

Gender, the Family, and the Organic State in Hegel's Political Thought

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1 Women's Place in the Hegelian State

For Hegel, woman's place is in the family:

Man [*der Mann*] . . . has his actual substantial life in the state, in science, etc., and otherwise in work and struggle . . . so that it is only through his division that he fights his way to self-sufficient unity with himself. In the family, he has a peaceful intuition of this unity, and an emotive and subjective ethical life. Woman, however, has her substantial vocation in the family, and her ethical disposition consists in this *piety*. (*PR* §166, p. 206)

Here in his discussion of the family in the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel effectively denies equality to women in a number of respects. Women are not to undertake paid work in the public sphere; rather, in each family the husband is the head of household who is “primarily responsible for external acquisition and for caring for the family's needs” (§171, p. 209). As each new generation comes to maturity, only sons leave their families to enter civil society. Although women (daughters) do have enough civil personality to enter into marriages, the nature of the marriage “contract” – which is no ordinary kind of contract but one that “begin[s] from the point of view of contract . . . *in order to supersede it*” (§163, p. 203; emphasis original) – is that the two marriage partners renounce their independent legal personalities to form a common unit. The husband, however, is the rightful representative of this unit: “The family as a legal person in relation to others must be represented by the husband as its head” (§171, p. 209) – so that in fact it is

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only women who renounce legal autonomy upon marrying, whilst men retain it under their new guise as heads of household. Consequently, wives also relinquish their maiden names; and although family property is owned in common, only the husband administers it (Hegel 1996: §82, pp. 150–151). Finally, not being rightful participants in civil society, women are not rightly to participate in political activities or processes either, since for Hegel political participation is properly mediated through participation in economic and civil activity.

Hegel is not simply prescribing how gender roles ought to be divided but describing the kind of family he saw taking shape in nineteenth-century Europe: the nuclear heterosexual family as a domain not of production but of intimate personal relations, structured by what Carole Pateman (1988) calls the “patriarchal marriage contract.” This peculiar kind of contract effectively recognizes women’s freedom (presupposed in their freedoms to marry and to choose their spouse) only to take that freedom away again by slotting women – and men – into roles preassigned according to sex. These are the roles respectively of (male) head of household versus that of (female) care-giver primarily occupied with the needs of others, especially children. This kind of family structure persists to varying degrees today, at least as an ideal. But, as many feminists have shown, this structure has inherent deficiencies. The economic and psychological dependency in which it places women makes them vulnerable to various forms of abuse, while the whole structure is arguably premised on women’s economic exploitation insofar as their care-giving work is unpaid and largely unvalued and unrecognized.

Hegel admits that things can go wrong within the patriarchal family – for instance, he notes that the husband’s right to manage the family property can conflict with its common ownership. Moreover, he recognizes that this possibility is built into the structure of the family – although for him this is not because that structure is patriarchal, but because, in his words, “the ethical disposition of the family is still immediate and exposed to particularization and contingency” (*PR* §171, p. 209). That is, family members are disposed to embrace and act on behalf of their common good on the basis of their immediate feelings of mutual love. Hence, if love dies, spouses (in practice, husbands) may lose the motivation to serve the family’s common good and may lapse into pursuing their self-interest at other family members’ expense. Still, although the patriarchal family is not flawless in Hegel’s view, on the whole he deems it rational, because the “immediate unity” of its members which the family embodies – their direct

identification with their common good based in immediate loving feeling – is one essential aspect of modern social life, despite the potential problems that can result from this immediacy. Hegel, then, is not offering a value-neutral description of the gender division of labor as it was crystallizing in modern Europe, but a normative redescription of that emerging division, a redescription in which this division and the family structure bound up with it form essential aspects of reason's progressive self-actualization in the modern social world.

Hegel's account of the family is one of the parts of the *Philosophy of Right* least discussed by commentators – not surprisingly, because commentators understandably tend to look for what is true and insightful in Hegel's work, and prima facie his account of the family is neither true nor insightful but merely a “remnant of his era” (Halper 2001: 817). Yet the fact remains that Hegel saw the nuclear family as one of the three fundamental spheres of modern society and as rightly structured by a rigid, hierarchical, division of sex roles. He saw no legitimate room for “non-traditional” family arrangements: unmarried couples, single-parent families, homosexual families all fail to conform to rational family structure (see Brooks 2007: 70–75). Unappealing as these views are today (to many of us, anyway), we cannot fully understand Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* without confronting his view of the family and sex roles. Having said this, feminist and feminist-informed interpreters have debated whether the division of sex roles that Hegel describes as rational really should count as rational by the standards of his own philosophy. Perhaps, despite what Hegel actually says, “the logic of his system should have led him to conclusions very close to recognizing women's equal rights in social, economic, and political spheres,” as Jean-Philippe Deranty puts it (2000: 145; for similar views see Mills 1996; Ravven 1988). On this view, Hegel's own ideal of individual freedom, and his support for (what he regards as) the Christian principle that all human beings are free, imply that all individuals of both sexes should be able to realize their freedom; Hegel simply failed to pursue this implication because he succumbed to the prejudices of his time.

In partial agreement with this interpretation, I will argue that Hegel's view of women is indeed in tension with one particular implication of his political philosophy: that all citizens should be able to participate in *every* key sphere of modern society – family, civil society, and state – because each sphere gives them access to an essential aspect of modern social membership. This latter idea follows from Hegel's organic conception of the state, according to which family, civil society, and government are the necessary

articulations of politically ordered society as a whole, so that participation in all three spheres, and self-identification as a member of every one of these spheres, is essential to social membership and to feeling and being at home in modern society. However, this same organic conception of the state implies that each social sphere must have its proper class of representatives, with the family represented by women. Thus Hegel's organic conception of the state does not simply point toward gender equality, but has egalitarian and anti-egalitarian implications which are in some tension with one another, and where Hegel on the whole – especially in regard to women – pursues the latter. I argue, then, that Hegel's view of women is not merely a contingent result of prejudice on his part, but follows from a core element of his political philosophy, namely his organic conception of the state. But this does not mean that Hegel's philosophy is simply irremediably sexist and must be left behind, since that philosophy – and indeed the very same element within it, the organic view of the state – also has inherent egalitarian implications.

In connecting Hegel's patriarchal views on women to his organic conception of the state, I may seem to be lending support to the many previous critics of that conception, of whom Karl Popper is perhaps the most (in)famous. The worry is that the organic conception of the state is proto-totalitarian, allocating individuals to fixed "stations" within the social whole and so denying them liberty and equality. I do not endorse this criticism; rather, Hegel's organic conception points both toward *and* away from equality (particularly but not only in respect of gender). Moreover, these tensions are internal not to the organic *concept* of the state as such but to Hegel's specific *conception* of the political organism on the model of the animal organism. In his *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel affirms the superiority of animal to plant nature on the grounds that it is only in animal organisms that all parts are fully subordinated to the whole. In contrast, he maintains that in plant organisms each part directly reproduces or contains the whole within itself, rather than being decisively subordinated to playing one specific role within the whole. If we reverse Hegel's natural hierarchy and take plant nature as our model, then we can reimagine political society in more thoroughly egalitarian – and gender-egalitarian – terms than Hegel does. I will explore this by turning to the political use that the early German Romantics made of the plant model.

My aim, then, is neither to discredit the organic concept of the state nor to suggest that Hegel's particular organic conception should automatically be dismissed. Instead, I wish to open up discussion about the political

meanings and merits of different organic conceptions, which are not necessarily illiberal. Moreover, by reflecting on this issue we can illuminate one way in which Hegel's political thought is systematically connected to his philosophy of nature – something almost entirely neglected in Hegel scholarship.

2 The Organic State and Individual Freedom

Critics of Hegel, such as Popper in *The Open Society*, have seen him as the arch-proponent of an organic and totalitarian state. Supposedly, he values the freedom only of the state as a whole and not of individuals, whom he subordinates to the state, allocating to each individual a fixed place in a range of “stations” chosen by the state according to its needs. At the same time Hegel allegedly misdescribes individuals as attaining freedom through this subordination, on the grounds that this subordination makes individuals into the parts of an organic political whole, a whole that is free qua organic, and from which freedom flows down into the parts – so that individuals become free just by taking up their social stations. The doctrine of the organic state is, then, supposedly merely the mystifying wrapping around a totalitarian core. (I take it that this is the core of Popper's complaint against Hegel – to the extent that one can discern a coherent argument in his invective. See Popper 1945: vol. 2, esp. pp. 31–45.)

That the totalitarian picture of Hegel is wrong has been abundantly shown by scores of interpreters, who have established that individual freedom – in multiple aspects – is one of the fundamental values on which Hegel's political philosophy is based. The *rechtliche Staat*, for Hegel, is one that realizes individual freedom. Yet so much emphasis recently has fallen on Hegel's liberal commitment to individual freedom that the ways in which he does nonetheless regard the rational state as organic – something manifested in the abundant references to the state as organism which pepper the *Philosophy of Right*¹ – have come to be largely ignored. In turn, some scholars, including Frederick Neuhouser (2003) and Nathan Ross (2008), have begun to correct this,² arguing that Hegel conceives of the organic state in a way that is compatible with his commitment to individual freedom.³

How, then, does Hegel reconcile these commitments? Very schematically: Hegel begins the *Philosophy of Right* by taking free will to be the ability to choose which to pursue from the set of one's individual desires or

of the available courses of action (PR §11, p. 45). The condition of an individual's exercising this ability, for Hegel, is that they own private property – enjoying rights over a range of material objects in respect to which they can embody and realize their freedom. But property-ownership is possible only if different individuals recognize and respect one another's property (§71, p. 102). This mutual recognition and respect amongst property-owners can reliably be achieved only if they respect one another not merely when it benefits them to do so but out of genuine respect for the rights of others. That is, individual freedom in Hegel's first sense – which Neuhausser calls “personal freedom” – requires that individuals be moral subjects, capable of recognizing and acting on moral principles and obligations: personal freedom requires the further *moral* freedom to legislate moral principles to oneself (Neuhausser 2008: 205–206). However, the latter will not constitute a form of freedom if it is experienced as mere subjection to moral law: moral *freedom* can be such only if it is reconciled with personal freedom, that is, in case individuals desire to do what morality demands. This requires that they undergo a moral education, by virtue of living amongst appropriate social institutions which cultivate their emotional and practical dispositions to align with moral requirements (§153, p. 196) – so that individuals want what is in the common good as well as their own individual goods.

These educative institutions, which make up *Sittlichkeit*, are the family, civil society, and the strictly political state – what Michael Wolff calls the “constitutionally organized set of political powers” to legislate, execute, and decide (2007: 298). The family educates us to renounce our exclusively individual interests entirely and to embrace the whole family's common good; the family does this by drawing out the rational, universal, dimensions that are embodied in individuals' immediate feelings of love. Civil society continues the educative work by leading citizens to embrace the common purposes pursued by legal and public authorities and by the corporations – although generally these are still seen as common in a deficient sense, either as being common merely to all individuals as single agents or as being common only to those with a shared economic vocation. The state completes the educative work by bringing us to embrace the common good in the genuine sense and by regulating and organizing the family and civil society so that they lead us toward and not away from this embrace of the common good. In this respect the state overarches family and civil society so as to become politically organized society as a whole. Thus nested within one another, these three spheres educate us to want what

morality requires and they thereby provide the conditions of our individual (moral and personal) freedom.

However, this reconstruction presents *Sittlichkeit* as merely instrumental for individual freedom. But, for Hegel, securing the conditions for individual freedom *transforms* the kinds of freedom that individuals enjoy and appreciate. It gives them a further freedom: to participate in, and to reproduce through their own activity, social institutions that flow out of and reflect the particular identities that they have acquired *as* members of those institutions, that is, as family members, *Bürger*, and citizens. Personal and moral freedom are possible only within this new form of freedom. But what makes this a form of *freedom* at all? As Michael Hardimon (1994: ch. 3) has shown, in a society that enabled individuals to be free only as individuals, what Hegel regards as a fundamental need of individuals would remain unfulfilled, namely their need to feel (as well as to be) at home in the social world. For this, individuals need to be able to participate in social institutions, to act according to the roles available within those institutions, and to affirm these roles as both constituting and expressing their own self-identities, rather than experiencing them as externally constraining or burdensome. This form of freedom – “subjective social freedom,” as Neuhouser calls it (2008: 214) – is a fundamental part of freedom, of being self-determining rather than acting from externally imposed constraints.

Now, Hegel further maintains that the rational state as a whole must *itself* be free and self-determining, and that for this it must be organically structured. How does he reach these seemingly bizarre conclusions? For him, the overall purpose of political society is to reconcile people's sense of having individual interests (of individual difference) with commitment to the collective good and the good of others (a sense of unity with others or of universality). This is the internal end or *telos* of political society. But to fulfill its purpose, the social order must be differentiated into family, civil society, and the political powers that overarch and organize these, because each of these *differentiae* corresponds to or embodies a distinct “moment” of the individual–universal spectrum the extremes of which are to be reconciled. The family embodies and fosters “immediate unity” between individuals; civil society embodies and fosters individual “difference”; and the political state reconciles the two by embodying and fostering “mediated unity” between individuals (Neuhouser 2003: 133; this terminology derives from Taylor 1975). Why are exactly *these* three moments those through which the reconciliation of the poles must be achieved? Because Hegel's general method of overcoming oppositions, or of reconciling their poles, is not

to deny the existence of the opposed poles but to show that each pole requires the other as the necessary condition of its own existence, so that the two prove to be united within a broader structure that encompasses them both. Thus, for the individual/universal opposition to be resolved, there must be a sphere embodying sheer universality (the family, in which all commitment to isolated individual interests is abandoned), another sphere embodying sheer difference (the apparent free-for-all of civil society), and a third sphere reconciling and overarching the previous two.

Politically organized society thus differentiates itself into distinct subsystems in accordance with its intrinsic purpose. As Charles Taylor puts it, this state articulates itself according to a necessary plan (1975: 438). It self-determines. In so doing, it simultaneously organizes itself organically. An organism is an entity that has its own purposes – chiefly self-preservation, development, and reproduction – and that articulates itself into specialized subsystems which interlock so that they fulfill these purposes (*EM* §381A, pp. 9–10). An organism is self-determining because it unfolds into a coherent system in accordance with its *own*, inbuilt, purpose or plan. And so Hegel declares that: “As living spirit, the state exists only as an organized whole, differentiated into particular functions which proceed from the single concept . . . of the rational will and continually produce it as their result” (§539, p. 265).

In describing the state as an organized whole, Hegel is not simply taking the organism to furnish a handy metaphor for the state. He believes that the rightly organized state *really has* the structure of an organism: self-differentiation into articulations each serving a function within the whole. “The state *is* an organism, that is the development of the Idea in its differences” (*PR* §269A, p. 290; emphasis added; on the non-metaphorical status of Hegel’s organic language, see also Wolff 2007: 312). This idea that states can really be organisms may seem strange, but it relies on Hegel’s particular understanding of organisms as self-organizing systems (which descends from Kant’s third *Critique*, especially his conception at §65 of that work of a *Naturzweck* – a purposively organized natural system).

These metaphysical beliefs of Hegel’s feed into his political philosophy, but they do not contradict his support for individual freedom. Rather, for Hegel, the organic state acts from the purpose of reconciling individual freedom (in its various forms) with social membership, so that a commitment to individual freedom is built into this state – even as it incorporates individual freedom into social freedom, the freedom to be a social member and to be at home in society. This incorporation is intended to preserve

individual freedom whilst also satisfying our need for reconciliation with the social world. But we might still wonder whether this scheme allows for individual freedom to be fully realized. This question arises particularly in relation to Hegel's treatment of women.

3 Tensions in the Organic Model: For and Against Sex Equality

On the face of it, the organic conception of society seems to imply that everyone ought to be permitted to participate in all three spheres of modern *Sittlichkeit*, because each sphere gives its participants access to an essential aspect of membership in a modern society. Neuhaus spells this implication out very clearly:

the idea of [an organic] social world not only specifies the necessary internal structure of the three basic institutions . . . but also gives an account of the different kinds of *identities* required of individuals if they are to participate freely in such institutions. Focusing on the latter point suggests that Hegel's demonstration of the [organic] structure of *Sittlichkeit* includes the claim that the modern social world is rational (in part) because it allows its members to develop and express different, complementary types of identities, each of which is indispensable to realizing the complete range of relations to others (and to self) that are . . . worthy of achieving. On this view, then, to lack membership in any of the three basic institutions would be to miss out on an important part of what it is to be a fully realized (individual) self. (2003: 140)

Apparently, then, the organic view of society entails that women *and* men alike ought to be able to participate fully in family, civil society, and state.

Admittedly, merely formally opening civil society and state up to women is not enough to ensure that they can really participate in these realms as fully as men, as has become apparent in our own time. If within the family women remain the presumptive care-givers while men remain the presumptive breadwinners, then women's care-giving role will continue informally to limit their possibilities for participation in paid work and politics, and will impose on women a double burden of care-giving and paid work. A necessary condition of real sex equality is a complete redistribution of care-giving work. And we might think that it is another logical consequence of Hegel's organic conception that this redistribution ought to take

place. For if each individual ought to be able to participate fully in all spheres of social life, then men ought, as well as having access to civil society and state, also to participate in the family just as fully as women: that is, men ought to embrace the communal spirit of family life as a vocation (although not the only one) and so to undertake an equal share of domestic responsibilities. More precisely, as Edward Halper (2001) explains: as Hegel divides up the roles of husband and wife, husbands will the family unity primarily as a “universal” – as an individual case of marriage in its general concept, understood to be rational and necessary – while wives will that unity primarily as an “individual,” that is, they will this particular instance of marriage (albeit implicitly as an instance of the general type). Each party also wills the material activities necessary to sustain the marriage under the particular mode in which they will it: thus wives do the material work of caring for the constituent members of the family, while husbands act on behalf of the family unit (*as a unit*) within the wider world. But if in fact Hegel’s organic vision implies that each party ought to have access to both dimensions of participation in family life, then both wives and husbands ought to will and materially support the family in both respects.

Hegel, of course, draws no such inference. On one view, this is just because the prejudices he inherited from his time prevented him from thinking through the sex-egalitarian implications of his own ideas. Deranty defends this view. He emphasizes that, according to Hegel, women are free individuals and all persons are fundamentally equal. Yet, Deranty objects, Hegel illogically restricts women’s freedom, dividing sex roles on the basis of (1) biology – when on his own terms society ought to be structured in accordance with the concept, not nature – and (2) experience, empirical acquaintance with the patriarchal division of gender roles (Deranty 2000: 155) – when on Hegel’s own terms society ought to be structured by reason, not by sheer empirical givens.

Perhaps, then, his organic conception should have directed Hegel to support sex equality. Yet other considerations suggest (*pace* Deranty for whom Hegel’s sex division of roles is illogical by his own criteria) that the organic conception leads Hegel to support this sex division. As Allen Wood puts it, for Hegel “differentiated institutions require a social differentiation among individuals. Each principle must have its proper representative and guardian” (1990: 244). Each organic social function (unity, difference, mediated unity) requires its specialized sphere or institution; and each sphere or institution requires a particular class of individuals to be permanently based in and responsible for its material and spiritual maintenance. After all,

each of an organism's purposive functions is realized by a specific subsystem within it – digestion by the digestive system, sexual reproduction by the reproductive system, and so on. And each functional subsystem is embodied in a particular range of organs: the stomach, bowels, etc. within the digestive system; the gonads, genitals, etc. within the reproductive system. Certain material parts of the organism are taken over by the purposes of the organism as a whole, and shaped in their very material configuration so that they serve those purposes. What would otherwise be formless, undifferentiated matter becomes a range of functionally organized, highly differentiated, and specialized organs. Similarly, then, Hegel supposes that each social sphere must be maintained by a dedicated set of people who serve as its “organs” or functionaries: what would otherwise be a formless, undifferentiated mass of individuals (a mere aggregate) is subdivided into distinct classes of specialized functionaries each with a determinate social role. Thus Hegel writes that:

The actual Idea is the spirit which divides itself up into the two ideal spheres of its concept – the family and civil society – as its finite mode . . . In so doing, it allocates the material of its finite actuality, that is individuals as a *mass*, to these two spheres. (PR §262, p. 285)

Charles Taylor (1975: ch. 16) identifies the same principle at work in much of the *Philosophy of Right*, such as Hegel's subdivision of civil society into the agricultural, business, and civil service classes (which replicates within civil society the broader division into unity, difference, and mediated unity). In choosing a line of work, each individual takes up a position within the complex whole, rather than falsely pretending to be able to realize the whole totality directly within themselves. Similarly Hegel introduces subdivisions into the political state, and within its estates assembly he has the representatives of the business class appointed by the corporations, thus opposing both universal suffrage and direct democracy. Appointment is through the corporations so that representatives can play their political role as members of an articulated economic structure, not as sheer individuals; and so that those who appoint them can also do so qua participants in corporations, in terms of their economic roles and identities, not as sheer individual atoms. As for the agricultural class, they are represented only by the unappointed landed aristocracy. Consequently, Hegel says, “in our modern states, the citizens have only a limited share in the universal business of the state” (PR §255A, p. 273). Just as women represent the

family and may not advance beyond it, most *Bürger* and all of the peasantry represent civil society and may not advance beyond it to the political level as such. The organic model now appears to support a series of hierarchical social stratifications – of which women’s confinement to the family is merely an instance. Far from being illogical, then, that confinement now seems to be an eminently logical consequence of Hegel’s organic approach.

We may still think that Hegel’s particular argument for women’s place in the family makes illegitimate reference to mere nature. For presumably the reason why women and not men are deemed to be the rightful representatives of the family sphere is because of women’s reproductive biology and functions. But matters are more complex than this. In a rational state, the division in gender roles does not result merely from biological sex difference as such but from the state’s elevation of that biological difference into the basis of a functional differentiation between citizens, a functional differentiation which, as we’ve seen, is itself rationally necessary so as to raise the citizens to the status of being members of an organic whole rather than leaving them as a heap of atoms. Thus, Hegel writes:

The *natural* determinacy of the two sexes acquires an *intellectual* and *ethical* significance by virtue of its rationality. This significance is determined by the difference into which the ethical substantiality, as the concept in itself, divides itself up in order that its vitality may thereby achieve a concrete unity. (§165, p. 206)

The “ethical substance” of the rational state needs to achieve a unity at once concrete and vital – that is, organic. This requires that this state “divide itself up” into two functional roles corresponding to family versus civil society. In turn, each role must be assumed by a determinate set of representatives. Here natural sex difference, which would otherwise have merely contingent practical consequences but no intrinsic ethical significance, comes into play as a basis on which to assign roles. This role difference gives ethical meaning – sociopolitical purpose – to natural sex difference, converting what would otherwise be its merely practical consequences into rational functions of the state. Accordingly, Hegel speaks of women’s female (*weibliche*) nature becoming the basis of the sociopolitical identity of woman as wife and mother (*Frau*). Women’s biological nature does not *cause* them to become wives and mothers (so, *pace* Deranty, Hegel does not wrongly biologize spirit). Rather, women’s nature “acquires”

(*erhält*), or “receives” (§165, p. 206), the new significance of a domestic role when that nature is enfolded by the purposes of the state.⁴

Overall, then, the organic conception of society points both toward equality, including sex equality, *and* against it, toward the rightfulness of social hierarchies, where it is generally the latter implication that Hegel pursued.⁵ I now want to argue that the source of this tension in Hegel’s thought is not his organic concept of the state per se but his particular *conception* of it.

4 Animal State, Vegetal State: Hegel versus Early German Romanticism

Hegel’s confinement of women to the family, as we’ve seen, follows from his principle that each social sphere requires a specific class of people to represent it – just as each functional subsystem within an organism requires a specific set of organs to embody it. Functional specialization of this kind is for Hegel intrinsic to the structure of organisms, political or natural. If it is intrinsic to organisms, though, it achieves full realization only in *animal* organisms – which for Hegel are the highest form of organic life, surpassing the other two forms, the earth (mineral life) and plants (vegetable life).

What makes animal life so excellent? Hegel does not actually see the earth as properly alive at all; he calls it “self-alienated life.” As for the plant, he complains that here “the objective organism and its subjectivity are still immediately identical” (*EN* §343, p. 303). The plant

is not as yet . . . the articulated system of its members . . . It unfolds its parts; but since these members are essentially the whole subject, there is no further differentiation of the plant; leaves, root, stem, are themselves only individuals. Since the reality which the plant produces . . . is completely identical to it, it does not develop authentic members [*Glieder*⁶]. (*EN* §337A, 276)

The whole of the plant is directly contained in each of its parts. That is, the entire set of functions specified by the whole is in principle performed by each part. It may seem that the parts of plants are functionally differentiated: leaves absorb light, roots absorb moisture, stems distribute water and sap, etc. But each part can, if cut from the whole, take on any of the other functions and undergo a transformation in its material structure to support

this. Branches, for instance, can be cut off and planted to become roots from which new plants grow. In an animal, in contrast, the whole organism so completely masters its manifold parts and adapts their materiality to its purposes that those parts become materially incapable of taking on another function if removed from the whole. As Hegel likes to say (following Aristotle), a hand cut from a body ceases to be a hand. The hand cannot regenerate a new body from within itself, so thoroughly has it been made into the material of its function. But the parts of plants are not so mastered by the unity of the whole plant as to serve as organs of one and only one function. Instead, each part contains within itself the potential to perform any number of functions, even if circumstances dictate that one of these functions predominates in it at some given time. Because plants exhibit a level of functional specialization, they meet Hegel's criterion for being organic, but their manifold parts are not completely subordinated to their general functions as they should be according to the concept of an organism. For this reason, Hegel complains that plants grow by simple addition of more and more identical parts – identical, in principle, because each alike contains the same potential for the same set of functions. Plants grow not by qualitative development but mere quantitative proliferation.⁷

Evidently, underpinning Hegel's conception of the political organism is the idea that its organic form is animal, not vegetal. But what might a state be like that was modeled on the plant instead? Presumably, in such a state, each individual would have to contain within themselves at least the potential for participating in every social sphere, and which sphere they specialized in – and to what extent they specialized in it – would be a matter of contingency and might change over time. But to contain these multiple potentials, individuals would have in addition to their specializations to have some level of access to all spheres. *All* social spheres would be realized in each individual to some extent at least.

This intriguing possibility of a “vegetal state” is not as whimsical as it might seem. We can explore it further with reference to the political writings of the early German Romantics. They share Hegel's commitment to an organic state – but for them, the model of the organism is the plant rather than the animal. In fact this privileging of the plant applies across all areas of their work (see Miller 2001). Friedrich Schlegel remarks in 1799 that: “The highest, most complete life would be nothing other than *pure vegetating*” (1991: 66). He also states that “The *world* as a whole, and originally, is a plant” (1958–: vol. 18, 151) – by which he meant that the universe is a self-differentiating organic whole whose manner of self-differentiation is that of

the plant: this whole develops endlessly, never reaching a point of closure, but forever progressing to higher and higher levels of organization. The same plant model underpins the fragmentary literary form beloved of the Romantics, a form that reflects their belief that a philosophical system can exist only as a sequence of interconnected fragments. Yet despite their interconnection, each fragment is a whole unto itself: "A fragment . . . has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine" (Schlegel 1991: 189). This is because each fragment contains within itself the potential to become each of the others: it contains all the others *in nuce* and thus crystallizes the entire system within itself – again like each part of a plant as Hegel saw it. Thus, Schlegel – who here as elsewhere may be taken as representative of Jena Romantic thought more broadly – conceives the plant in similar terms to Hegel, but valorizes it positively because of its fragmentation and open-ended development. This reassessment of the plant is bound up with early Romantic political thinking about the ideal of an organic state.

This Romantic ideal has often been seen as politically reactionary. But in their youth the Romantics ardently embraced the ideals of the French Revolution and, despite growing reservations in view of the Terror, they continued throughout the 1790s to support the Revolution's basic principles (see Beiser 1996: xiv). This specifically *early* German Romantic political thinking is my focus here. Admittedly, none of the Romantics developed their political thinking to the level of systematicity and sophistication we find in Hegel. Their political ideas are expressed largely in fragmentary and exploratory form. Even so, instructive contrast with Hegel is possible.

The Romantics opposed the so-called "machine-state," the paternalist, enlightened absolutist state which took its purpose to be the provision of security and the satisfaction of individuals' material needs (a view of the state upheld by influential theorists of the time, such as Christian Wolff; see Ross 2008: 12). But in opposing this kind of state the Romantics did not, generally, oppose the state *per se*. Some did: Wilhelm von Humboldt's opposition to the machine-state led him to advocate what we now call a minimal state (see Humboldt 1969); and the author of the "Earliest System-Programme of German Idealism" – variously identified as Hölderlin, Schelling, or the young Hegel – declares that: "We must . . . go beyond the state! For every state must treat free human beings as if they were cogs in a machine; but that it should not do; therefore it should *cease* to exist" (Beiser 1996: 4; emphasis original). On the whole, though, the Romantics

proposed instead a different, organic, kind of state,⁸ which does not dominate other spheres of social life from the outside but instead permeates and animates them from within. The organic state must therefore self-differentiate into these manifold social spheres; and within each sphere, political participation and common will arise immanently, “elevating us” (as Schleiermacher puts it) to embrace the unity of the state as a whole. Civil life is not to be set free from the state, but to become the organ *of* the self-differentiating state, so that politics and orientation to the common good pervade all areas of daily life, leaving no footholds for atomistic individualism. For individuals to be fully free – rather than being dominated by the state as an external limitation on their activity – they need to be able to find the state to be their home, flowing out of their own activities and identities; this requires that political participation run through the entirety of social life. The Romantics saw this ideal as that of a “true republicanism,” in which there is a “general participation in the state” (Beiser 1996: 47).

To see how these thoughts relate to the Romantic privileging of the plant model, we can turn to Novalis’s controversial 1798 essay “Faith and Love; or, The King and Queen.” On first reading, Novalis here seems to be proposing a renewal of a (highly idealized) feudal monarchy – the essay was occasioned by and appeared to celebrate the coronation of the new Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm III and his wife. But, as Novalis indicates in his prefatory comments on cryptic language, he is covertly using the idealized royal couple whom he eulogizes here as a symbol of a possible future organic state, which might be monarchical, aristocratic, or democratic, but where the key issue is not its “indifferent form” but its organic or “republican” essence (see Novalis 1960–1988: vol. 2, 503). Moreover, Novalis covertly situates this kind of state as something the coming of which has been made possible by the French Revolution (see O’Brien 1995: 169–171). The idealized royal couple provides a model of felt commitment to the common good, a model that permeates and inspires all of society, Novalis suggests: “It is a great mistake of our states that one sees so little of the state. The state should be visible everywhere, and every person should be marked as its citizen. Can not badges and uniforms be introduced everywhere?” (Beiser 1996: 40) Although these remarks by Novalis have been criticized as proto-totalitarian, they are surely meant to be a humorous illustration of the idea that attachment to the common good is not to be separate from but to run through all dimensions of social life. The idea, then, is not that most people are to participate in political affairs only indirectly via economic life, but that through economic life everyone is to become educated to become an

active participant in politics and the state too, as irreducible to but permeating civil society. The vegetal model is at work: each member – each individual agent – is directly to contain, and to realize to at least some degree, the potential for political activity as well as for economic activity (after making the above claims, Novalis compares this ideal state to “a new plant”). These radical ideas, however, are disguised, not to say distorted, by Novalis’s monarchical symbol, since the monarchy that he envisages makes no structures available to enable people’s active political participation (and so we have to question Novalis’s claim that the “form” of the republican state is a matter of indifference).

The vegetal model also shapes Novalis’s thinking about women and the family in this essay, although, again, a tension emerges between its radical implications and its distorted conservative presentation. Novalis sees the family, too, as a sphere which is to give rise directly to political participation: each household is modeled on that of the royal couple whose household is organized by commitment to the common good, and, Novalis writes:

by such means one could ennoble daily life through the king and queen as the ancients once did with their gods. Then there was a genuine religiosity through the constant mixture of the divine in daily life. Now a genuine patriotism can emerge through the constant interweaving of the royal couple in domestic and public life. (Beiser 1996: 44)

If the family is to be a sphere through which individuals can be directly raised into political activity and identification with the common good, then equally the state – as symbolized by the royal couple – has to have its *own*, internal, domestic aspect that descends into and arises out of family life. This is the queen’s domain: the domestic life of the entire nation, encompassing the education of women and children, pastoral care for “the sick and poor,” and matters of sex and personal morality. For Novalis, then, there must be a king *and queen* – as his essay title indicates – because the organic political sphere must expand into a domestic aspect so that participation in domestic life, especially by women, can reciprocally rise to political participation. Evidently, in making these claims, Novalis accepts women’s domestic vocation. On the other hand, when he suggests that all women are to emulate the queen, hence – non-cryptically – to participate in the (pastoral side of the) life of the state, he implicitly suggests that women ought to be full participants in the state and that their domestic role is to feed into this.

Women's domestic role is not to be merely private or privatizing but to expand into broader social concerns. Rather than seeing women's domestic role as excluding them from the state, as Hegel does, Novalis sees this role as compatible with women's participation in the state insofar as that state, as an organism, intrinsically differentiates itself into a pastoral side.

However, cutting short this potentially radical idea, Novalis suggests that the state's pastoral side is not actually political after all: "The queen has indeed no political sphere of influence, but she does have a domestic one" (Beiser 1996: 42). Yet her supposedly merely domestic pastoral realm is part of the state, on his own account: it is an intrinsic self-differentiation within the organic state. In denying that the queen's – and by extension all women's – roles are political, Novalis contradicts his own organic conception of the state. Whereas Hegel's exclusion of women from politics has roots in his organic conception and so does not merely reflect the prejudices of his time, Novalis's exclusion of women from politics contradicts his organic view and thus *does* reflect merely the prejudices of his era.

Because of his vegetal model, Novalis suggests that each individual is to be raised into direct political activity by their participation in either economic or family life. However, we can now see that he divides participation in those last two spheres by sex: family life and pastoral political work for women, for men civil life and direct participation in government. On this point again Novalis fails to pursue his own vegetal model of the state consistently. Since under that model each individual is to be raised through their everyday activities and self-identifications to "*general* participation in the state," as Novalis puts it, each individual should have full access to both family and economic activity and identities and to the forms of political activity and self-identification arising from each. When pursued consistently, the vegetal model pushes toward sex equality.

From Hegel's standpoint, a vegetal state would be defective. It would involve a merely immediate union of individual citizens with the state as a whole, rather than their mediated union by way of nested hierarchies. Yet that latter form of union is in some tension with Hegel's own idea of social membership which also flows from his organic conception of the state. We could resolve this tension in Hegel's thought by rethinking the organic state along vegetal rather than animal lines. Even if the resulting kind of state would contain more immediacy than Hegel would have liked, offsetting this is the fact that this kind of state would enable all individuals to achieve full social membership and thus would be more fully their home.

Notes

1. See for instance PR §200R, p. 234; §267, p. 288; §269, p. 290; §279, pp. 316–321.
2. Franz Grégoire (1996) also emphasizes that Hegel understands the state as organic in a sense that includes individual autonomy. Likewise, Charles Taylor (1975) stresses Hegel's organicism within his reading of Hegel as a specifically communitarian liberal, while Michael Wolff (2007) argues that Hegel's organic conception of the state has not only political but also epistemological roots in his idea of *Wissenschaft* (science/systematic knowledge) as the understanding of methodically self-unfolding wholes. Another recent (brief) re-examination of Hegel's organicism is Lambier 2008.
3. To be precise, Ross argues this only apropos of Hegel's Jena political writings (the *Natural Law* essay and the *System of Ethical Life*), in which, he maintains, Hegel argues that the most genuinely organic state integrates into itself the mechanism of civil society, which it regulates and organizes; such a state thus includes bourgeois freedoms, rather than excludes them as did the ancient Greek *polis*. But Ross argues that in the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel adopts a different view of the state as an "absolute mechanism" (a concept derived from Hegel's *Logic* where it primarily applies to the solar system): a set of mechanisms which regulates civil society. This, it seems to me, incorrectly reduces the Hegelian state to what Hegel describes as its "ethical root" within civil society (PR §255, p. 272), namely that sphere's regulatory and legal institutions plus the corporations.
4. I examine at greater length how Hegel thinks about nature and spirit in relation to gender division, and how he understands women's biological nature, in Stone 2010.
5. Neuhouser argues, however, that over time Hegel increasingly favored "the right of all (male) individuals to participate in social life as a family member, as the practitioner of a socially productive occupation, and as a citizen all at once" as a condition of full social membership (2003: 141–142). That is, Hegel understood organicism more and more in egalitarian terms, and so, Neuhouser suggests, the fact that Hegel nonetheless remained supportive of the patriarchal family shows that this support was merely an accidental consequence of sexism and was not held on philosophical grounds. But we could equally argue the reverse: that Hegel remained supportive of patriarchy indicates that he did not consistently go over to construing organicism in egalitarian terms. Moreover, there need be no conflict for Hegel between the ideas that most male individuals are limited to civil society *and* that they participate in social life both as *Bürger* and as citizens – for they achieve a limited, but still real, level of participation as citizens *just by* participating in the corporate life of civil society (through which they contribute to appointing representatives to the estates assembly).

6. *Glied* is Hegel's term for a limb or organ as an articulation within a fully realized organic system.
7. Hegel is drawing extensively on Goethe's 1790 *Metamorphosis of Plants*. Goethe identified how the parts of plants could assume one another's functions and thus metamorphose into one another, and he identified this as the principle of plant growth. Thus, he argued that the universal, common principle in a plant is not unitary form or structure but metamorphosis itself, as process, of which the different parts are more or less transitory manifestations. However, Goethe evaluates this metamorphic character of plants positively, whereas Hegel regards it as indicative of their inferiority to animals. See Miller 2001, esp. pp. 53–56.
8. Thus Schleiermacher inveighs against views like Humboldt's: "Whoever thus regards the most splendid work of art of humanity [the state], which elevates it to the highest level of its being, as merely . . . an indispensable mechanism . . . , must feel as only a restriction that which is designed to secure him the highest degree of life" (Beiser 1996: 192). (The artwork counts here as paradigm of a self-determining organic whole.)

Abbreviations

- PR *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet. Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- EM *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.
- EN *Philosophy of Nature*, trans. A. V. Miller. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970.

Translations have occasionally been amended without special notice in light of Hegel 1969–1972.

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