

Nagl-Docekal, Herta

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Equality and the Uniqueness of the Individual. Towards Just Gender Relations

Herta Nagl-Docekal

Abstract: The paper addresses the asymmetrical gender relations which have shaped all spheres of life, arguing that in both the public and private domains just relations cannot be accomplished unless the uniqueness of the individual is duly acknowledged. Examining the background for the persistent discrimination of women, Part I discusses the naturalistic fallacy implied in traditional gender norms, the fatal correlation of ‚women‘ and ‚nature‘, and the ‚feminization of poverty‘. Part II focuses on the ways in which philosophical conceptions such as ‚autonomy‘ and ‚equality‘ have been, and still are, important tools for elaborating legislative measures – on the national as well as the international level – that aim at abolishing gender discrimination. Participatory equality is one case in point. Emphasizing that legislation represents but one element of what is needed in order to achieve fully reciprocal gender relations, Part III argues that the understanding of intimate human relations needs to be re-considered. Hegel’s portrayal of ‚love‘ that is based upon mutual recognition of individuals in their unique personality, and his conception of ‚we‘ prove relevant here.

Keywords: feminist theory, gender norms, embodiment, participatory justice, feminization of poverty, love, individual distinction, Hegel

Three introductory remarks

1: Gender relations today are often marked by *asymmetrical structures* which impose manifold forms of discrimination and oppression upon women, in both the private and the public sphere. Some asymmetries have been generated or aggravated in the course of economic globalization. Significant phenomena are: unfair wages, the feminization of poverty, educational disparity, violence against women, the ‚glass ceiling‘, denigrating views on women which hinder due respect. In view of these manifold injustices it is important to emphasize: Where the term ‚gender relations‘ is used exclusively with reference to sexual or familial relations, this means an unwarranted restriction, since *all* spheres of life have been shaped by gender relations. This is true even for institutions that have traditionally been reserved to one of the sexes (as, in many countries, the military), since such institutions are

based upon certain images of gender difference. This wide perspective does, of course, not imply that all women are affected by discrimination in the same manner or to the same extent.

2: Which difference have *women philosophers* made? It is significant that the scandal of unbalanced gender relations had not been on the agenda of the philosophical discourse before women philosophers began addressing it some decades ago (just as it was up to women scholars in other fields of the humanities to confront the mainstream of their disciplines with gender injustice). Obviously, persons who are placed on the receiving end are more likely to perceive a given problem in a sharp-sighted manner. Regarding the impact on philosophical research, one common misunderstanding needs to be addressed: To introduce the problem of gender asymmetries is not about creating a new sub-discipline that could simply be added to the traditional fields of research, but about challenging all the established sub-disciplines: from philosophical anthropology through theory of science, ethics, philosophy of law, aesthetics, philosophy of religion, etc.¹ It is important to consider that this confrontation may claim more than inner-academic relevance, since each of these fields contributes to shaping the views of the general public on what it means to be a human being.

In the long run, research guided by an interest in just gender relations is, of course, not only a task to be performed *by* women and *for* women, since unjust conditions represent a scandal concerning everybody. What has been emphasized with regard to racism does apply here as well: It would be outright cynical to leave the task of challenging discrimination exclusively to those affected by it. Given the constitutional framework of the modern state, one attitude that is still rather common does clearly represent an inconsistency: the attitude of those individuals who claim to be democrats, defending the principle of equal rights, but fail to support women's rights.

3: Regarding the *global dimension* of feminist thought, we need to distinguish two aspects: Firstly, there is one concern which is, indeed, shared worldwide: to abolish all forms of discrimination and oppression of women; secondly, this concern has been taken up in different, in many ways incompatible, approaches. This diversification has material and methodological sources. As living conditions of women have evolved differently in different parts of the world, based upon political and economic structures as well as ideological or religious convictions, investigations from a feminist perspective have detected a wide range of regional problems. On the theoretical level, a great variety of schools of thought have been employed in order to create categories that allow for a sharp-sighted critical analysis and that provide perspectives on alternative forms of social order. As regards the particular historical background of contemporary conditions in the Czech Republic, recent research has unearthed complex developments that deserve being studied carefully.²

¹ For a survey see: Herta Nagl-Docekal, *Feminist Philosophy*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press 2004, XIII-XXI (= *Feministická Filozofie. Výsledky, problémy, perspektivy*, Praha: SLON, 2007, 15-30).

² See, for instance, Hana Havelková/ Libora Oates-Indruchová (eds.), *The Politics of Gender Culture under State Socialism. An Expropriated Voice*, London: Routledge 2014, and: *European Journal of Women's Studies* 21(4)2014, Special Issue: *The New Europe: 25 Years after the Fall of the Wall*. Twenty years ago, the author of this article has participated in the international meeting, held in Prague, „Are there typically Middle European conceptions of marriage and the family?“ the papers of which are published in: Hana Havelková (ed.), *Existuje*

In short, feminist research is *work in progress*. In recent years, the focus has been extended so as to include other forms of gender related discrimination, for instance discrimination against individuals who do not share a heterosexual orientation, and individuals describing themselves in terms of ‘transgender’.

Part I: Gender, or Bodies and Norms

What are the reasons for the persistent injustices? We need to focus on gender norms here. First, let us recall the relevance of the notion ‘gender’. In the context of linguistics, the term ‘gender’ refers to “the understanding of certain words as masculine or feminine”.³ In different languages, the same object may be correlated differently; the moon, for instance, is feminine in Italian and masculine in German. What language performs here is to associate the object in question with symbolic images of ‘the feminine’ and ‘the masculine’ that are shaped by a specific culture. Transferring the concept ‘gender’ from linguistics to the analysis of social relations, feminist authors in the 1960s came to describe “differences between women and men as having two dimensions: (1) the biological and (2) the social”.⁴ The dyad ‘sex/gender’ was introduced to clearly mark this distinction. The relevance of this distinction can be demonstrated, for instance, with reference to the common expression ‘women’s work’. Obviously, to be born with a female body does not mean to be specifically qualified for certain types of work, such as house cleaning.

However, some authors inspired by the work of Judith Butler have contended that this dyad must be considered obsolete. Highlighting the fact that the descriptions of biological differences have varied considerably, depending on cultural context, these authors argue that ‘sex’ is but one element of the social construction of gender. But this constructivist claim is based upon a misunderstanding: Other than gender roles which have, indeed, been changed over time, biological differences are not *created* by discourse. Descriptions of the human body – how diverse they may have been in the course of history – share one and the same intent: to address the given preconditions of human life and generativity.⁵

It is significant, however, that the constructivist view, although its inconsistency has often been demonstrated, is still widely shared. Examining the reason for this phenomenon, we encounter a political rather than a theoretical concern: Many people assume that viewing bodily differences between men and women as natural givens does unavoidably entail traditional heterosexual social conceptions. But this assumption is erroneous. There is no logical necessity to deny bodily differences in order to reject oppressive policies; rather, it is import to contend that social norms cannot be derived from biological features. Similarly, for those who demand full respect for persons describing themselves in terms of ‘transgender’

středoevropský model manželství a radoni? (in both Czech and German language), Prague: Publications of the Institute of Theater Studies 1995.

³ Linda Nicholson, “Gender”, in: Alison M. Jaggar/Iris Marion Young (eds.), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, Malden, MA - Oxford, UK: Blackwell 1998, 289.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For a detailed explanation of the shortcomings of the constructivist approach see Nagl-Docekal, *Feminist Philosophy*, 1-40.

there is no need to deny that there also exist male and female bodies. Respect is something that everybody is entitled to because of being a person. Moral Philosophy proves a valuable source of sound arguments in this context: Kant, for instance, explains that it is everybody's moral duty to respect each human being as a person.⁶

Let us consider the core problem of traditional gender roles. As mutually exclusive character images are being associated with the biological dyad 'woman/man', the main thrust is *normative* rather than descriptive: People are being urged, from their early childhood on, to behave like 'a real girl' or a 'real boy,' thus creating an "emotional division of labor",⁷ and to arrange their lives – in the public as well as the private sphere – along this dividing line. These processes have been pointed out, for instance, by Simone de Beauvoir.⁸ A careful distinction is needed here: While everyday experience clearly indicates that men and women are, indeed, different in accordance with common gender images, this must not be taken as evidence for theories claiming that these differences are simply rooted in biology. Rather, we have to consider that gender norms have literally been *embodied*.

The concept of gender roles is flawed in several respects. I would like to specify three problems here. *Firstly*, a *logical inconsistency* marks the views of advocates of gender norms, who typically appeal to what they perceive as the natural essences of 'the man' and 'the woman'. This approach fails to explain how any social norm could be legitimized in this manner. To formulate a norm means to address human beings as agents, and this implies to acknowledge that they have been enfranchised from natural behavior patterns (to adopt one of Johann Gottfried Herder's expressions). Precisely because we are capable of reflecting on biological givens, our body is an issue of practical decision making.⁹ The historical diversity of gender roles indicates that humans can and did respond to the shape of their bodies in very different ways. In philosophical terms, any attempt to advocate a gendered social order by referring to 'nature' does amount to a *naturalistic fallacy*. What is needed, instead, is an evaluation of traditional gender roles in light of the norms that are relevant for human actions in general, i.e., the principles of morality and justice. If these norms are properly applied, however, it becomes clear that the idea of gendered social roles is altogether untenable.

Today some authors utilize *neuroscience* as foundation for theories of gender differences.¹⁰ But such views fail to reflect that conceptions of social order are not part of the genuine subjects of scientific research methods. Thus, we are confronted here once more with the problem of naturalistic fallacy. To summarize the shortcomings just addressed: the

⁶ See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997, 36-39.

⁷ This expression is used by Agnes Heller in: Agnes Heller, "The emotional division of labour between the sexes", in: Herta Nagl-Docekal (ed.), *Feministische Philosophie*, Wien – Muenchen: Oldenbourg 1990, 229-243.

⁸ See: Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex. Woman as Other* (1949), trans. Constance Bordel/ Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, London: Vintage 2010.

⁹ See: Immanuel Kant, *Idea for a universal history from a cosmopolitan point of view*, in: Immanuel Kant on History, ed. Lewis White Beck, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill 1979, 13-14 (Third thesis).

¹⁰ For a critical assessment see: Kim Q. Hall, „'Not Much to Praise in Such Seeking and Finding': Evolutionary Psychology, The Biological Turn in the Humanities, and the Epistemology of Ignorance“, in: *Hypatia. A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 27 (1), 2012, 28-49.

contemporary discourse on gender is marked by two complementary forms of reductionism – the constructivist and the naturalistic reductionism. In order to challenge both forms, philosophical gender theory needs to address the complex corporeal-symbolical constitution that characterizes the human being.

Secondly, while claiming a complementary character, gender clichés have generated constellations of *male dominance*. This is true at least with regard to the bourgeois gender conception of the late 18th century that still shapes Western societies in many ways. The bourgeois cliché has confronted women with double subordination. (1) In the sphere of the family, wives have been placed under the rule of the male head of the household. (2) In the public sphere, the basic principle of the modern constitutional state – self-legislation – has not been applied to women. While state laws shape the lives of all citizens, women have not been granted the right to participate in the processes of public decision making. One lasting consequence is that today, in spite of the legal implementation of equal rights, gender parity is still lacking in many fields of the public life. (This issue will be taken up again in this paper.)

Further burdens have resulted from the fact that the bourgeois conception associates the dyad ‘Spirit/ Nature’ with the biological sex difference in such a way that women are defined primarily by their sexuality. There is no lack of clarity in the way Rousseau has expressed this difference – albeit not from a critical point of view – in his *Emile*: “While the man is a man only in certain moments, the woman remains a woman throughout her life – or at least as long as she is young.”¹¹ (The latter part of this reflection articulates an opinion that, to this very day, has resulted in an enormous disadvantage for women. Where women are perceived primarily under the perspective of sexual attraction and/or procreation, elderly women find it hard to achieve a decent social standing. The fact that the percentage of women among the elderly poor is remarkably high must be analyzed with this cliché in mind.) It is important to note that the view that associates sexuality primarily with women has generated an objectifying attitude which fails to respect women as subjects. The many forms of disparaging treatment of – and violence against – women, including sexual violence, are based upon such an attitude.

The correlation of ‘women’ and ‘nature’ has also led to a gendered understanding of both individuality and love. Regarding individuality, the common expectation has been that men – since they need to compete in the public sphere – would develop distinct personalities (within the range of what is considered to be properly masculine), while women – being located in the domestic realm – would remain within the scope of a rather homogenous identity. This asymmetry is expressed clearly in Hegel’s interpretation of the married couple,

¹¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: or, On Education*. New York: Basic Books 1979, 323. For an examination of Rousseau’s views on gender difference see: Herta Nagl-Docekal, “Justice, Morality, Love. Re-Reading Rousseau from the Perspective of Feminist Philosophy”, in: Andrea Javorská/ Michal Chabada/ Silvia Gáliková (eds.), *L’udská prirodzenosť: rozum, vôľa, cit. Slovenské filozofické združenie pri Slovenskej akadémii vied*, Nitra 2013, 8-20.

as he notes: “The wife is without the moment of knowing herself as *this* particular self.”¹² The resulting problematic is obvious: If women are denied their claim to singularity they are, strictly speaking, not being fully acknowledged as human beings.

The ‘masculinization of individuality’ has a counterpart in a one-sided ‘feminization of love’.¹³ It has been a widely shared view that a loving, caring involvement is part of women’s nature. This view does, however, entail serious disadvantages. For instance, if the domestic tasks that women have traditionally performed are attributed to their ‘nature’, they will not be acknowledged as a form of labor. As social research has well documented, one result of this perception is the gender gap on the labor market – for example, the notorious concentration of women in curative and service sectors which typically yield a much lower income than professions that have traditionally been male-dominated.¹⁴ Among the negative consequences is the notorious infringement of women’s labor rights – the recent collapse of textile factories in Bangladesh provides evidence in the most tragic form. Also, the increasing ‘feminization of poverty’ is rooted in this lack of recognition.¹⁵

With regard to care work, a clear separation of arguments is needed. Obviously, it is an important duty to care for children and to attend to the sick and the elderly. But this duty is a *moral* one which – like any other moral duty – does oblige every human being, not only females. Significantly, Immanuel Kant, in his doctrine of virtue, emphasizes that the “duties of kindness” represent an essential implication of the moral law which is binding for everybody: It is, he notes, my “duty to make others’ ends my own (provided only that these are not immoral).”¹⁶ In the feminist discourse, the concept of ‘care ethics’¹⁷ has been criticized for being ambivalent at this very point: While plausibly calling for a re-evaluation of the curative work that has typically been provided by women, many care theorists have maintained a gendered view of morality.

Thirdly, the idea of gender roles fails to acknowledge the fact that *individual distinction* is a key feature of the human being. One symptom of this failure is the grammatical singular often used in this context: common expectations of what ‘a woman’ and ‘a man’ should be like, or should do, prove to be an abyss in which individual diversity gets submerged. Talents,

¹² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie, New York - Evanston: Harper Torchbooks 1967, 477. Hegel’s failure to reflect here that this understanding of married people is in sharp contrast to his idea of genuine love will be addressed again in Part III of this paper.

¹³ See, for instance: Karl Lenz, „Romantische Liebe – Ende eines Beziehungsideals?“ in: Cornelia Hahn and Guenter Burkart (eds.), *Liebe am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts. Studien zur Soziologie intimer Beziehungen*, Opladen: Leske und Budrich 1998, 73.

¹⁴ Cf. Barbara Hilkert Andolson, „Work“, in: Alison M. Jaggar/Iris Marion Young (eds.), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, 448-465.

¹⁵ For a detailed analysis of recent data documenting the vulnerability which marks women’s social position on a global scale, see Alison Jaggar’s essay “‘Are My Hands Clean?’ Responsibility for Global Gender Disparities”. In: Diana Meyers (ed.), *Poverty, Agency, and Human Rights*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014, 170-194. See also <http://www.genderpovertymeasure.org>

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor, Cambridge, UK - New York: Cambridge University Press 1991, 244 (§25).

¹⁷ For a critical assessment of ‘care ethics’ see: Herta Nagl-Docekal, „Feminist Ethics: How It Could Benefit from Kant’s Moral Philosophy“, in: Robin May Schott (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Immanuel Kant*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press 1997, 101-124.

interests, and inclinations that are not associated with the respective ideal will not receive support, and their cultivation may be seen as inappropriate. In this manner, men as well as women are shaped as humans cut in half. Against this background, the call for justice implies the demand that everybody's uniqueness must be respected.

The following two parts of this paper will point out that in both the public and the private spheres just relations cannot be accomplished unless the uniqueness of the individual is duly acknowledged. Furthermore, it will be shown that some conceptions of the philosophy inspired by the Enlightenment can be made fruitful for the current discourse on just gender relations.

Part II: Women as Citizens

Regarding the aim of abolishing discrimination caused by entrenched gender clichés, the sphere of law – including both state and international law – provides valuable tools, based upon philosophical research on the basic idea of justice. Conceptions such as ‚autonomy‘ and ‚equality‘ have been, and still are, crucial for a well-argued elaboration of just social arrangements. Let us take a brief look at the development of feminist legal theory. At first, priority was given to detect the many ways in which state legislations as well as executive practices failed to fully apply the basic principles of the modern state to women, since decisions typically were led by the common cliché of the ‚female life world‘ (as discussed in Part I). One case in point were regulations claiming protective value, such as laws prohibiting women from working night shifts. Challenging such measures, scholars (and politicians) inspired by feminist concerns have exposed the problem of paternalism. Further discussions underscored that formal equality was not all that was needed: As experience shows, it is often impossible for disadvantaged people to successfully assert claims which they are entitled to by legislation. Therefore, feminist authors began investigating which measures in terms of *social law* might provide the needed support for women. One focus has been the promotion of literacy and higher education as well as vocational training. In this manner, feminist concerns became part of the general discourse on ‚equal opportunity‘, on programs like ‚affirmative action‘, and on ‚empowerment‘. Feminist authors also highlighted in which way a lack of such support increases the ‚feminization of poverty‘ and the vulnerability of women with regard to all kinds of violence, including rape as weapon in wars (a problem which has dramatically increased in recent decades¹⁸). The debates concerning social law had far-reaching practical results. Most notably, they were taken up by the United Nations and the European Union as politics aiming at the improvement of women's conditions were introduced. Current programs like ‚gender mainstreaming‘ and ‚gender budgeting‘ have been elaborated along these lines. (In the recent debate, the latter programs have been met with critical comments, however, since the search for pragmatic conceptions of equal distribution has tended to shift the focus away from fundamental facts of structural discrimination.)

¹⁸ See, for instance: Robin May Schodt (ed.), *Feminist Philosophy and the Problem of Evil*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 2007.

Last not least, feminist legal theory has emphasized that changes are called for not only regarding how women are being *treated by* the state, but also regarding *active citizenship*. One phenomenon addressed here was that problems which men encounter more likely than women tend to attract greater attention in public discourse. Challenging this mode of silencing women, some authors have adopted the conception of ‚deliberative democracy‘.¹⁹ Another issue is the fact that the percentage of women in legislative bodies and governments still remains rather low in the great majority of countries. In short, the core concern is to achieve *participatory equality* in the public sphere. In recent years, this debate has extended its scope in view of the pressing issues of economic globalization guided by neo-liberal principles. Economic decisions of transnational relevance typically are made in the form of ‚soft law‘ by actors who are not democratically legitimized, such as CEOs of international concerns, and this often leads to negative consequences for women, since improvements of working conditions that had finally been achieved on the level of the nation states tend to get overruled. The concept of ‚global democracy‘ has provided valuable tools for challenging these developments.

Before concluding Part II of this paper, one common misunderstanding needs to be addressed. Some critics have argued that the call for ‚equality‘ does imply that women wish to become ‚masculine‘. The flaw in this critique is that it fails to consider the difference between the conceptions ‚equality‘ and ‚sameness‘. To establish equal rights means to provide all citizens with the freedom – protected by law – to make the important decisions of their lives by themselves, and to contribute his/her perspective to processes of public decision making. Thus, rather than inducing ‚sameness‘, the concept of ‚equal rights‘ provides a crucial basis for individual development.

Part III: Towards a balanced conception of love

There can be no doubt that legislative measures represent but one element of what is needed in order to achieve fully reciprocal gender relations. The comprehensive character of philosophical research is of relevance here – i.e., philosophy’s claim to address human existence in all its aspects. In order to fully realize their potential, human beings clearly need more than individual rights that protect their self-determination. They have an existential desire for communities based upon mutual trust, for personal bonds and relationships built upon intimate attachment. From this perspective, conceptions of social philosophy such as ‚solidarity‘ and ‚friendship‘ have been re-considered, often with a particular focus on their significance for relationships among women.²⁰ In this context, women philosophers are also discussing how the idea of ‚true love‘ must be re-considered so as to make it compatible with the desire for non-hierarchical forms of life. This is an intricate issue, given the fact that feminist theory in its early stages had to reject traditional views on love which typically employed this term as a camouflage for the asymmetrical relations between the male

¹⁹ Seyla Benhabib uses this term for instance in: Seyla Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996.

²⁰ See, for instance, Marilyn Friedman’s elaborate research on this issue: Marilyn Friedman, „Feminism and Modern Forms of Friendship. Dislocating the Community“, in: *Ethics* 99(2)1989, 275-290.

breadwinning head of the household and the housewife. Regarding the search for a re-definition of ‚true love‘ which acknowledges the need for mutual attention and care, Hegel provides subtle differentiations which have not been fully examined in the philosophical mainstream as yet.

Based upon his conception of ‚Spirit‘, Hegel emphasizes that genuine love can occur only between individuals who acknowledge that they share the same mode of being: “only in love is one in union with the object which is neither dominating nor being dominated”.²¹ Significantly, Hegel does not perceive this kind of ‚union‘ as the result of a fusion that would eliminate the singularity of the individuals involved; rather, he portrays it as the unity of persons who are, and remain, unique. “The beloved one is not opposed to us, but in unity with our being; we see ourselves in this other who then, however, is not identical with ourselves – a wonder that we are incapable of comprehending.”²² As lovers we are involved with the other in an unrestricted manner – with “this person as a whole”²³ –, and this implies that individuality does receive the highest esteem. Thus, Hegel’s approach suggests an intrinsic connection between ‚love‘ and ‚difference‘. Precisely because – as Spirit – we share the same mode of being, we have the capacity for developing difference, i.e., for shaping ourselves as specific individuals. Therefore to love someone means „to relate to this person’s singularity“.²⁴ (For further elucidation of this point one might turn to Hannah Arendt’s considerations, which attribute to love an unparalleled awareness of the “Who” of the beloved person.²⁵) In order to illustrate the importance of individual distinction, Hegel refers to Shakespeare: “Compare Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*: ‘the more I give to thee, the more I have’. This wealth of life love acquires in the exchange of every thought, every variety of inner experience, for it seeks out differences and devises unifications ad infinitum; it turns to the whole manifold of nature in order to drink love out of every life.”²⁶ The fact that love involves this mode of full involvement with the other entails that it liberates our “opposite of all foreign character [...]. In love the separate still remains, but no longer *as* separate, rather as something united.”²⁷

As Hegel emphasizes, genuine love does not leave the individuals untouched but rather shapes them. “Love is the distinction of two who are, at the same time, absolutely indistinct for one another. The feeling and consciousness of this identity is what constitutes love, this being beside myself: I have my self-consciousness not in myself but in the other, yet this other, in whom alone I am satisfied [...], as he is equally being beside himself, has his

²¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Entwuerfe ueber Religion und Liebe* [Sketches on Religion and Love]. G.W.F. Hegel, Werke in zwanzig Baenden, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1971, vol. 1, 244. Unfortunately, Sarah Hoagland is not aware of this point of Hegel’s conception of ‚love‘. She gravely misrepresents his thinking as she criticizes “the Hegelian understanding of differences as oppositional, hence a threat [...]. So I try to dominate the Other as the Other tries to dominate me”. (Sarah Lucia Hoagland, “Lesbian Ethics”, in: Alison M. Jaggar/ Iris M. Young (eds.), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, Malden, MA – Oxford, UK: Blackwell’s 1998, 405-406.)

²² Hegel, *Entwuerfe ueber Religion und Liebe*, 244.

²³ Hegel, *Entwuerfe ueber Religion und Liebe*, 246.

²⁴ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen ueber die Philosophie der Religion II* [Lectures on Philosophy of Religion II]. G.W.F. Hegel, Werke in zwanzig Baenden, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1971, vol. 17, 283.

²⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday 1959, 217.

²⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, transl. T.M. Knox, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1975, 307.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 305. The English translation was slightly altered here by H.N.-D. with regard to the German original.

consciousness only in me, both of us being nothing but the consciousness of this being beside oneself. To perceive, to feel, to know this unity – this is what constitutes love.”²⁸ On this basis, Hegel further elaborates the conception of ‚individuality‘. Neither individual simply brings his or her specific identity into the relationship – as something external, as it were – rather, both lovers are also being shaped by their relationship. It is only through their love “that they acquire their subjectivity [...] which constitutes their personality”.²⁹ In this manner a shared identity is developed which eventually allows the lovers to speak in terms of ‘we,’ i.e., to speak as one single person. Addressing this *relational* aspect of identity, Hegel chooses a poignant mode of expression: “The I is ‘we’ [a plurality], and the ‘we’ is a single I.”³⁰ As Hegel points out, ordinary language expresses awareness of this aspect, for instance, in referring to individual partners as ‘family members’.³¹

Obviously, love in the sense of such a comprehensive bondage has an exclusive character: “The human beings whom one is able to love and towards whom love is real, are only a few special ones.”³² Hegel’s reflections also bring to light the specific temporality of love: The ‘exchange of every thought’ and the overcoming of ‘all foreign character’ can be aimed at only in a continuous process. In particular, we need to consider here that individuality always remains open to change – as long as we live, it never reaches a point of completion. Therefore, love unavoidably has an aspect of futurity. Yet Hegel also acknowledges that – understood in this comprehensive way, not as a momentary affair – love is very demanding. “Love is the utmost contradiction which reason is unable to resolve, as there is nothing more stale than the punctuality of self-consciousness, which is being negated and which I am supposed to have affirmatively nevertheless. Love is, at the same time, the creation and the resolution of this contradiction.”³³

The faculty which allows us to develop such an attachment is the faculty of feeling.³⁴ However, Hegel adds, it “is not a single feeling [among other single feelings]”.³⁵ He contends that, in order to understand love, we need to consider the difference between love and a fragmented Eros. The latter, typically, is guided by a “single feeling” and therefore bound to move on continuously: “A single feeling is only a part and not the whole of life; the life present in a single feeling dissolves its barriers and drives on till it disperses itself in the manifold of feelings with a view to finding itself in the entirety of this manifold.”³⁶ This aim can never be achieved, however, since dispersion can only result in a series of „many

²⁸ Hegel, *Religion II*, 222.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.

³⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie, New York-Evanston: Harper Torchbooks 1967, 227.

³¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox, London-Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press 1978, 110 (§158). Hegel notes here with regard to the family that “one’s frame of mind is to have self-consciousness of one’s individuality within this unity as the absolute essence of oneself, with the result that one is in it not as an independent person but as a member.”

³² Hegel, *Religion II*, 283.

³³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophie des Rechts* (Philosophy of Right). Werke in zwanzig Bänden, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1971, vol. 7, 308 (§ 158). (This passage is not contained in the English translation by T.M. Knox.)

³⁴ Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, 304.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 305.

particular and isolated feelings“,³⁷ as Hegel maintains. In the medium of film, Federico Fellini has taken up this topic, in an ironic manner, in his film “8 ½”, in which he shows his leading actor Marcello Mastroianni sitting in a wooden bathtub, in the kitchen of an old farm house, surrounded and cared for by all the women of his life – from his mother onwards³⁸. In contrast to such an idea, Hegel emphasizes that in love the “whole life is not contained [...] in the same way as it is in this sum of many particular and isolated feelings; in love life is present as a duplicate of itself and as a unification thereof”.³⁹ Accordingly, in Hegel’s view, love is located in a feeling of a different kind – a feeling that lies beyond the sphere of momentous attraction and alienation, and also beyond momentous “happiness and unhappiness”.⁴⁰ Hegel describes this feeling as “heartiness of spirit”,⁴¹ as the “concentrated sentiment” which “contracts the vastness and immensity of its content in the single depth of the heart”.⁴²

Where we fail to fully become involved with the other, insisting on our separateness, one result is an incapability of feeling the pain of separation and of mourning. The phenomenon Hegel describes here seems to be well known to us in view of present urban conditions: where an attitude of self-centeredness prevails, the individual “is an independent unit for whom everything else is a world external to him [...], and, while his objects change, they are never absent [...]; this is the ground of his tranquility in face of loss and his sure confidence that his loss will be compensated, because compensation here is possible”.⁴³ Commenting on this phenomenon, Hegel notes: “This attitude makes matter something absolute for the human being”.⁴⁴

In short: as Hegel’s understanding of ‘true love’ portrays an intimate bond based upon reciprocal recognition, it provides an important tool for examining in which way traditional encrusted patterns of life represent something ‘dead’ that prevents mutual involvement with the other’s individual personality and needs from flourishing. However, this element of Hegel’s thinking can be fruitfully employed in today’s discourse only after having been separated from his conceptions of marriage and the family which are of a rather bourgeois brand (in this regard, Hegel’s social philosophy presents itself as openly contradictory⁴⁵). Yet, as one does treat Hegel’s understanding of love as a separate idea, it proves valuable in several contexts – and has indeed been brought to bear on diverse issues. First of all, it has anticipatory potential concerning future personal relations that are not marked by discrimination. Moreover, it is worth noting that Hegel describes the mutual involvement between individuals in gender neutral terms: ‘the one’ and ‘the other’. Based upon this form

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Federico Fellini, *Otto e mezzo*, Italy 1963.

³⁹ Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, 305. The English translation was slightly altered by H.N.-D. with regard to the German original.

⁴⁰ Hegel, *Philosophie des Rechts*, 312. (This passage is not contained in the English translation by T.M. Knox, published 1967.) The distinction of different kinds of ‘feeling’ that Hegel suggests could prove useful in the current debate on the links between ‘love’, ‘desire’, and ‘morality’.

⁴¹ Hegel, *Vorlesungen ueber die Aesthetik II* (Lectures on Aesthetics II). Werke in zwanzig Baenden, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1971, vol. 14, 154. The German expression Hegel uses here is “Innigkeit des Geistes”.

⁴² Ibid., 155.

⁴³ Ibid., 303.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ An analysis of this contradiction is provided in: Herta Nagl-Docekal, *Innere Freiheit. Grenzen der nachmetaphysischen Moralkonzeptionen.*, Berlin: de Gruyter 2014, 129-150.

of wording, his portrayal of love has been used in conceptions of non-heterosexual relations⁴⁶ (although this usage clearly goes beyond Hegel's own perceptions of this matter). Furthermore, Hegel's emphasis on the uniqueness of the individual proves relevant not only for intimate relations, but in a broader sphere as well. While we obviously are able to love – in the full sense of the term – only very few persons, respect for, and support of, the uniqueness of individuals are also called for in relations of friendship, professional life, and everyday encounters in general.

Finally, as we focus on the core issues that individuals encounter, *human finiteness* also needs to be addressed. To whatever extent we may succeed in establishing just social conditions, we still have to face the fact that humans are incapable of creating lasting happiness, since we cannot escape being burdened with suffering and death. Here the question arises how women in different social and cultural contexts have coped with this fact. In this respect, religion moves to the fore. It seems inappropriate to maintain an agnostic approach in a manner that simply refuses to take women's faith seriously. However, we need to distinguish different issues that have been intertwined once again. Firstly, it has been – and still is – important to critically examine in which ways the teachings and practices of authorities representing the various religious communities fail to fully acknowledge the equal dignity of women and men. Secondly, given the numerous forms of discrimination that women have encountered in their respective churches, it seems understandable that feminist authors have tended to strongly advocate turning away from religion altogether. Thirdly, as recent philosophical scholarship has demonstrated, however, this secular move is not the only option for people aiming at just relations. From the perspective of women, one important project is to re-interpret the central teachings of their respective creed through introducing philosophical conceptions which explain the equal value of every human being.⁴⁷ For instance, the Jewish-Christian call for love has been re-interpreted so as to include the idea of reciprocal gender relations. Along this line, feminist philosophy of religion investigates in which way philosophy can contribute to reconciling the theological discourse with conditions of modernity.⁴⁸

Herta Nagl-Docekal

University of Vienna, Austria

herta.nagl@univie.ac.at

<http://homepage.univie.ac.at/herta.nagl/>

⁴⁶ See, for instance: Brigitte Buchhammer, „Religion und Homosexualität. Eine Relektüre von Hegels Religionsphilosophie“, in: Herta Nagl-Docekal, Wolfgang Kaltenbacher und Ludwig Nagl (eds.), *Viele Religionen – eine Vernunft? Ein Disput zu Hegel*, Berlin: Akademie 2008, 211-233.

⁴⁷ For more on this project see: Herta Nagl-Docekal, „Issues of Gender in Catholicism: How the Current Debate Could Benefit from a Philosophical Approach“, in: Charles Taylor/Josè Casanova/George F. McLean (eds.), *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age*, Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy 2012, 155-188.

⁴⁸ CF. Brigitte Buchhammer, *Feministische Religionsphilosophie*, Vienna, Austria - Muenster, Germany: LIT 2011.