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In the Shadows of Hegel: A Feminist Critique of Epistemology

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Modern Philosophy and the Monological Model

One of the distinguishing features of the development of modern philosophy in the West, since the Cartesian turn, is its 'first person' presupposition. By this is meant the unquestioned conviction that the individual or the self is fully formed and is an ego or subject in herself, and that the analysis of experience and knowledge must start from the individual as the knowing and active subject.[1]

Accordingly, the epistemological framework is taken to be the subject-object relationship. In this model the subject is fully formed and is and for itself antecedent to any relationship with other subjects. As Solomon observes, it is this paradigm which has been implicitly operative in the development of modern philosophy from Descartes to Kant.[2] Even the denial of self-consciousness and self-identity, as in Hume, paradoxically reinforces the hold of these presuppositions, for Hume's critique follows the assumption that if there is such a subject or self, it must be given in my internal experience – the identity of the self is to be revealed within the limits of individual consciousness. However, it is in Germany, and particularly in the philosophy of Leibniz, that this presupposition of the ontological self-sufficiency of the individual finds its clearest and most vigorous expression, in the doctrine of monodology.

Although Kant did not accept the ontological underpinnings of the philosophy of the subject, yet for him, also, consciousness was a self-enclosed realm; and it is such self-consciousness, under the name of transcendental unity of apperception, which becomes the ground of the world of objects. It is this idea which finds expression in the formulation of the central problems of philosophy according to Kant. The problems of knowledge, action and faith are formulated in the first person as: 'What can *I* know? What ought *I* do and what may *I* hope for?' Not merely the formulation of the problems, but the direction in which their solution is sought, also thematizes the privilege of the subject.[3] With regard to the epistemological problem,

it is enough to recall, at this point, the thrust of the transcendental deduction – the unity and identity of the object is grounded in the unity of the self-consciousness which conceives of representations in the same stream or series; it is this investiture of a representation by the 'I think' which accompanies it which constitutes it as experience; and it is also this which, looked at from another point of view, constitutes the representations as representations of the object. It is in this sense that Kant tells us that the conditions of the possibility of knowledge of objects are, at the same time, conditions of the possibility of the existence of objects of knowledge.[4] Of all these conditions, it is the unity of self-consciousness which is their ultimate ground and source. Thus, self-consciousness is the ultimate presupposition of not merely our experience of the world but of the world of our experience. It is thus that Kant's philosophy defines itself, not merely as a transcendental philosophy but as a transcendental idealism. We could, perhaps, distinguish between them by saying that, for a transcendental philosophy, experience and knowledge have certain *a priori* conditions of possibility, whereas for transcendental idealism these conditions have their source in the self or subject. Thus, if, for a transcendental philosophy, the formula is 'for me', then a transcendental idealism is presented under the formula 'from me'.[5]

It is not only in the epistemological context of Kant that we can discern the predelineations of the philosophy of the subject, but also in his moral theory.[6] Indeed, the distinctiveness of Kant's feeling for the absolute value of the individual is seen more clearly and emphatically here. Like knowledge, moral obligation also has a certain universal binding force: that is knowable which is also a possible object of experience for others. In spite of this inter-subjectivity, yet it is the unity of *my* self-consciousness that constitutes the object of knowledge. So, in the context of morality, Kant does recognize the universality of the moral law -- in recognizing something as my obligation, I also recognize it as binding upon every other rational subject. In fact, this universalizability is the mark of a categorical (as distinguished from a hypothetical) imperative. But what is to be noted is that this universal validity of the moral law is apprehended within my consciousness as the tribunal of its validity. If, in my consciousness, I can perform the thought experiment of universalizing it, then it is this verdict of what I can conceive, or not conceive, that decides the issue. I bring my will under the moral law not because it is universally valid but, rather, because it is my consciousness and its essential norms which enable me to recognize

its universal applicability. Like in the case of knowledge, so also in the case of moral actions, validity is the achievement of a constitutive act of the subject.

After Kant, the primacy of the first person standpoint continues in the transcendental philosophy of Fichte: 'I am wholly my own creation; whatever has an existence for me, has it through me'.[7] This is not pathological ego mania as George Santayana suggests, but an epistemological or transcendental remark about the conditions of knowledge and experience.[8] Hegel's views present a decisive break with the presupposition of the philosophy of consciousness. In this connection, the celebrated dialectic of the master and the bondsman is a crucial landmark for, in its epistemological interpretation, the dialectic may be regarded as the first clear attempt at a paradigm shift from a monological to a dialogical model.[9]

Hegel and his Shadow

If the rich and complex arguments of Hegel in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* were to be summarized, one would say that, without interpersonal interaction, there is no 'self' or self-consciousness, and that the subject is formed as such in what is called 'the demand for recognition'. Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact, that it exists for another, i.e., it exists only by way of being acknowledged.[10] The point to note is that it is not merely the awareness or consciousness of the self or its being as a subject that Hegel is talking of here. It is in the dialectic of moral recognition that each is formed as a subject. Furthermore, it is not any experience but *interpersonal experience* that is the ground for self-consciousness. The culmination of this phenomenology of self-consciousness is that form of relationship in which mere independence gives way to freedom, which is not the privilege of being alone but a life of shared and participatory fellowship – 'an I that is a we, and a we that is an I'.[11]

The Phenomenology of the Spirit is the story of the journey of consciousness to this point of self-affirmation and self-identity in the form of fellowship, insofar as Hegel displaces the Cartesian-Kantian first person monological model in favour of the dialectical model of recognizing and being recognized in a community of consciousnesses.[12] Hegel may be said to be the first great philosophical spokesman of the community and reciprocity, but it is also necessary to keep in mind what is excluded from this dialogue – in Hegel, the story of the road to fellowship begins with the life-and-death struggle between adult wills, which leads to enslavement and bondage and

thus, through the many forms of unhappy consciousness, reaches its culmination in the recognition of 'an I that is a we and a we that is an I'. It is, perhaps, not without significance that the phenomenology should so heavily emphasize conflict, contradiction, slavery and bondage and the ever-present threat of annihilation, for it is coded in the male register; its operative categories are struggle, property assertion, conquest, surrender, bondage, exploitation and self-frustration;[13] Hegel clearly perceives the reciprocity of recognizing and being recognized; one can accord freedom and dignity only if oneself has been so regarded; and one can recognize the other as thou only if oneself had been recognized as thou in some primordial relationship. In the life of all of us, we receive before we can give, we are loved before we can love. It is this primordial gift of maternal love that is missing in the phenomenology, and it is missing because woman is missing. Rather, she is there as nature. Even as nature, Hegel represents woman as vegetative and plant-like. Thus the placidity and the vague unity of feeling characteristic of women is described as plant-like in the *Philosophy of Right*.[14] This is, of course, bizarre and wildly male chauvanistic even for Hegel, but even the far more sensitive and sympathetic representation of Antigone, in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* categorizes woman as the representative of the immediacy of nature against the demands of the civic and political order of man, for which Creon stands. The Hegelian dialogue of community and fellowship excludes nature, woman and child, and all these three excluded terms determine each other and thus form a counterpoint to the freedom and autonomy of the adult male consciousness. Thus, woman is both naturalized and infantized. On the one hand, woman is said to be the custodian of the earth and the soil. It is thus that the divine law of Antigone is understood as the unalterable rhythm of birth and death. It is interesting to note that while the family and life within its sacrosanct limits is pictured as a tranquil and secure refuge for men, for the woman it is her doom and fate. It is by standing for it that Antigone meets her death. The metaphor of the child evokes dependency, the need for male protection and guidance, impulsiveness, emotionality and the disinclination for discipline and self-denial. Together these two lenses of interpretation project woman as particularistic and hence incapable of the universal which, it may be remembered, is the ground for freedom and autonomy. This illustrates how the contrast in the nature between men and women, in Hegel, ends up as a discrimination between the moral developmental problems of the two sexes.

As feminist critics have pointed out, the exclusion of woman from public life, and the conception of the peculiarity and retarded nature of her potential for moral development, reinforce each other. She is denied a public vocation since she is said to be incapable of universal will, and she is said to lack that capacity since she is committed to the immediacy of family life.[15]

Most feminist critiques of Hegel's reflections on women have understandably focused on the 'political' aspect of his thought. But, in this paper, without in any way denying the importance of this dimension of the critique, I would like to consider the moral aspect, namely the exclusion of women from the schema of moral development. This aspect of Hegelian distrust of women has continued even after the Hegelian system had been given up. In contexts far removed from Hegelian philosophy, such as Lawrence Kohlberg, for example, one may see the same animus and antipathy behind a theory of genetic psychology rather than of transcendental philosophy.

Different Visions of Maturity

According to Aristotelian thought we understand the nature and form of a thing in the light of the form of perfection proper to it. It is this vision which is the immanent meaning and purpose of its growth and development, and it is also this ideal and the possible that allows us to understand the actual. Applying this Aristotelian telic imagination to the life experiences of humans, we get one of the most moving images of modern humanism – the vision of a certain ideal being or state of humans. On the one hand, this teleological motive has been one of the ways of interpreting development and change, both individual and collective. On the other, this idea has also functioned as an instrument of criticism of self-formation as well as social formation. Psychological as well as social development has been judged in the light of the demands of the inherent potential.

But precisely because so much is conditioned by the proper description and identification of the images of maturity, any flaw in that conception, or any inadequacy or limitation at this level, is likely to infect and distort not merely the ideal but the actual as well. The marginalization of woman and their experiences does not mean that an important area of our concern has been neglected or that our philosophical and socio-political theories and conceptions are limited and partial. It also means that the understanding of the male and not merely of the female, is jeopardized by this failure.[16] I propose to

illustrate the theoretical short-circuiting which occurs as a result of the exclusion of women and their experiences in terms of two radically different perspectives on human development. When viewing the theories of Freud and Lawrence Kohlberg, they appear to be fundamentally opposed. Freud sees personality development in terms of the dynamics of instincts while Kohlberg sees it in terms of the developing autonomy of judgement. But what is interesting and instructive for us is that, in spite of other differences, these two developmental theories share some things in common.[17]

1. Both the theories conceptualize the development process (in the case of Freud, the formation of personality and, in the case of Kohlberg, the formation of moral development) as ordered according to certain stages. The sequential order is held to be necessary in the sense that each subsequent stage presupposes the developmental achievements of the earlier stage. Thus, to take Kohlberg's description of the second stage; where rules are judged by subjects as what is useful or instrumental to their needs and wants, this instrumental perception of rules presupposes the more elementary stage at which rules are seen to be external compulsions. The possibility of the judgement, at one stage, depends upon the skill and discrimination already achieved at the earlier stage.
2. Both the theories regard the process of development as oriented towards an end-state which defines the maturity of the evolving aspect in question. Thus, in the case of Freud's theory of personality, ego autonomy is one of the critical attributes of maturity whereas, in the case of Kohlberg's model, the capacity to reflectively validate a moral rule in terms of a universal principle is regarded as the final stage of the growth of moral judgement.
3. Both theories describe this end-state from the perspective of the male adult. Freud is explicitly aware of the fact that his theory problematizes the development of women whereas, in the case of Kohlberg's model, the bias is more deeply hidden. But Gilligan has shown how the description of the fifth and terminal stage, in terms of fights, individuation and demarcation of the self from others, comes naturally to male subjects of Kohlberg whereas women subjects typically conceptualize a moral situation in terms of relationships. They see the moral dilemma in terms of stability or disturbance of such interpersonal relationships. It is this difference that she describes as

the morality of autonomy and the morality of relationships.[18] Her point is that, within the Kohlberg schema, relationships belong to the lower level of social orientation and, hence, within this model, women appear to fall short of the developmental optimum.[19]

4. Although the facts of feminine experience do not fit into the theories, the theories concerned interpret this situation not as a shortcoming or inadequacy of the theories but as the failure or incapacity of women to realize the ideal of maturity. Thus, after noting the *difference* between men and women, Freud nevertheless *interprets* this difference as showing that women have less of a sense of justice than men, that they are less ready for the great exigencies of life, and that they are more often influenced by feelings and emotional responses. This echoes Hegel's view that a woman is confined to the sphere of the immediate and the concrete and is incapable of the notion and the demands of the universal.

After reviewing the developmental theories of Freud, Erikson, Lever, Piaget and Kohlberg, Gillian shows how these theoretical constructions impose an interpretation upon the differences between men and women. According to her, relationships, particularly issues of dependency, are experienced differently by women and men. For boys and men, separation and individuation are critically tied to gender identity, since separation from the mother is essential for the development of the image of masculinity. But, for women, issues of femininity or feminine identity do not depend upon separation. Hence, male identity is threatened by relationships while female identity is threatened by separation. But these phenomenological differencess between men and women, when conceptualized within a monological theoretical framework which is implicitly male-centeric, appear as deficiencies and limitations of female capacities. Horizontal differences become transformed into verticalized gradations and women appear as inhibited and retarded.[20] But, according to Gillian's analysis, Kohlberg's theory sums up the drift of this female subordination by projecting the differences on the moral plane. Kohlberg, at the psychological level, not merely notes the differences between men and women, but also interprets them at the *moral level*, for he holds that the ultimate principle of moral judgement is the principle of justice as abstract equity. The assumption behind the principle of justice is that the moral context is one of autonomous subjects with separate identities who have to work out the rules of their interaction

in the light of separation from intimate bonds. It is this which requires the rules of interaction to be validated by abstract universalizable principles. What he regards as the ultimate expression of the moral point of view is a decontextualized morality of autonomy and responsibility. In this light, concern for personal relationships, and the preservation of personal bonds – in fact, the morality of embededness – appears as an inferior and inadequate expression of the moral point of view. At the philosophical level, this takes the form of the claim that the typical moral category is obligation rather than virtue.

This may seem like a purely theoretical or conceptual choice of one terminology rather than another but, as Seyla Ben Habib has shown brilliantly, conceptual frameworks are not neutral devices in this context.[21] She reinterprets the data of Gilligan's study to show how the women subjects of her study naturally interpret their experiences and articulate their moral dilemmas in terms of care, concern, friendliness, tender regard, self-respect, and self-dignity. It is the discourse of virtues, especially interpersonal virtues, that is the medium of their self-expression. Thus, Gilligan's suggestion that the two moral points of view – the morality of responsibility and the morality of relationships – are not merely different theories but *different voices,* different mirrors of life.[22] But, as Habib also tells us, to leave the matter here would be seriously misleading as it would end up in a kind of gender relativism. More importantly, she also follows Gilligan in arguing that the ethics of relationships is not merely complementary to the ethics of justice. But, rather, it is in the context of relationships that the moral rules, as against the legal rules, have an application. It is her argument that the safeguarding of relationships in terms of virtues is the primary goal of moral development, thereby implicitly opening up a stage beyond Kohlberg's end-state of justice. But the intention is not the rhetorical one of privileging the female over the male. On the contrary, Habib argues how this step beyond the ethics of male supremacy is essential for a proper understanding of the real issues of male experience itself. The irony, she points out, lies in the fact that the ideology of male domination deforms men themselves. It is because of this that she speaks not of a feminist ethics but of a feminist perspective on ethics. For Habib, feminist theory is a way of talking about all problems, and not only the problems of women. She suggests that it is this idea of feminist theory, not as an object of thinking but as a way of thinking on all issues, that is the fit expression of women as subjects and not objects of theory.

Feminism as a Way of Thinking

It is possible to distinguish two kinds of change – change *within* the system and change *of* the system. Change within the system involves only new realignments of terms within the set of established relationships. It sets up a new centre of power and privilege but does not fundamentally alter the norms and institutions of the system. Unlike this internal change, change of the system involves a transformation – a totally new scheme of relationships embodying new values and norms. It is this kind of transformative critique that Habib has in mind when she describes feminist theory as a new way of thinking. For the possibility of making sense of a new order or form of life, of new ways of inter-subjectivity and new forms of personal expression depend upon changing not only the reference but the senses of the terms of discourse as it is in the practice of language that the given order of power and dominance has its secret and ultimate source of strength. This is particularly true of patriarchy, for female subordination is not so much the result of naked power or force but more the result of linguistic coding. It is this truth which explains the enormous importance attached to language in recent feminist theorists. Luce Irrigary, for example, argues that if the function of feminist endeavour is to unravel the working of the patriarchal system of values and display the social and cultural order, then we must begin with an analysis of language, because it is in the practice of language that the systems of patriarchy are constituted.[23] No political reflection can dispense with a reflection on language, for we are born into a language which lays down a familial and conjugal model.

Irrigary's theme of conjugality and language is a critical response to Levi-Strauss, for whom marriage is a form of human communication. Levi-Strauss shows how the incest taboo necessitates exogamy which, in turn, brings about patterns of exchange of women. This circulation of women sets up communication between groups. In Levi-Strauss' scheme, women occur as *objects* of sexual property interests.

But there is no place in his scheme for woman as a *person*, as a voice taking part in the dialogue of women as *subjects*. It is precisely this discourse of the subject that feminist theory is in need of, and in this connection the ideas of Julia Kristeva may prove useful.[24] Kristeva distinguishes between the symbolic order and the semiotic order. The symbolic order is the order of inter-subjective communication. It is the discourse of the family, and its intelligibility supports the values of the order of society. But this symbolic order represses a more

primordial relationship – the relationship to the mother – which is the semiotic or maternal aspect of language. Although repressed, the semiotic conditions the possibility of the symbolic. Unlike other feminist writers, Kristeva takes a less women-centred position. She observes that some frontline writing by male writers provides access to the level of the semiotic, against the codified representations of the symbolic order. Access to the semiotic is through the recovery of the sense of pre-oedipal participation. Hence the poetics and aesthetics of the semiotic provide the experiential basis for the conceptual discourse of participation and relationship that Habib recommends as the new way of thinking demanded by the feminist perspective.

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