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Hegel and His “Victims” on Women in the Private Sphere

by Dorothy Rogers

Hegel, like many male philosophers in the Western canon, did not have a particularly enlightened view of women. In fact, in one representative passage, he described the genders this way:

The difference between man and woman is the difference between animal and plant; the animal is closer in character to man, the plant to woman, for the latter is a more peaceful unfolding whose principle is the more indeterminate unity of feeling whose principle is the more indeterminate unity of feeling [*Empfindung*].¹

As noted by others, feminists generally have followed one of two paths when they address such statements by male predecessors: apologia or critique.² The first

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, H.B. Nisbet trans., Allen W. Wood, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §166, Addition. Hereafter referred to within text as PR, with section number following.

² See Seyla Benhabib, “On Hegel, Women, and Irony,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Hegel*, Patricia Jagentowicz Mills, ed. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1996), 26.

option usually involves a sort of explaining away in which the thinker is said either to have "really" meant something else, or simply to have been a product of his time. The second option accepts no excuses, but instead offers a counter-attack in which the thinker is read and interpreted through feminist eyes. Both approaches have their merits. But here I offer a third alternative which neither apologizes for nor blames Hegel, but instead asks: What were the practical effects of his ideas? As suggested by Seyla Benhabib I want to look at Hegel from the point of view of "the victims"³—i.e., women. How did Hegel's ideas about men/women, public/private, objective/subjective affect women in the nineteenth century who were familiar with his work?

This article looks at three women who were among Hegel's first followers in America, paying particular attention to their views on matters related to women and the public/private distinction: Susan E. Blow (1843–1916), Anna C. Brackett (1836–1911), and Marietta Kies (1853–1899). Although they rarely made direct references to Hegel himself, each appropriated a number of his ideas in order to make Hegelianism applicable to their own social and historical context. This article looks at how this sometimes resulted in a transformation of Hegel's thought.

Blow and Brackett were members of the American Idealist movement in St. Louis (1860–1880); Kies became associated with the movement later while a student at the Concord School of Philosophy (1879–1888). Their male contemporaries were credited with having led these movements, and about them much has been written.⁴ Yet while the women were no less active in the attempt to interpret German Idealism than the men were, they have been largely ignored as theorists. There were many women in the movement who were educators in the St. Louis public school system which, due to the application of German Idealist educational principles there, was the model school system in America throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. A number were also active in the movement's St. Louis Phi-

³ Ibid, 27.

⁴ Over twenty books and articles about the St. Louis and Concord branches of the early American Idealist movement were published between 1882 and 1873, and histories of American philosophy usually dedicate a section to the movement. Only rarely do these works make mention of the women who were part of this movement. One welcome exception is William H. Goetzmann's *The American Hegelians: An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), in which both Susan Blow and Anna Brackett have an entire chapter devoted to them. A full bibliography of material on the American Idealist movement, as well as works by and about Blow, Brackett, and Kies appears in Dorothy Rogers, "Making Hegel Talk English"—America's First Women Idealists" (Boston University Ph.D. dissertation, 1998).

losophical Society or other organizations connected to the movement. Also among the women were a number of contributors to *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, edited by the acknowledged leader of Idealism in America, William Torrey Harris (1835–1909).

Anna Brackett was an important force behind *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, and was recognized as such in its first issue.⁵ She translated the text of *Pädagogik als System* by Hegel's disciple, Karl Rosenkranz, and published it first as a series in JSP, then later as a book.⁶ An educator who taught primarily young women in the St. Louis Normal School for teacher training, Brackett was a feminist who saw education as the key to women's equality. In addition to her translation of Rosenkranz, she edited two texts featuring essays of her own concerning women and education, *The Education of American Girls and Women* and *Higher Education*. Brackett also frequently wrote articles in popular journals on women's education and rights. Along with a number of other women close to the Idealist movement, Brackett was a member of the Missouri Equal Suffrage Association and St. Louis Women's Club, both of which were feminist-oriented. Her repeated calls for women to assert themselves appear to have been carried over into her personal life, as Brackett was said to have been skilled in debate with her male colleagues at meetings of the movement's St. Louis Philosophical Society.⁷ She left St. Louis in 1873, dissatisfied it seems over the school board's failure to recognize the need for the Normal School to maintain its special status as a professional institution for teacher training, but she remained connected to the Idealist movement at least into the 1880s.⁸

Susan Blow was so important to the life of the St. Louis circle that the movement's self-appointed historian, Denton Snider, referred to her as one of its four principle figures.⁹ She was an active member of the movement, attending Philosophical Society meetings regularly. She was also an extremely popular and charis-

⁵ *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 1, preface.

⁶ Brackett also produced a paraphrase of this work, publishing it both in *JSP* and as a book.

⁷ "Woman Educator is Dead," obituary in the archives of the State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, MO, (newspaper title unknown).

⁸ Brackett's decision to leave the St. Louis Normal School seems to have been related to changes in the curriculum and other developments to which she was opposed, as discussed in my work on the American Idealist movement, "Making Hegel Talk English" (1998), p. 121–133.

⁹ Denton Snider, *The St. Louis Movement in Philosophy*, (St. Louis: Sigma Publishing Co., 1910), 301.

matic lecturer in St. Louis whose classes on philosophy and literature regularly drew crowds of 100–200 listeners. A more conventional woman than Brackett, Blow was opposed to suffrage and cautioned against women working outside of their assigned “sphere”—i.e., the home. Not surprisingly, she herself chose to be a volunteer rather than an employee of the St. Louis school system while serving as Director of the kindergarten program, so as not to embarrass her well-to-do family. Nearly all of her published works focused on kindergarten education, a fact about which she was apologetic toward the end of her life.¹⁰ However, each of her books has within it discussions of the nature of God and the universe, the nature of the soul and personality, and other matters of pure philosophy. And in this sense, she (perhaps inadvertently) produced philosophy specifically for women—mothers and teachers, who constituted the majority of her audience.

Marietta Kies was too young to have participated in the movement in St. Louis, but instead became associated with William Torrey Harris during his years in Concord, Massachusetts. While studying under Harris at the Concord School, Kies collected material to publish her first book, *An Introduction to the Study of Philosophy*, an edited volume in which she put Harris' lectures and writings into a systematic, coherent form. Kies also met John Dewey and George S. Morris at Concord and toward the end of the School's existence began to study under them in an official, rather than ad hoc, capacity as a student at the University of Michigan. At Michigan, Kies also became acquainted with Henry C. Adams, a political theorist and economist with socialist leanings, who appears to have influenced her considerably. Having had the opportunity to study at the graduate level and thus to be only the sixth woman to earn a Ph.D. in philosophy in America, Kies secured full-time faculty positions at Mt. Holyoke College, Colorado College, Mills College, and Butler University.¹¹ She also published two original works of political philosophy, *The Ethical Principle and Institutional Ethics*. Kies' theory of altruism in these works foreshadows the contemporary “ethic of care” discourse that has percolated since the publication of Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*, although Kies' theory

¹⁰ In a letter to James Jackson Putnam, 17 May 1908, Blow announced the completion of her last book, *Educational Issues in the Kindergarten*, but said of the effort, “I'm afraid you'll be disappointed . . . it is about the Kindergarten again.” Later in the letter, Blow added, “If I were better, I could write a better book.” In James Jackson Putnam Papers, Countway Medical Library, Harvard University, Boston, MA.

¹¹ For a complete list of women doctoral degree recipients in this period, including Kies, see Walter Crosby Eells, “Earned Doctorates for Women in the Nineteenth Century,” *American Association of University Professors Bulletin*, vol. 42, no. 4, p. 644–651; (Winter 1956).

is by no means identical to that of Gilligan or her followers.¹² Kies' early death at the age of forty-five cut short a promising career.

Interestingly enough, only Brackett was a feminist. Both Blow and Kies expressed reservations about women venturing too far into the working world, what they called "the industrial realm," despite the fact that their very lives were, in a sense, feminist statements. Blow remained the most true of any of these women to the traditional Hegelian ideal of women maintaining their place in the private sphere. Kies adhered to Hegel's system as a whole, but her more realistic approach to family life resulted in a transformation of Hegel's view of the private realm. The particulars of each women's ideas as well as her contributions to early American Hegelianism, vis a vis Hegel himself, is now to be turned to.

Hegel on Public and Private

Particularly in *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel tried to show that the distinction between public and private is not an unbridgeable chasm, but instead a unified whole. The private realm is characterized as the realm of the natural, the internal, and the subjective; the public realm as the realm of the ethical, the external, the objective. The home for Hegel is the seat of private life, and here familial relations dominate. Familial relations, in turn constitute the "immediate substantiality of spirit" and have as their "determination the spirit's feeling [Empfindung] of its own unity, which is love." [PR §158] Love is only a feeling for Hegel, and as such tends toward caprice (whereas reason tends toward system). Yet at the same time, love is also an ethical relation, albeit a natural ethical relation. Thus, the individual who experiences feelings of love, first of all does not desire to be an independent person, for this would make him/her "feel deficient and incomplete." Secondly, the individual who loves loses him/herself in another person and thereby finds self in relation with that person. Hegel recognizes this as a contradiction in which "love is both the production and the resolution," but in so far as love resolves this contradiction, it becomes ethical unity.

Within the family, love holds primacy in Hegel's system. Therefore, in the family circle independent existence is neither sought, attained, nor required. Here persons need not be individuals, but simply members of the family unit. It is only out-

¹² I have tried to make clear the distinction between Kies' "altruism" and the "care" of contemporary feminist theorists in "Private Virtue in Public Life: Marietta Kies' Challenge to Hegel," (publication pending, April 1998).

side of the safety and comfort of private life (i.e., the family) that assertion of individual rights, wants, and needs is necessary. And when the family dissolves (through the maturity of children primarily), its members move into the public realm (civil society) in which individuation and self-assertion is not only an option, but a requirement – for men, that is. Since the home remains securely within the private realm and is characterized as natural and subjective, it is women's domain. Upon the dissolution of a family, a grown daughter moves not from the family circle into civil society, but begins her own family circle, and there she remains. In Hegel's view, it is in women's nature not only to desire to remain here, but to find complete fulfillment—i.e., self-actualization in the ultimate sense—here and here alone. We find Hegel claiming that public life tears the individual away from family ties, alienates the members of the family from one another, and recognizes them as self-sufficient persons. Thus, the individual becomes a son of civil society, which has as many claims upon him as he has rights in relation to it. [PR §238]

In contrast, the female gender is a "spirituality which maintains itself in unity as knowledge and volition of the substantial in the form of concrete individuality [Einzelheit] and feeling [Empfindung]." Therefore, the feeling of love that reigns in the home is women's natural element. Lest the reader have doubts about Hegel's meaning, let us quote him directly once more: "Woman... has her substantial vocation in the family, and her ethical disposition consists in... [family] piety." [PR §166]

Children also operate on the level of feeling in Hegel's view. Their ethical sensibilities are first based on their emotional responses to their parents as those in whom they can put their trust and whom they must obey. For this reason, presumably, a mother (whose primary orientation is also said to be one of feeling) is a child's first and best teacher. But as children grow, they must be educated away from this subjective and potentially capricious realm of emotion "thereby enabling them to leave the natural unity of the family." [PR §175] In this way, education serves the invaluable role of preparing well-disciplined and ethically educated individuals for their entrance into civil society, which in turn provides the means for each family to acquire property and/or wealth, thus ensuring the livelihood of the family unit and the ability of its members to thrive and become productive members of society themselves in due time.

However, as anyone with even a hint of gender awareness can clearly see, this leaves women conspicuously absent from public life, because as creatures ruled by feeling, they are unable to make this step from family life into civil society. Male children may begin life with an orientation toward feeling that later develops into a rational, ethical outlook. But girls ruled by *Empfindung* in Hegel's system merely

grow to be women ruled by *Empfindung*, therefore, both are destined to remain in the private sphere. How loyal to this aspect of Hegel's thought were America's first women Idealists?

The American Idealist Perspective

Susan Blow: Professionalizing Motherhood

For Hegel's first American followers, as for Hegel himself, education begins in the home; that is to say, within the family circle with mother as teacher. In some cases, as with Susan Blow, the American Idealists agreed with Hegel that women are naturally suited to teaching, particularly young children. But since education was the main focus of the American Idealist movement in its earliest stages, to grant women this authority was no small matter. As "Mother of the Kindergarten" herself, Susan Blow went to great lengths to describe the epistemological process involved in educating young children.¹³ She insisted that mothers' games with their children were more than simply expressions of affection or forms of amusement for mother and child, but instead were ways in which mothers introduced deep truths to their children, in some cases metaphysical truths.

Basing her theory on the work of Friedrich Froebel, kindergarten pioneer in Germany (1782–1852), Blow maintained that everyday playtime activities assist children in their development of self-consciousness. The willingness of mothers to participate in play and games also awakens children to maternal love. This in turn introduces children to a principle of altruism that is expressed in familial relations, runs throughout nature, and extends to all of creation through God's benevolence.¹⁴ In this sense, Blow is very much like Marietta Kies for whom altruism is a main goal of human social institutions. But it is Blow's understanding of the mother/teacher role in this process that is of most interest to us here.

Blow herself recognized that her system of educating children through games and the like was not a particularly new concept. After all, mothers had been playing "Falling-Falling" and "Peek-a-Boo" with their children long before Blow began explicating kindergarten theory to them, and they continued to do so even when they

¹³ William Torrey Harris dubbed Blow "Mother of the Kindergarten" as early as 1874, at the end of her first year as director of the St. Louis kindergarten program. See St. Louis Annual School Reports, June 1874.

¹⁴ Susan E. Blow, *Letters to a Mother on the Philosophy of Froebel* (New York: Appleton, 1898), 259–61.

were ignorant of her work. Yet what was new about Blow's work was the way in which it systematized the natural mother-child relation. Through Froebel, Blow studied the "inmost union" and "reciprocal influence"¹⁵ of mother and child and arrived at a theory that facilitates the mother's instinct to meet the needs of her child, thus "vitalizing" "with clear consciousness and persistent purpose [that which] maternal instinct has always blindly and intermittently attempted."¹⁶ Blow hoped that her efforts would help mothers to attend not only to their children's physical, but also to their moral and intellectual growth, or in her words, "come to his aid in every crisis of the spiritual battle for liberty."¹⁷

Significantly, Blow's discussion of the mother's role in education does not romanticize self-sacrificial devotion by a mother to her child as was so popular in the nineteenth century. And in this sense she provides a mild challenge to Hegel's claim that, like children, women are ruled by feeling and attain ultimate fulfillment in their maternal role. For instance, Blow explains that many games are meant to teach children that they need not be inseparable from their mothers; that periods of alienation between mother and child are not only natural but necessary components of the mother-child relationship. This is because Blow sees the ability to make the distinction between Self and Other as an integral part of children's growth.¹⁸ By building this Self/Other distinction into her theory of childhood education, Blow does more than address children's need to achieve individuation. She also justifies women's desire to have some distance from their children, to identify themselves as persons apart from their maternal role; in short to have and to develop interests of their own outside of the mother-child relationship. In her words "no sensible person [can] accept the sentimental theory that the mother should be her child's sole and constant companion."¹⁹ Both mother and child will be better for accepting this lesson and integrating it into their lives, in reality as well as in play.

While Blow's work was innovative on a number of levels, for the purposes of this paper, her systematic approach to childhood education is of interest more in regard to its insights into motherhood than for its discussion of children's development.

¹⁵ Susan E. Blow, *Mottoes and Commentaries of Froebel's 'Mother Play'* (New York: Appleton, 1895), 19.

¹⁶ Susan E. Blow, *Symbolic Education* (New York: Appleton, 1894), 104–5; 128.

¹⁷ Blow, *Commentaries*, 36.

¹⁸ Blow, *Symbolic*, 229–30.

¹⁹ Blow, *Symbolic*, 229.

For while she did not challenge Hegel's view of women, she did teach women to see their games with young children in a different light, and to take these activities seriously. What might even be called revolutionary about Blow's work is that it not only affirmed women's nurturing role, but recognized it as an educative practice and validated it as such. Practically speaking, through Blow's work mothers' games with their children became a professional enterprise in the kindergarten classroom. Theoretically, they resulted in five published volumes that Blow wrote, albeit inadvertently, as philosophy specifically for women.

Brackett: Women & Girls in the Family Circle

Brackett's discussion of the family and its influence shifts the focus away from women's role as mother and teacher. Instead, she looks at how seclusion in the private realm restricts the intellectual growth and moral development of women and girls, thereby inhibiting their entrance into public life. The comments that Brackett makes about mothers as teachers are interspersed throughout her arguments on behalf of women's education, which constitutes the bulk of her work. These points are worth looking into, particularly because of the way Brackett connects the role of the family to the transition from private to public life.

In claims compatible with the norms at the time, Brackett views a mother as the moral and spiritual head of the household. And based on her observations, responsibility for the moral and ethical aspects of education "fall almost wholly into the hands of the mother."²⁰ (As we will see later, however, for both Brackett and Kies this is more an accident of social systems than a necessity of women's nature.) Brackett also agrees that often it becomes the responsibility of mothers to "foster and direct" the wonder toward creation that their children naturally feel as part of religious training.²¹ And all of these aspects of early childhood education could very well be said to match Hegel's description of the level of feeling that women and children share as their dominant trait. But Brackett takes a mother's educative responsibilities further. Women must also enforce obedience, promote conscientiousness, and instill a conception of Right, in their children.²² These educative aspects of mothering profoundly affect the entire nation, because the ability to obey

²⁰ Anna C. Brackett, *The Education of American Girls* (Boston: Putnam, 1874), 96.

²¹ Brackett, *American Girls*, 113.

²² Brackett, *American Girls*, 98 regarding obedience, 109 regarding conscientiousness and Right.

and a conception of personal duty and of Right are at the heart of a well-functioning state.

Clearly, the last of these educational tasks, that of instilling a concept of Right, requires that women have intellectual capacities far deeper than the rather shallow level of "feeling" to which Hegel limits them; for Right is the manifestation of Reason in the world, and a person who is ruled by feeling would be unable to comprehend it. As moral and ethical educators, then, women must be able not only to conceive of the idea of Right themselves, but also to convey this idea to children. This calls for women to engage in a complex pedagogical process: They must be able to integrate the idea of Right into their own thought, to apply it to practical situations, and then to communicate the idea intelligibly when their children's minds are ripe for such knowledge. A person who is ruled solely by feeling or whose education is inadequate cannot perform such demanding intellectual tasks.

As a follower of Hegel, Brackett was well-acquainted with the idea of the importance of the home, and thus of the family. In fact, she agreed with Hegel that the love and nurture that an individual receives within the family is indispensable. However, although she did not question the Hegelian idealization of the role of the family, she did make a feminist amendment to this theory. And this amendment addresses the problem of women's entrance into civil society. Namely, she pointed out that young men entered into civil society, the realm in which individuals are torn out of their family bonds thus becoming independent persons, but girls were often confined to only the family circle.²³ Thus their intellectual and moral development suffered. Brackett believed that social changes were needed to remedy this inequity. Like boys, girls needed to meet and compete with their peers in order to develop the "thick skin" that boys acquired almost from the moment they were aware that they were boys. Without this, girls grew to be ineffective or even impotent within the public realm and fulfilled the stereotype of the incompetent woman. Brackett was convinced that these deficiencies grew out of women's socialization, not their nature. Her solution was to ensure that girls and young women were thoroughly educated.

Yet often women's education was far less than adequate in Brackett's day, and she challenged this social reality by posing these questions: How can a woman who has no clear ideas herself of what should be demanded and enforced, and hardly a sufficient command of language to express directions clearly, who was never taught herself to obey, and who has no definite idea of what end she really wishes to attain,

²³ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §238.

educate her children into obedience?... Does not the welfare of the country imperatively demand that we give those who are to be the only educators of the children in their first and decisive years, a thorough education?²⁴

Brackett's assertions are clear. The education of children entails more than the undifferentiated and potentially capricious feeling that Hegel assigns to women. Women have the capacity to comprehend ethical and moral principles themselves, but must have better educational opportunities in order to reach their intellectual potential. Women's improved education will also allow them to perform their maternal task more adequately and thus contribute to the function of the State.

Kies on the Family

Kies had her own, slightly different, view of the family. She began with the standard Hegelian description, claiming the family was the foundation of the state, noting that its origin was in the monogamous union of a man and woman, and indicating that in marriage these two people in essence became one.²⁵ Yet there are also important departures from Hegel in Kies' discussion of the family.

Hegel argued that women were more suited for activity in the private sphere, because their nature was such that they were fully actualized within the family—an ethical, but natural, institution. Blow accepted this idea for the most part, but added to it a system through which women's role as the first educators of children in the home could become a professional endeavor. Yet Kies remarked that the duty of raising and educating children lay equally with the mother and father, and that it is only because of "the necessary division of labor and duties between the father and mother . . . [that] the early direction of infant life necessarily devolves upon the mother."²⁶

On this point, there is a similarity between Kies and Brackett in that both deny the existence of an essential women's nature. We see Kies rejecting maternal instinct, per se. Early in a child's life, of course, biology plays a role and thus requires that a mother take a more active part in child rearing than a father does. But this is not due to anything inherent in masculinity versus femininity. Yet Kies also recognizes that women do tend to be more likely to care for young children. And in this educative role, they serve to bridge the gap between home and school. In her words:

²⁴ Brackett, *American Girls*, 98–99.

²⁵ See Hegel on the marriage relation in *Philosophy of Right*, §§161–169. Hegel also discusses women's actualization within the family circle in these sections.

²⁶ Marietta Kies, *Institutional Ethics* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1894), 69–70.

"The intelligent answers of the mother to the thousand queries and wonders of the young mind prepare the way for the more definite and extended instruction of the school."²⁷ And like Brackett, she sees a mother's educative function to reach beyond the realm of feeling into moral and ethical life. For within the home, mothers teach children to set aside their own selfish wants—to share, join in family chores, and the like. Thus they develop a habit of altruism, focusing early in life on the needs of others rather than on the desires of self.²⁸ This is vitally important, because this altruistic impulse then extends from children's own familial relations to relations within their social groups at school and ultimately to society as a whole. Thus, women render an invaluable service to the state, even if they remain confined to their place in the private realm.

In her discussion of the importance of the moral lessons learned in the home, however, Kies departs considerably further from Hegel. And this particular departure indicates either that she is not clear on Hegel's vision of the family or that she is more interested in recognizing the prevalence of American individualism in her own theory than in being true to Hegel's. The offending statement is this: "In the collision of wills in the household, one cannot assert all his own peculiarities and particular wishes. One must learn to respect the rights and privileges of others."²⁹ But for Hegel, within the family there is no need to suppress individual wants and desires, because the family relation is such that within it all members are one body, their needs one need, and their interests a unity of interests. Individual will does not assert itself in the family, and "rights" and "privileges" are a foreign notion in this natural relation that is ruled by love and affection. The contest of individual personalities that Kies seems to be alluding to occurs within civil society, but not within the family circle in Hegel's scheme.

In this sense, it is not clear that Kies' ideal of the family is genuinely Hegelian. In my reading of Hegel, his vision of the family is one in which individuation is not only non-existent, but unnecessary. Hers is of the family as a unit, but a unit in which members' self-development is realized (which assumes a certain level of individuation has already been achieved) and personal rights are set aside for the good of all (which assumes an assertion of rights in the first place). Furthermore, Kies ignores gender distinctions as they relate to individual realization in the family versus civil society. All family members, whether fathers, mothers, brothers, or sisters,

²⁷ Kies, *Institutional Ethics*, 70.

²⁸ Kies, *Institutional Ethics*, 70–71.

²⁹ Kies, *Institutional Ethics*, 71.

have the same expectation placed upon them by Kies. This, too, is a departure from Hegel, one that Brackett also made, although the latter made it from a pointedly feminist point of view.

Given the different historical contexts in which the two thinkers were writing, the incommensurability of Kies' understanding of the family with Hegel's is not terribly surprising. After all, she was writing at a time when the women's movement had begun to gain some rights for women, even within marriage. So it is likely that women had begun to voice competing interests within the family circle much more in Kies' time than they had at the time of Hegel's writing. Kies' apparent failure to match Hegel's ideal of the family is closer to a re-assessment of its accuracy—and its appropriateness given women's increased autonomy, which she applauded both in private and public life—than a deficient understanding of the family's role in his system.

Conclusion

Hegel tried to reconcile the division between public and private that had developed in the Western tradition. But in his attempt to do so, he ended up driving the wedge between them even deeper—at least concerning the role of women in society. The American Idealist women under discussion here agreed with Hegel that women's domain was often the home and that they were the first educators of children (but remember for Brackett and Kies this was merely an accident of their social role, not a necessity of their nature). Yet each made contributions of her own to the reconfiguration of the public/private distinction. Blow offered insight into the mother/child relation, making Hegel's vague claims about motherhood concrete and granting maternal instinct a professional status. Brackett went further, calling for improved education to undermine the gender privilege inherent in Hegel's theory. Kies' more realistic view of family life challenged Hegel's understanding of the private sphere. Intentionally or otherwise, America's first women Idealists provided a theoretical basis (and often practical opportunities) for women to play at least a quasi-public role in society. And when we consider again their starting point—the system of a man who described them as creatures whose intellects would be hard pressed to grasp the principles of humanity's loftier modes of thought—this in itself is commendable.