



# Hegel and Feminist Philosophy

KIMBERLY HUTCHINGS

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*Kimberly Hutchings*

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# Hegel and Feminist Philosophy

*This book is dedicated to the memory of  
Gillian Rose 1947-95*

## *Preface*

This is a relatively short book, but it is the product of a very long gestation period. I first encountered the work of Hegel as a post-graduate student twenty years ago. At the time at which I first read Hegel, I was already a feminist but it did not occur to me that there could be any philosophical relation between my feminism and Hegel's thought, of either a positive or negative kind. It was almost a decade later before I became aware that to many feminist philosophers, feminism and Hegelianism were antithetical mutually exclusive philosophical positions. From that time I have been preoccupied with the question of what kind of sense I can make of my own commitment to both feminism and Hegelianism. This is a question which clearly entails reflection on the meaning of both terms and therefore opens up many more questions connected to ongoing debates about what it means to be either a Hegelian or a feminist. Writing this book gave me the chance to reflect on these questions more thoroughly and systematically and to offer an account of how and why I think Hegel can be a useful resource for feminists. I am profoundly grateful to have been given this opportunity. However, I remain aware that what I offer is an understanding of Hegelian and feminist philosophy that many feminist and other philosophers would contest with vigour. According to my own reading of Hegel's account of the claims of philosophers, what follows in this book is a reflection of my own partial self-understanding, which may or may not invoke recognition in the reader. I am conscious in particular of the irony that the most significant influence on my study of Hegel's work, Gillian Rose, would have been highly unlikely to identify with my perception of the need to defend Hegelianism both against and on behalf of feminist

philosophy. Nevertheless, it is to her memory that this book is dedicated.

I would like to record my thanks to the two anonymous readers of the manuscript of this book. They pointed out many unclarities and errors in my analysis and there is no doubt that it is a much better book as a consequence of their intervention. Thanks are also due to Polity Press, both for giving me the opportunity to write the book and for patience in the face of delays in its completion. The actual writing of the book had to be done in my spare time over the past three years. I am therefore deeply grateful for the understanding and support of my friends and family during a very stressful time; without them the Owl of Minerva would definitely never have got off the ground. Needless to say, any errors in the text which follows are my responsibility alone.

Kimberly Hutchings  
Edinburgh

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# *Introduction*

In this book I examine the philosophical connections and debates between Hegelian thought and feminist philosophy. Hegel is a significant reference point for many feminist philosophers and there is already a considerable body of feminist scholarship which engages with Hegel. However, it is not my intention simply to catalogue ways in which Hegel figures in different feminist philosophical arguments. Over and above this, I seek to demonstrate that Hegel's thought has something to contribute to significant philosophical arguments within feminism over sexual difference, epistemology and moral and political theory.<sup>1</sup> The fulfilment of this aim clearly requires both the articulation of a particular perspective within feminist philosophy and a specific interpretation of Hegel's thought. Feminist philosophy is not a uniform body of thought and my characterization of feminist debates will reflect a perspective which some feminist philosophers would want to reject. Similarly, my interpretation of Hegel is a contestable, left-Hegelian one with which other feminist philosophers and Hegelian scholars will disagree.<sup>2</sup> This means that the persuasiveness of any of the arguments which follow depends on the extent to which readers recognize and identify with the kind of feminist philosophy and the kind of Hegelian philosophy which I seek to articulate and defend. I should make it clear at the outset, however, that I am not arguing that Hegel himself was in any sense a feminist. It is patently obvious from his own remarks on sexual difference that, even in the context of his own time, Hegel's attitude to women was patriarchal and at times misogynist. If Hegel's work is useful to feminist philosophers it is in spite of his own ideological position on the 'woman question'.<sup>3</sup>

Hegel famously complained of the inability of Prefaces or Introductions to accomplish the intellectual journey on which a book is designed to take a reader. In line with this complaint, in this Introduction I can only assert as an abstract promise claims about feminist philosophy and Hegel which the argument of the book as a whole will be concerned to redeem. At the heart of my argument is the claim that Hegel is battling with the same conceptual conundrum which is constitutive of feminist philosophy within the Western tradition. This is the conundrum of how to escape the conceptual binary oppositions (between culture and nature, reason and emotion, autonomy and heteronomy, universal and particular, ideal and real) which have associated women with the denigrated term and prescribed the exclusion of women from the practices of both philosophy and politics. As I expound it, feminist philosophy can be defined as a project to think the world differently, but one which is forever prey to a tendency to lapse back into the terms it is seeking to transcend. This is particularly clear in debates internal to feminist philosophy, in which the difficulty of 'thinking differently' becomes apparent in feminist characterizations of opposing positions. I argue that Hegel prefigures the reductive pattern of internal philosophical debates within feminism in his account of the temptations of modern thought to lapse into one-sidedness and exclusivity in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Science of Logic*. In addition, I argue that Hegel provides a resource for resisting the temptations of modernist transcendence, through his insistence on the inseparability of being from truth and his historicization of both being and truth. Having made this argument, I put forward an account of its implications for feminist ontology, epistemology and moral and political theory. The later part of the book attempts to show how a Hegelian feminism would respond to contemporary feminist debates about knowledge, morality and politics.

The argument which follows is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 puts forward an account of feminist philosophy as a response to the explicit and implicit masculinism of the philosophical tradition. It is claimed that this masculinism is inherent in the hierarchical binary oppositions which have underpinned the conceptual framework of mainstream Western thought. Feminist philosophy is therefore largely preoccupied with developing frameworks for thought which do not repeat the hierarchical binaries of the tradition. An important aspect of feminist attempts to re-think established philosophical conceptual frameworks has been engaging with canonic philosophical texts. Within this engagement I suggest that different pathways for feminist philosophy can be discerned, some of which reject the philosophical

tradition altogether and some of which 'collaborate' with it. On this basis, I distinguish between four different ideal types of feminist philosophy. These ideal types are labelled: *rationalist*; *critical*; *sexual difference*; and *postmodernist*. As with any ideal types, these modes of feminist thought are rarely completely distinguishable in practice, but nevertheless this classification provides a tool for analysing the logic of feminist philosophical debate. I then go on to demonstrate this logic through the examination of three significant areas of feminist philosophical inquiry in epistemology, moral philosophy and political theory. The chapter concludes that feminist philosophy is caught in a struggle with the binary thinking which it aims to overcome yet which it finds difficult to escape. I suggest that this pattern is reminiscent of the 'way of despair' chronicled in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and turn to the exploration of this claim in chapter 2.

Chapter 2 offers an interpretation of Hegel's philosophy as a response to the problems of binary thinking which have been intensified, Hegel argues, in the turn to transcendence which is characteristic of modernity. This is a turn which Hegel associates particularly with Kant's critical philosophy and the principles underpinning the French revolutionary terror. My account of Hegel treats the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Science of Logic* as the key to Hegel's philosophical approach. In addition, it offers a brief exposition of Hegel's philosophies of nature and right which have been important to feminist engagements with Hegel's work. In the final section the argument returns to the domain of feminist philosophy and an overview of the ways in which Hegel's work has been read by feminist thinkers. It is argued that for rationalist feminists, Hegel's work is of limited philosophical interest. However, for critical, sexual difference and postmodernist categories of feminist philosophy Hegel's work has figured as an important interlocutor. This latter claim is the focus of the following chapters, which seek to show both how certain feminist philosophers have used Hegel and how Hegel may be more useful to feminist philosophy than even those who engage constructively with his work generally acknowledge.

In chapter 3, the focus is on the work of Beauvoir and the uneasy relation to Hegelianism in both *Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex*. It is argued that Hegel's account of the emergence of self-conscious being in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* might have been more useful to Beauvoir's argument than is explicit in her texts, if her encounter with Hegel had not been so decisively mediated by the contestable readings of Hegel offered by Sartre and Kojève of the 'struggle for recognition'. I argue that an alternative Hegelianism is

discernible in Beauvoir's phenomenology of women's subject position in *The Second Sex* and the way in which it (women's subject position) figures as an impossible identity of subject and object and of self and other. Chapter 4 explores how the ways in which feminist philosophy moves beyond Beauvoir in critical, sexual difference and postmodernist directions continue to formulate arguments in part in relation to Hegel's work. In Beauvoir's case it is Hegel's story of the emergence of self-consciousness, and in particular of the 'struggle for recognition', which is central to the interpretation and significance of Hegel. For the thinkers explored in chapter 4, Patricia Mills, Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler, it is the story of Sophocles' *Antigone* (both the play and Antigone the character) retold by Hegel in the *Phenomenology* which becomes the crucial point of encounter between feminists and Hegel. In the case of all the feminist philosophers discussed in chapters 3 and 4, the crux of their engagement with Hegel is connected with the way he explains the position of women in his account of the mediation between the realms of nature (organic, animal being) and spirit (self-determination) in the *Phenomenology*. I argue that in each case there are problems with the way in which Hegel is interpreted. These problems are important not simply because Hegel can be interpreted differently, but because they are philosophically significant for the tendency of debates between feminist philosophical positions to return to the logic of the 'way of despair' set out in chapter 1. The last section of chapter 4 fleshes out the claim repeatedly made in the preceding analysis, that my alternative interpretation of Hegelian philosophy can be used as a resource for addressing ongoing debates in feminist philosophy concerned with the ontology of sexual difference and its implications for feminist claims to truth. It is argued that Hegel offers an escape from the 'way of despair' via a radical historicization of accounts of both being and truth.

The argument of chapters 5 and 6 explores the implications of the feminist Hegelianism articulated in chapter 4 for moral and political agency and judgement. Chapter 5 examines the recent trajectory of work in feminist ethics following Gilligan's intervention and the introduction of the idea of an 'ethic of care', with the ensuing debate over 'care' versus 'justice'. A variety of theoretical positions are explored, in particular those of Elisabeth Porter and Rosalind Diprose who represent critical (Porter) and postmodernist (Diprose) modes of feminist philosophy respectively, and who are both concerned to move beyond the care versus justice debate. It is argued that this move entails a radical shift in the ambitions of moral philosophy, which is not fully accomplished by either Porter or Diprose themselves. However,

both Porter and Diprose articulate their own positions partly via a reading of Hegel which is used as a prompt to examine Hegel's critique of what he terms the 'moral point of view' and to assess the extent to which Hegel may be useful in drawing out the implications of the critique of the either/or of care versus justice which Porter and Diprose are anxious to transcend. An account is given of Hegelian ethics, and strong parallels are found between this and the kind of moral philosophy championed by the feminist philosopher Margaret Urban Walker. This approach to moral theory abandons the invocation of a privileged ground for moral judgement and prescription, encouraging the feminist moral philosopher to concentrate on phenomenological adequacy and genealogical honesty in accounting for moral claims and goals. In conclusion, I argue that this kind of development within feminist moral theory does not preclude critique and commitment to transformative political goals, but it does preclude the invocation of a moral high ground as a short cut to definitive judgement and prescription. Crucial to this development is a shift of the ground of authority of moral claims to the relations of recognition between the philosopher, the object of moral concern and the recipients of the philosopher's judgement. This means that moral judgement can never be anything other than risky.

In the course of the exploration of both feminist and Hegelian ethics in chapter 5 it becomes clear that both approaches to moral theory problematize distinctions between the realms of morality and politics. Chapter 6 turns explicitly to feminist political theory and the question of how women's position within the liberal state is to be understood, judged and challenged. The argument focuses on evaluating the contributions to addressing this question in the work of Carole Pateman and Catharine MacKinnon respectively. I argue that there is a fundamental ambiguity in both Pateman's and MacKinnon's arguments about the meaning of what Pateman defines as 'the sexual contract'. In both cases the contract is presented as simultaneously oppressive *and* as offering possibilities for resistance and political transformation. It is argued that Hegel's account of women's position in the modern state in the *Elements of Philosophy of Right* helps to explain the ambiguities diagnosed in Pateman's and MacKinnon's analyses. Moreover, Hegel's argument also helps to articulate a way forward for feminist political philosophy which involves the strategic mobilization of the normative resources of the liberal state. The kinds of practical implications this entails are spelled out in relation to ongoing debates within feminist political theory about conceptions of citizenship and political agency both within and across the boundaries

of the liberal state. The conclusion to the book comprises a brief set of reflections on the characteristics of Hegelian feminism for which the book has been arguing. This is accomplished through examining the commonalities and differences between Hegelian feminism and the other trajectories of feminist philosophy with which the book has been mostly concerned (critical, sexual difference and postmodernist feminisms). The book concludes with the claim that Hegelian feminist philosophy is distinguished by its focus on a phenomenological project of comprehension, by its modesty concerning the status of its own philosophical claims and by a this-worldly ethics and politics.

# 1

## *Feminist Philosophy and the Way of Despair*

### Introduction

Feminist philosophy is preoccupied with a range of common philosophical questions about being and truth, goodness and justice. However, the perspective of feminist philosophy on what is relevant to understanding and addressing this range of questions is distinctive. Feminist philosophers are interested in how sexed or gendered modes of thought have been complicit in constructing the form and substance of questions and answers about being, truth, goodness and justice which are explored in the philosophical tradition.<sup>1</sup> This interest has two dimensions. In the first place, it is an interest in exposing the way in which gender bias operates in mainstream philosophy. In the second place, it is an interest in examining the ways in which understandings (not necessarily articulated) of sex or gender may either help or hinder both philosophical inquiry and the achievement of the goals of feminist politics. In what follows, I will seek to demonstrate certain persistent patterns of feminist philosophical debate. In section 1.1, I examine how feminist philosophy has responded to the modern (post-seventeenth-century) Western philosophical tradition and suggest that we can discern four ideal types of feminist philosophy which emerge from this engagement: *rationalist*, *critical*, *sexual difference* and *postmodernist*. Each of these pathways within feminist philosophy depends on a response to the conceptual framework of mainstream philosophy and its association of female or feminine qualities with the denigrated pair of a mutually exclusive binary opposition. This means that the diverse directions of feminist philosophy hinge on the question of how the categories of 'women', 'sex' and 'gender' are understood. In sections 1.2, 1.3 and



1.4, I trace the implications of these different philosophical routes in debates within feminist philosophy over the conditions of possibility of claims to knowledge, moral and political agency and judgement. It will be argued that what emerges from this overview confirms the ways in which feminist philosophical consciousness is perpetually caught in exposing the inadequacy, but also the apparent inescapability, of the hierarchical binary oppositions in relation to which its thinking is always oriented. This conclusion forms the bridge to chapter 2, in which it will be argued that the patterns of thinking within feminist philosophy display parallels with what Hegel termed the 'way of despair' which consciousness follows in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* and which defines the terms of his own philosophical project (Hegel, 1977: 49).

### 1.1 Thinking as a Feminist

Feminist philosophy in the Western academy begins in reaction to contemporary philosophy and its apparent denial of the relevance of sex and gender to philosophical reason. Feminist philosophers were suspicious of this denial, given the absence of women from the philosophical academy and of concerns particularly relevant to women from the substantive philosophical agenda. The suspicion was that behind this silence and absence lay an actual denigration and consequent exclusion of women from philosophical reason and therefore from the category of the fully human. For feminist philosophers, the re-interpretation of the canonic tradition has been a crucial route into interrogating the way in which presumptions about sex and gender have in fact been complicit in constructing the agenda of modern philosophy. Feminist readers have gone back to trace the appearances of women, sex and gender in the work of canonic thinkers from Plato to Marx in order to uncover the gendered subtext of apparently gender-neutral philosophical thought. Feminist readings of canonic thinkers have brought to light the way in which the binary conceptual oppositions which are central to Western philosophy are also gendered, with certain categories being consistently male- and others female-identified. The categories associated with the male side within the philosophical tradition are normally identified as superior to those associated with the female. Standard examples of this binary conceptual hierarchy include the following (privileged term first in each case): culture/nature; mind/body; form/matter; reason/emotion; universal/particular; transcendent/immanent; ideal/real; truth/opinion;