from the unconscious, mediation from immediacy – and equally returns whence it came. The power of the nether world, on the other hand, has its actual existence on earth; through consciousness, it becomes existence and activity. (PS 248.39–249.5/M 276)



Thus Hegel the phenomenological analyst sees what the allegedly unreflective ancient Greeks – represented by Antigone and Creon – did not see: that the binaries operative in their society were at bottom deeply connected and interdependent. The play *Antigone*, at least on Hegel's reading, shows the collapse and destruction that tragically follows precisely from holding the binaries stringently apart. It is not Hegel, then, who maintains those binaries in strict opposition but, rather, Greek ethical life itself, infected by this "false consciousness."

If we look a bit more closely at Sophocles' play, is this the story we find? Here the objection that Hegel misreads the play for his own purposes becomes pertinent. Of course we find dramatic antagonism between Antigone and Creon, but also between Creon and Haemon, Antigone and Ismene. Yes, the antagonisms unfold around Creon's decree versus Antigone's revering the sacred traditions of burial, an opposition cast in terms of gender. Creon, stubbornly insisting on his sole right to rule, refuses to listen, to be undone, to be "unmanned" by a mere woman. By the end of the play, however, Sophocles has Creon admit that the guilt is all his (*l.* 1441/1318).<sup>7</sup> Near the end Creon even performs burial rites on Polynices' ravaged body (*ll.* 1320–26/1197–1204), thus showing himself to be indeed "unmanned" by taking on the role of woman. In the Chorus's final words, the "moral of the story" is told in terms of wisdom and reverence toward sacred traditions. Rather than presenting Greek ethical life as the unreflective, unmediated oppositions between human and divine laws, family and state, Sophocles dramatically emphasizes the importance of recognizing precisely the *interdependence* of these realms. One might conclude, following Vernant, that as the meaning of the term "law" becomes increasingly ambiguous, unsettled, and problematic, Sophocles calls attention to the need for greater practical wisdom, better judgment, in learning how to navigate the terms of law in the increasingly complex Greek *polis* (cf. Nussbaum 1986, Chapter 3). This point supports Hegel's insight that when the interconnections and interdependencies of human and divine law are ignored, doom and destruction follow. As idealized by the Romantics, the Greeks were happily unconcerned with such difficult problems; their lives went on tranquilly, harmoniously structured by the binaries in question. On Hegel's reading, that Greek society, the romanticized one, spiritually collapses.

In what sense, or to what extent, is Antigone guilty in contributing to this collapse? Commenting on the culminating passage (*PS* 255.25–37/*M* 284), Pinkard (1994, 144) claims that for Hegel, Antigone's guilt is "perhaps a little greater" than Creon's, since she *knowingly* violates his law, while he apparently violates the sacred traditions out of ignorance. The end of the play, however, emphasizes that in tragedy ignorance is no excuse. Indeed, Creon's "ignorance," consisting in stubborn refusal to listen, learn, and consider larger ramifications of his actions, is itself the root of his crime and is shown to be entirely blameworthy.<sup>8</sup> It seems plainly wrong to say that Antigone is even *more* guilty than Creon, but is she guilty at all, and if so, of what crime?

In his text Hegel quotes a line from the play implying that Antigone *admits* her guilt: "Because we suffer we acknowledge we have erred" (*PS* 256.1/*M* 284).

But she actually says something quite different. Invoking the gods and divine law she claims to revere, she says:

Very well: if this is the pleasure of the gods,  
once I suffer I will know that I was wrong.  
But if these men are wrong, let them suffer  
worse than they mete out to me –  
these masters of injustice!

(ll. 1017–1021/925–928)

Antigone invokes the gods, not human powers, to judge her. If Hegel regards Antigone and Creon as equally guilty, the play doesn't bear out his allegation, not only because of the questionable line Hegel inserts, but also because the Chorus, the Theban citizens in the play, Creon's own son, and presumably the spectators all attest to the righteousness of Antigone's act, even within the larger scheme of her life's entanglement in the fate of the Oedipal household.<sup>9</sup> Granted, from the standpoint of Creon's decree, Antigone *is* guilty of breaking it. But the point is that breaking this law is a "crime," as Hegel names it, only when this decree is divorced from its place within the sacred traditions, as Creon-turned-tyrant so enforces it. On this reading, Antigone's "crime" is contingent precisely on splitting law into its opposed binaries, but this split constitutes the false consciousness, or self-misunderstanding of the ancient world. We seem to be left with these alternatives: either Antigone is guilty from the standpoint of the false consciousness operating within the Greek world; or Hegel *claims* Antigone is guilty as a matter of his own logic, where both sides of the dialectical oppositions must be flawed to bring about "the negation" of the form of life in question.

However, other readings of Antigone's "crime" are possible. For example, she may be guilty of refusing to submit as a woman. "She is *autonomous*, a law unto herself," and hence disruptive to the *polis* (Sjoholm 2004, 43). Or, as Nussbaum suggests (1986, 63ff.) – closer on this point to Hegel's reading – Antigone like Creon is guilty of a lack of vision, of practical wisdom. She stubbornly refuses to see that her ethical obligation to her dead brother requires service to the state as well; one must stay alive within the community to continue to honor the dead. Her stubbornness commits her to the gods of the dead, cut off from the gods of love, procreation, and life. But here again her crime lies in not seeing that justice requires the *interconnections* of human and divine, rather than their separation. Antigone is guilty, then, not only from the standpoint of the false consciousness of her community but because she herself instantiates this false consciousness.

How do attributions of false consciousness, stubborn ignorance, or lack of wisdom correlate with the feminist criticism that Hegel underestimates the rational capacities of women? It appears that *both* male and female characters know and do not know in significant ways. They both know what they must do according to their respective laws, but do not envision how their actions will affect not only themselves but also the whole community. Judging by the consequences, Creon's lack of wisdom is far greater, more serious, and more blameworthy than Antigone's.

Antigone's impeded vision ends with her dying the "beautiful death" of the male warrior (Sjoholm 2004, 44). In contrast, Creon's error leads to the bloody deaths of his niece, his son, and his wife, and to the demise of his own state and ruling power. Why suppose Hegel relegates women to the intellectually inferior position?

A simple but important response is that Hegel's account depicts the ancient Greek world in which women are confined to home and family and are generally denied opportunities for education. Hegel does not structure that world in that way. Indeed, his phenomenological analysis calls attention to inherent tensions within those structures. As Pinkard (1994, 143) aptly comments, "It would be a mistake to take the issue here to be the incompatibility of this Greek view of the possibilities for men's and women's lives with modern, egalitarian views. For the purposes of Hegel's discussion, the only issue is whether this Greek understanding is *in its own terms* rational, not whether it fails to fit *our* modes of self-understanding." Along these lines, I am not trying to exonerate Hegel from the charge of overt or latent sexism here, but to highlight his project of phenomenology. The purpose of the dialectic is to examine critically different forms of consciousness or kinds of normative social worlds to see if their own criteria of reasonableness or integrity can escape falling into contradiction. In the context of the ancient Greek world as seen through Hegel's dialectical analysis, women's intellectual and social confinement points to a hidden source of fatal instability.

One may object, however, that even if Hegel is only describing and analyzing the Greek world, he is at the same time interpreting that world by using the terms and categories of his dialectic. It is Hegel, after all, who terms women's relation to divine law "unconscious":

The feminine, in the form of the sister, . . . has the highest *intimation* of what is ethical. She does not attain to *consciousness* of it . . . because the law of the family is an *implicit, inner* essence which does not lie in the daylight of consciousness, but remains an inner feeling and divine element devoid of actuality. (PS 247.17–21/M 274)

Hegel's language here relegates feminine "knowing" to a kind of unknowing, presumably an irrational or at the very least an unarticulated feeling. Hegel himself employs this terminology with its derogatory connotations.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, we cannot overlook Hegel's blatant reinforcement of sexist biases by attributing to women inferior rational capacities.

This charge against Hegel is difficult to refute in general, but at least a partial response may be available. Granted, we have noted repeatedly that Hegel calls divine law, associated with women and family, "unconscious." Within Hegel's dialectic, generally speaking, what is unconscious, or implicit, needs to be articulated to become "conscious," or explicit. This process of articulation – through language, actions, principles, social practices, and cultural institutions – forms the basis of the development of Spirit. So Hegel's account of women's "unconscious" relation to the ethical does suggest an inferior relation. However, in terms of the differentiations of divine and human law, we have also seen that

divine law is something “unconscious,” merely felt or intuited, and in that sense “unknown” – as opposed to the human laws which are “known” and “manifest to all” – because the divine law has no historical origin, not having been promulgated or decreed by particular authorities. Already at the end of the Reason chapter (immediately preceding Chapter VI), Hegel quoted the *Antigone* on the status of the “unwritten and infallible law of the gods: ‘They are not of yesterday or today, but everlasting / Though whence they came, none can tell’” (*PS* 236.10–11/*M* 261; *ll* 506–508/456–458). In this sense, the status of divine law as “unconscious” or “unknown” is not a detraction or derogation but, rather, an attribution of its ethical necessity or “absoluteness,” the sense that such law *must* be obeyed. Here the binary ‘conscious/unconscious’ has to do with the origins, scope, and force of the laws, rather than their positioning in an epistemic hierarchy. This point helps explain, furthermore, how Hegel can claim that Antigone “*knowingly*” does what she does even when she is supposedly only darkly, “intuitively” aware of her ethical duties. Creon’s decree is public, intelligible to all, so defying that law entails she knows it. Her “knowledge” of the divine law, in contrast, involves her very positioning within her world rather than a belief or knowledge claim subject to rational testing. While this interpretation does not fully address the feminist objection that Hegel derogates women’s rational capacities, at least it calls attention to different senses of “unconscious” that figure in Hegel’s text.<sup>11</sup>

Let’s move on to consider the contention that on Hegel’s account, Antigone’s womanly role prevents her from acting publicly. Obviously Antigone does act openly and defiantly. To be sure, Sophocles also presents her as a “stranger,” outside the scripted gender roles, even while she insists on her sisterly duty within the sacred traditions (*ll.* 940–43/849–852). Ismene is clearly the stereotypically feminine woman, obedient and compliant, afraid to contend with men, wanting to maintain the status quo – and in the end, showing genuine affection and solidarity with her sister. Antigone, in contrast, renounces this form of sisterhood as well as the joys of love, marriage, and children, instead to wed death. In that sense, Lacan’s (1992, 281) claim that she is driven by a desire for death, for a “beyond,” is well taken. In any case, we are led to the following paradox. Precisely by insisting on her sisterly duties to her dead brother, Antigone dramatizes that the ethically prescribed confinement of women to familial roles and duties is deeply flawed. She becomes an impossible outlaw, an unnatural stranger indeed, while her outlaw position dislodges her from representing woman’s ethical place within the community. We come to see that she cannot be both a female outlaw *and* the womanly paradigm within ethical life. Insofar as Hegel identifies Antigone with woman, family, and divine law, he occludes her rebel role.<sup>12</sup>

The role of woman as disruptive outsider, however, does appear explicitly in Hegel’s text. Reviewing the relationship between the public and familial – this time, near the end of his discussion, and so near the “spiritual” end of Greek *Sittlichkeit* (*PS* 258.19–260.6/*M* 287–9) – Hegel reveals that the “universal” public sphere of men maintains itself by “consuming and assimilating into itself the separation of the Penates, or the self-sufficient individuation of families, over which womankind presides . . .” (*PS* 258.33–35/*M* 287–8). Finally the suppress-

sion of women and family is openly admitted! At the same time, he reiterates that the public *depends* on the private, or familial. “In what it suppresses and yet is essential to it – womankind as such – [the community] creates for itself its own internal enemy” (PS 259.2–4/M 288). Immediately following, Hegel presents his famous – or infamous – passage on “womankind”:

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 which, indifferent to purely private pleasures and enjoyments, as well as to playing an active part, only thinks of and cares for the universal. (PS 259.4–10/M 288)

What shall we make of this depiction of “womankind”?<sup>13</sup> So far, I have been arguing that Hegel is not necessarily subject to the feminist criticism that he “naturalizes” or “essentializes” binaries and privileges one side over the other. I have been pointing out that Hegel the phenomenological analyst criticizes ancient Greek society for that kind of oversimplified thinking. But now, when Hegel speaks of “womankind” as the “everlasting irony” in the community, the charge of his “essentializing” woman’s nature and roles returns to center stage. Let’s consider a few possible interpretations relating to this charge.

First, does this passage actually refer to Antigone herself as she has prominently figured in this chapter? Given the context one easily assumes that it does. However, Patricia Mills (2002, 214) argues convincingly that “Antigone is not merely *distinct* from woman as the irony of the community, but that she is in fact the very *antithesis* of this picture of ‘womankind in general’.” After all, Antigone does not engage in hidden intrigue against the state by seducing its young men away from their public, military duties, or by using the state to augment family fortunes. On this reading, Hegel implicitly distinguishes Antigone, his ethical paradigm of the virginal, dutiful sister, from the typical role of woman as manipulative, sensual seductress. Despite his charges of her guilt, Hegel’s Antigone somehow transcends woman’s nature to become the beautiful figure he so admired.

A different reading of the passage avoids the issue of essentialism altogether. On this reading (Donougho 1989, 85), Hegel points out how women’s historical suppression within Greek society reveals that society to be an individualistic warrior ethic rather than a harmonious ethical whole. Thus, the line ‘Womankind as the everlasting irony of the community’ refers to women in *that ancient Greek* community, not all communities over time.<sup>14</sup> Hegel is to be neither condemned nor celebrated for judging women’s “eternal” sensual seductiveness. On the contrary, he should be appreciated for uncovering the contingent, violent, individualistic “truth” hidden beneath the idealized conception of Greek ethical life.

If the latter reading makes sense in the context of Hegel’s discussion of the collapse of the Greek community, it may not settle issues about Hegel’s particular word choices, namely, his use of “womankind” and “everlasting” or “eternal” irony of the community. His statement suggests a claim about “womankind” as a

universal or transhistorical category, not merely the particular women within ancient Greek culture. This suggestion is often taken by feminist critics to be Hegel's own position. If we suppose him to be making a universalist claim, what follows?

On the one hand, we may applaud Hegel's insight that women have been constantly excluded by male-dominated history and culture. "Woman's irony" is thus a needed and ever-present challenge to a system bent on closure. But then Hegel's insight presumably turns against his own philosophical system aimed at mediating or dialectically overcoming the "otherness" threatening to remain excluded (Benhabib 1996). On this reading, if Woman, associated with sensuality and family intrigue, is forever ironically excluded by the "progressive" development of Spirit, that admission supports the feminist charge that that development is indeed a masculinized process of continual suppression of the feminine.

On the other hand, we may call attention to the inconsistency of Hegel's universalist claim. On his own phenomenological grounds, according to which knowledge claims are justified within a particular shape of consciousness or spiritual world, he has no justification for holding that women necessarily, "naturally," or "eternally" remain excluded from the progressive development of spirit, or – more mundanely – remain confined to private or familial realms, cut off from cultural, political interaction and recognition. That women have historically been so excluded is surely true, but this historical observation does not warrant a universalist claim that women's nature justifies such exclusion (cf. Hutchings 2003, 99). Accordingly, to render Hegel consistent with his dialectical project we would do well to read his passage about "Woman's eternal irony" as referring simply to the particular Greek world in its decline.

While offering an interpretation of Hegel's conception of *Sittlichkeit* within the *Phenomenology* by examining feminist criticisms of his account of *Antigone*, I have not yet directly addressed what follows the breakdown of Greek ethical life. Here the feminist objection that Hegel privileges a masculinist development of Spirit by siding with an individualistic, legalistic "overcoming" of the Greek spiritual world seems plausible (cf. points 7 and 9 above). After all, the next sub-section turns to "legal status," the putative next stage of Spirit in its unfolding (*PS* 260.25–264.6/*M* 290–4). But is that feminist criticism upheld in this case? What sort of "overcoming" takes place in the Roman community based on laws, rights, and property?

Here we find that Hegel actually condemns this "development." "Legal Status" avoids the problem central to "immediate spirit" by omitting the non-statutory norms of customary and divine law represented by *Antigone*. However, this strategic advantage has its price: the Greek spiritual world has been "shattered into a multitude of separate points" (*PS* 260.22–23/*M* 289); it becomes a "spiritless community which has ceased to be the unself-conscious substance of individuals" (*PS* 260.27–28/*M* 290). Here "a mere multiplicity of individuals" are regarded equally as "*persons*," but abstracted from the normative world of interdependent social actions and institutions. Hegel reminds us that this kind of abstract independence of the self-conscious 'I' was previously examined in his critiques of

Stoicism and Skepticism: “Personal independence in the sphere of *legal right* is rather the same general confusion and reciprocal dissolution” as skepticism (*PS* 262.3–5/*M* 291).<sup>15</sup> That is, the independent citizen, as a bearer of rights, notably property rights, is not thereby *spiritually* “richer” or more developed than the participant in earlier Greek *Sittlichkeit*, but only thinks himself to be so. Put even more strongly, “to designate an individual as a ‘person’ is an expression of contempt” (*PS* 262.26–27/*M* 292). Furthermore, insofar as legal power becomes concentrated in the ruler or emperor – “the titanic self-consciousness that knows itself as being an actual god” (namely, Caesar) – the ruler’s “activities and self-enjoyment are equally monstrous excesses,” revealed in the “destructive power he exercises against the self of his subjects, the self which stands over against him” (*PS* 263.9–15/*M* 291–3).

If one claims, then, that in this section of the *Phenomenology* Hegel assigns the “victory” to Creon over Antigone – or more broadly, to a masculinist notion of individual power over a feminist conception of communal relationships – we see that such a claim is mistaken, a misconception of Hegel’s conception of spirit and dialectical development. On Hegel’s dismal description, legal status is tantamount to Creon’s rule by pure, positive edict, without any basis in actual social practices or familial relations. This sorry development reveals the essential importance of such communal dimensions of society highlighted in the previous discussion of *Antigone*. “Legal status” is thus *not* a spiritual improvement over Antigone’s world but, rather, a historical change that emphasizes, or *overemphasizes* an important but insufficient facet of the modern conception of self; it serves, after all, to introduce “the self-alienated Spirit” discussed in the second section of Hegel’s chapter (*PS* 264.8/*M* 294; see chapter 9). We learn thereby that not all “later developments” in the *Phenomenology* are actually improvements. We need to remember a point made earlier: it is a mistake to identify as Hegel’s own a view that he is instead examining and criticizing. In the case of legal status, his strongly negative language makes it clear that this configuration of spirit is sorely lacking. But his strident criticism is thus aligned *with* and not against a feminist call for a genuine overcoming of the masculinist individuality and abstract legal power that collapses under his phenomenological vision.

In conclusion, what I hope to have shown is that examining feminist contentions against Hegel, especially in this section on Spirit, is an important, helpful way of opening up and learning to read this complex text. Exploring feminist critiques of Hegel in the *Phenomenology* shows that Hegel’s claims about sexual difference and gender roles need to be contextualized in terms of his dialectical strategy. Within the *Phenomenology* each shape of consciousness or spiritual world presents its own ideals or conceptions of knowledge, whether about “sense certainty,” as in the opening chapter, or the relationships of normative practices to individual actions, as in the ancient Greek world. Along the way Hegel cannot rightfully be assumed to identify with any one set of claims made from within the world under examination. Granted, it is often difficult to determine when Hegel is speaking from within that world and when he shifts to the voice of the phenomenological analyst. But it is important to be aware of this interpretive

shift. On my reading of this section, I have called attention repeatedly to Hegel's stance as the phenomenological analyst revealing the fragility and interdependencies of the supposedly natural or necessary binaries figuring prominently in Greek ethical life. If we suppose that Hegel is asserting the truth of the binaries or divisions in question, then we identify as Hegel's a view he is in fact criticizing.

Hegel is certainly no feminist, as his later explicitly asserted views attest. However, a feminist insistence that gender and sexuality are socially constructed, and are thus historical and variable, gets support in the *Phenomenology*, especially in this section, which explicitly confronts these issues. Hegel himself seems not to have recognized the radical import of his examination of Greek *Sittlichkeit*. From his later writings, we see that he continued to suppose that sexual difference is "natural," an ahistorical given which becomes incorporated into ethical life through social practices of family. But when we see that his treatment of divine and human laws shows them to be more interdependent and fluid than initially supposed, we can claim on similar grounds that gender categories and sexual difference are also socially, historically variable. If Hegel himself misses the radical potential of many of his analyses, readers of the *Phenomenology* may want to push his texts in that direction.<sup>16</sup> Emphasizing Hegel's contextualism and historicism, then, offers a reading of the *Phenomenology* that makes it closer to and more useful for feminism and contemporary social thought than one might have supposed.

## Notes

- 1 *PS* 238–41/*M* 263–6 are discussed further below, pp. 191–92. – *Ed.*
- 2 *PS* 244.14–245.17, 251.9–24 /*M* 270–1, 276–7. In light of feminist criticisms considered below, it is interesting to note that prior to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel in his essay on *Natural Law* had viewed only the sacrificial act of the aristocratic soldier as constituting the ethical order. Here in the *Phenomenology* Hegel attributes ethical action to female members of the family (Speight 2001, 63).
- 3 The relation between Antigone and Polynices, as siblings, is the first case of genuinely mutual recognition in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, albeit an immediate, undeveloped form of mutual recognition. – *Ed.*
- 4 For more detailed discussions of this issue see Westphal (2003, chapters 3 and 4), Speight (2001), and Willett (1991). All three authors highlight the emotional, experiential elements in both tragedy and in Hegel's phenomenological method, a point often overlooked by those who see Hegel privileging intellect over other aspects of human spirit. Furthermore, Westphal argues that Sophocles' *Antigone*, specifically his characterization of Creon, provides a literary model for Hegel's "internal critique," or phenomenological method.
- 5 This point about the breakdown for forms of consciousness bears comparing with Hegel's constructive lessons from skepticism and his examination of normative authority via its breakdown; see above, chapters 1, 3, 6, 7. – *Ed.*
- 6 Speight (2001, 64). After quoting from Hegel's *Aesthetics* on the importance of the mask in Greek tragedy, Donougho (1989, 87) notes that for Hegel "the truth of Greek tragedy (and by extension of the Greek world-view and of art generally) is 'the truth of masks' . . . For the plastic character or ethos there is nothing behind that mask; the



- agents identify themselves totally with their personae, their pathos, as do the players/dramaturges presenting them.”
- 7 Fagles (1982), whose translation is used here, devised his own line numbering system; lines of the Greek text follow his, after a ‘/’. – *Ed.*
  - 8 Countering Irigaray’s charge against Hegel that he overlooks the connections between blood ties and community, Hutchings (2003, 96) writes: “there is no reason to read Hegel as if he were unaware of the irony of Creon’s simultaneous dismissal of and dependence on the claims of kinship. Rather, Hegel presents Creon’s treatment of human law as entirely self-legitimizing, without regard to its dependence on and entwinement with the ties of blood, as being at the heart of his crime.” Hutchings generally supports the line I am arguing: Hegel, the phenomenological analyst, stresses the often hidden or merely implicit *interconnections* between the divisions in Greek life.
  - 9 Irigaray (1996, 49) interprets Antigone’s “guilt” in the following way: “However guiltless, she feels she bears the burden of her mother’s fatal marriage, feels guilty for being born of such terrible embraces. Thus she is damned, and by consenting to a punishment she has not merited and yet cannot escape, at the least she accepts on her own account the death knell of her *jouissance* – or is mourning itself her *jouissance*? – by killing herself.”
  - 10 Kelly Oliver (1996, 84) develops this point in her essay on Hegel’s treatment of family: “[T]he feminine element remains unconscious and unconceptualizable. Hegel’s *Phenomenology* is a phenomenology of masculine consciousness that is possible only by setting up feminine ‘consciousness’ as the negation of masculine consciousness and then suppressing the feminine.”
  - 11 These considerations are supported by Hegel’s view that it is possible “to know something falsely” (*PS* 30.36–37/*M* 22–3). For Hegel knowing is a process, within which “false knowledge” can contribute to our subsequently achieving true (genuine) knowledge (Westphal 1989, 102). Hence to know something explicitly does not suffice to know it either truly or justifiably, as shown in Creon’s case. According to Hegel, regardless of whether Creon and Antigone “know” their principles implicitly or explicitly, their knowledge suffers from being “immediate” because it is dogmatic and unjustified; this is central to the “immediacy” of the ancient Greek spirit. At least Antigone has the advantage of having firmly grasped a truth; no matter how implicit her grasp may be, it is correct and justifiable, even if she cannot provide its justification. – *Ed.*
  - 12 Agreeing with other feminists that Hegel’s reading does not allow for this outlaw role, Judith Butler (2000) articulates Antigone’s claim to be the ever-present disruptor of familial and political arrangements. Patricia Mills (1996a, 77) – also reading Hegel against the grain – points out Hegel’s failure to discuss Antigone’s suicide. Mills sees her suicide as a significant, active positioning outside or beyond the female ethical ideal. For Mills Antigone can be read as the precursor of the modern feminist who proclaims the personal is the political. But Mills asserts that *this* Antigone is occluded in Hegel’s interpretation.
  - 13 Irigaray’s (1996) critical meditation on Hegel’s Antigone is appropriately entitled “The Eternal Irony of the Community.” Irigaray plays with the ironies and tensions she discovers in this phrasing as well as within the entire passage on Greek ethical life.
  - 14 The community that is said to suffer the eternal irony of womankind (*PS* 259.4/*M* 288) is the same community that is said to survive only by suppressing individuality (*PS* 259.15–17/*M* 288), something Hegel regards as a key defect of Greek *Sittlichkeit*. – *Ed.*
  - 15 See above, pp. 60–64. – *Ed.*
  - 16 Cf. especially Hutchings (2003), Ravven (2002), and Gauthier (1997).

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