

**MATERNAL ETHICS AND OTHER SLAVE
MORALITIES**, by Cynthia Willett.
Routledge Press, 1995.

Reviewed by
John McClendon
University of Kansas

In the context of the hegemonic Anglo-American tradition of specialization, where disparate disciplinary foci are restrained and demarcated in such a manner that discursive and dialogical processes are the solemn domain of technicians of thought, Cynthia Willett's *Maternal Ethics and Other Slave Moralities* is a rare and refreshing philosophical text. The former Kansas University philosopher, now on board at Emory University, spans several intellectual traditions in grappling with the pressing question of ethical subjectivity. Intent on not falling prey to the nagging dualisms so often illustrative of philosophical texts in the Eurocentric/paternalist tradition, Willett excavates the experiential and axiological gems embodied in the intellectual cultures of the putative "marginalized" regions of this society.

Willett's excursus into the manifold traditions of feminism, Africana Studies, post-modernism, and psychoanalysis is structurally adjoined and sustained by a process of reconstruction to which the presuppositions undergirding the Eurocentric bifurcation of self/society, mind/body, and stoic/erotic (here primacy is afforded the first element of each couplet) is radically reconfigured in view of her theory of recognition. The prima facie antithesis in each couplet, Willett detects, is an axiological distortion that is penultimately destructive of the dialectical relationship encompassing both terms and is more fundamentally a species of cultural pathology. By situating the Eurocentric conception of ethical subjectivity to the realm of cultural pathology, Willett is not merely employing an inversion of opposites, where the putative "marginalized" simply assume the locus formerly inhabited by the Eurocentrist/paternalist and hence the last becomes the first; instead what portends is a radical reformulation of philosophical perspective, explicitly at the level of ethical inquiry and implicitly with regard to wider terrain of metaphilosophy. The Western, Eurocentric, declarations of the universality of reason, and its ancillary claims to objectivity and neutrality, Willett unveils them as not only false universalities, i.e., the disguised voice of the oppressor, but furthermore, she confronts the basic assumption that coincides with the more traditional approach to philosophy, viz., the universalizing project per se.

The (neo)post-modernist influence in Willett's reformulation is, in this author's estimation, though arguably not brandishing the imprimatur of Nietzsche, nevertheless, shares in many respects, a Wiggersteinian family resemblance with the Nietzschean ethical project shorn of its racist and sexist dimension. Willett more specifically takes a cautiously post-modernist turn, like Nietzsche and following him, in a more sweeping critique of Western cultural history, Foucault, in what could be termed post-Hegelianism a la continental philosophizing. It is precisely Hegel's master narrative of carthatic freedom, which purges desire and elevates reason, that looms as the pervasive logocentricism of Western thought, and which Willett confronts with the voices, values, concepts and feelings-narratives- posited by the putative marginalized or "slaves" of history. The master text which Hegel, though surely not alone, most prominently tendered before the altar of history as the very incarnation of the world-geist is challenged by Willett via the juxtaposition of the slave narrative.

The links connecting the narratives of European feminism and African American struggles, Willett warns, is not a simple identity better yet what prevails is a correspondence of conceptions of selfhood and freedom. Consistent with her rejection of conflating the particularities of each struggle (indeed Willett recognizes the diverse segments within each movement) Willett eschews the notion of a grand metanarrative which would envelope all oppositional narratives.

The structure of the text reflects Willett's attempt to offer an alternative to the traditional treatment of ethical subjectivity. The overriding premise is that the traditionalists failure to engage the narrative of the marginalized leaves their accounting of ethical subjectivity within the constraints of a psycho-somatic dualisms which renders the body as the prisoner of an ascetic solipsism. The three parts of the text correspond to the three definitive stages of self development as mapped out in the traditional psychological and psychoanalytical paradigms. At issue with the traditional account, is that in each stage, the social character of the self is taken to be unrealized. Full selfhood thus takes place only in the final stage, on the traditionalist account. The third stage, entrance into manhood, is the fully socialized self which Hegel posits is the struggle from recognition, the "master" and "slave" dialectic. Willett is fully aware of the inability by post-modernists, such as Foucault, to escape the abyss of stoicism; they consequently meet Hegel through the "left" door, in a replication of Max Stiner's left Hegelianism, so Willett must turn to Douglass to uncover the alternative axiology. It is precisely this last section which most engaged this reviewer.

The juxtaposition of Hegel's master text and Douglass' slave text, brought vivid reflections, to mind, on the ambiguous legacy of Hegel looming on the landscape of African American intellectual culture. While Willett is cognizant of contemporary African American philosophical discourse with respect to the alternative narrative e.g., Howard McGary, Bill Lawson, Lewis Gordon, et. al., as well the sociologist, Orlando Patterson and the early W. E. B. DuBois of 1903; African American philosophers from William Ferris, Charles Leander Hill, C. L. R. James, Eugene C. Holmes, Martin Luther King Jr., DuBois especially in the period of his preparation of *Black Reconstruction* and political economist Abram Harris in some manner or fashion have critically tackled the Hegelian tradition. The import of exploring that tradition is that there are those such as Holmes, James, DuBois and Harris (at least Harris for most of his intellectual career) who would not endorse the McGary claim that "materialist Marxist theories of alienation based in economics . . . can [not] remedy the "particular estrangement that blacks experience because of the attitude of disrespect generated by the dominated society." The alternative of "a dialectic of spirit" Willett offers and thus her conception of a theory of recognition is relegated to functioning as a species of idealism. This idealist approach, I think, is inadequate for the task of eradicating racism in both its material and ideological dimensions. Though McGary acknowledges that liberalism proves to be impotent in the face of racism, he overlooks the crucial issue that idealism is at the philosophical anchor of liberalism.

This text by Cynthia Willett, of course, cannot be fittingly addressed in the few pages this reviewer has devoted to it. The richness and subtlety of her approach to Hegel's *Phenomenology*, would, no doubt, have been appreciated by Hill and King, both of whom, with the appropriate caveat, took Hegel as their favorite philosopher. This book *Maternal Ethics and other Slave Moralities*, is a must read for all those that view the philosophical enterprise as more than merely interpreting of the world, and, moreover, see the opportunity to change it.