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Žižek's Hegel, Feminist Theory, and Care Ethics

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Abstract: This article presents conceptual bridges that exist between the philosophy of G.W.F Hegel and a feminist ethics of care. To do so, it engages with Slavoj Žižek's contemporary reading of Hegel in concert with existing feminist interpretations of Hegel's thought. The goal of doing so is to demonstrate how both Žižek and a selection of critical feminist thinkers interpret Hegel's perspective on the nature of subjectivity, intersubjective relations and the relationship between the subject and the world it inhabits, in a way that can further our thinking on the feminist ethics of care as a relational and contextualist ethics that foregrounds vulnerability as a condition of existence. These readings of Hegel highlight the radical contingency of human subjectivity, as well as the relationship between human subjectivity and the external world, in a way that is compatible with the feminist ethics of care's emphasis on the particularity, fluidity, and interdependency of human relationships. I argue that this confrontation between care ethics and mainstream philosophy is valuable because it offers mutual contributions to both care ethics as a moral and political theory and the philosophy of Hegel and Žižek.

Keywords: Slavoj Žižek; feminist theory; care ethics; G.W.F. Hegel; subjectivity; vulnerability; relationality

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1. Introduction

This article presents conceptual bridges that exist between the philosophy of G.W.F Hegel and a feminist ethics of care. To do so, it engages with Slavoj Žižek's contemporary reading of Hegel in concert with existing feminist interpretations of Hegel's thought. The goal of doing so is to demonstrate how both Žižek and a selection of critical feminist thinkers interpret Hegel's perspective on the nature of subjectivity, intersubjective relations and the relationship between the subject and the world it inhabits, in a way that can further our thinking on the feminist ethics of care as a "relational" and contextualist ethics that foregrounds vulnerability as a condition of existence [1] (p. 13). These readings of Hegel highlight the radical contingency of human subjectivity, as well as the relationship between human subjectivity and the external world, in a way that is arguably compatible with the feminist ethics of care's emphasis on the particularity, fluidity, and interdependency that is characteristic of human relationships, a reality which care ethicists argue should be better reflected in our dominant moral and political theories (see Gilligan [2]; Held [3]; Tronto [4]). To put it simply, the picture of Hegel's thought that emerges out of the specific interpretations presented in this article is one that acknowledges that human beings, the relationships that they engage in, and their relationship with the natural world, are never static, always changing, and thus require an ethics that recognizes and responds to the fluid contexts of mutually vulnerable individuals and their always evolving relationships with others and the external world.

Hegel was a 19th century German philosopher known for his immense philosophical contributions related to the tradition now known as German Idealism. It is important to note that the reading of Hegel presented in this article is a very particular one and is primarily focused on his theory of the self as discussed in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) [5]. Furthermore, this reading of Hegel draws heavily upon the prominent Slovenian

political philosopher and cultural theorist, Slavoj Žižek, who provides a contemporary interpretation of Hegel's theory of the self. As such, the goal is not to provide an exhaustive assessment of Hegel's thought, and many scholars may disagree with the picture of Hegel which is foregrounded in this article. Despite this, I argue that Hegel is a thinker who lends himself to a variety of legitimate interpretations, and the main purpose of this article is to demonstrate how certain readings of Hegel are amenable to the kind of critical ethics that is evident in the ethics of care, an approach to feminist moral philosophy which focuses on the ethical and political implications of our relational and vulnerable being (see Robinson [1]). Žižek's reading of Hegel presents the subject (i.e., the human self) as a source of radical contingency and, I argue, this picture of the subject can be mobilized to counter the dominant vision of the independent and rationalistic self from the Enlightenment tradition of liberalism. The mainstream liberal conception of the human self is equally a target for the feminist ethics of care which juxtaposes said vision of the subject with a picture of the relational and vulnerable self. The objective is thus not to provide a definitive interpretation of Hegel's thought, it is to demonstrate how Hegel, Žižek, and critical feminist theory can intersect in ways that can further our thinking on the ethics of care and the theory of the self—as relational—that is a key piece of care ethics.

The article proceeds with three main sections. The first presents some of the basic elements of Žižek's reading of Hegel that are relevant to this article; the second foregrounds a selection of feminist interpretations of Hegel that are compatible with Žižek's reading and which will in turn be compatible with the relational ontology of the ethics of care; the final main section identifies some of the points of intersection between these readings of Hegel and recent literature related to the ethics of care, with particular emphasis on the conceptual themes of relationality and vulnerability. Specifically, I will argue that Žižek's emphasis on the instability (or contingency) that characterizes Hegel's model of the human self can be usefully expanded when it is reimagined with the conceptual themes of relationality and vulnerability. At the same time, Žižek's reading of Hegel—in addition to the other feminist thinkers discussed—can offer care ethics additional philosophical resources in further developing its own theory of subjectivity and intersubjective relations which is consistent with its commitment to foregrounding the centrality of relationships at the ontological, epistemological, and ethical levels. The conversation between these approaches contributes to a wider philosophical effort to understand the nature of the human self and intersubjective relations in a way that is rooted in concrete relationships and contexts, and yet, does not presuppose that either individual subjects, nor the relationships that shape them, have, or will take on, any essential or fixed characteristics.

2. Žižek's Reading of Hegel's Theory of the Self

Before turning to Žižek and his reading of Hegel, I would like to offer some brief words on two related approaches in contemporary ethics which seek to foreground the importance of intersubjectivity (i.e., of relationships), and which can also be traced back to aspects of Hegel's thought; these two approaches are the communitarian tradition and the politics of recognition. A brief mention of these approaches, as well as why some feminists see them as inadequate attempts to develop a relational moral and/or political theory, not only provides some additional philosophical context, but also helps to identify how Žižek's approach to Hegel (developed in the rest of the section) differs in a way that can potentially avoid the feminist criticisms levelled at communitarian and recognition-based theories and, based on these differences, can then be potentially compatible with care ethics, especially when reimagined with the themes of relationality and vulnerability.

The communitarian tradition holds a prominent place in the fields of contemporary ethics and political theory because of its thoroughgoing critique of liberalism and the theory of the self as a rational autonomous individual that is a core piece of the liberal tradition. The emphasis on communal life and its role in the development of the human self can be traced back to Hegel's theory of the state and its role in the development of self-consciousness. One of the most well-known examples of the communitarian critique of

liberalism comes from Charles Taylor [6], who argues that liberal conceptions of political society, premised on a belief in the "primacy of rights," reveal a misguided conception of human society, the human self, and the relationship between the two. The liberal tradition, for Taylor [6], can be labelled as a form of "atomism," which neglects the ways in which the human self depends on their community in order to sustain itself and to then develop the "capacities" that are traditionally seen as defining what it is to be human and key to living a fulfilling human life in a particular political community.

One can observe a clear affinity with care ethics here, in the sense that care ethics is also premised on a relational understanding of the self and society, where the self cannot be separated from its relations with others in either theory or practice; furthermore, this relational understanding of the self and social relations also acts as a key premise upon which care ethics makes its own critique of liberalism. However, feminist theorists like Susan Hekman [7] demonstrate why a focus on community, on its own, may not be the best avenue to critiquing liberalism if we wish to take seriously the specific concerns of feminists (including those in the care-tradition) as it relates to the various hierarchical relations of power which can exist between different groups within the same community (pp. 1115–1117). As Hekman helpfully writes:

> One of the central claims of the communitarian critique of liberalism is the assertion that the disembodied "I" of liberalism must be replaced by the embodied "we" of community. A feminist appraisal of this critique, then, must question the constitution of this "we" that the communitarians espouse. [7] (p. 1108)

A related and influential attempt to develop a moral and political theory suitable to a relational understanding of persons and the reality that modern communities, especially in the West, will have within them a range of group differences is that which is commonly known as the "politics of recognition" [8]. The scope of this article does not allow for an extended discussion of a moral or political theory of recognition; however, it is important to note that this approach is influenced by the well-known dialectic of lordship and bondage found in Hegel's *Phenomenology* which is used to convey Hegel's insight that the development of human subjectivity is, at its core, an intersubjective process which requires mutual recognition between human selves. By extension, for theorists of recognition such as Taylor [8], we should extend this ideal of mutual recognition to relations between different social groups within a given society to foster greater levels of social and political inclusivity. This is again an effort to develop an ethics and/or politics which is consistent with a relational understanding of persons, which is attentive to the contexts of individuals within social relations, and where there is a normative concern that these relationships (broadly conceived) allow individuals to flourish within their societies. However, and like Hekman's [7] critique of communitarianism, there are concerns that can be raised about this related recognition-based approach to subjectivity and social relations. For instance, Kelly Oliver [9] raises the concern that a politics of recognition stops short of challenging the unequal relations of power that make the act of recognition necessary; furthermore, Oliver argues that the possible unintended consequence of making recognition the core of a politics of inclusion is that it reaffirms unequal relations of power in which certain social groups are in need of recognition and the dominant group(s) have the power to grant it [9] (p. 474, 476–477).

Both above approaches can be seen as efforts to think of ethics and politics according to a vision of human beings as relational, and, where the development of subjectivity is an inter-subjective process. An emphasis on the importance of community and mutual recognition are ideas that could also be compatible with an ethics of care. However, as demonstrated by the corresponding feminist critique of each of these approaches, there is a risk that certain problematic relations of power can go unchallenged. In other words, the response from communitarians, or recognition theorists, to the realities of human interdependency and difference do not go far enough in some sense. This is where a more Žižekian reading of Hegel's subject can be helpful. As will be demonstrated below, Žižek's reading of Hegel on the subject has a more anti-foundational tone, where the subject is not

defined by any thick or positive characteristics. In fact, for Žižek, subjectivity itself can be thought of as a source of contingency or instability, and this means that intersubjective relations, all the way up to political communities, could also be characterized as contingent. This is important for two reasons. First, Žižek's reading of Hegel is one that is less likely to fall into the idealization of communities, and, in fact, suggests that any community is always vulnerable to change because of the nature of human subjectivity; second, it also allows us to think of human subjectivity in a way that is non-essentializing. I argue that placing these insights into conversation with the themes of relationality and vulnerability, which are important to care ethics, provides mutual benefits. It allows the care ethics perspectives to further reflect on the implications of taking a wholly relational approach to ontology, epistemology, and ethics, and to do so in a way that can further avoid the charges of essentialism (gendered and otherwise) from its critics; on the other hand, reading Žižek alongside feminist theorists (including care theorists) can make this particular approach to Hegelian subjectivity more concrete and relational in ways that are philosophically and politically interesting. Overall, the conversation I stage in this article between Žižek's Hegel, feminist theory, and care ethics, seeks to demonstrate that the contingency, or what Žižek will below call the "negativity," of the subject, is perhaps more a property of relationships as such, rather than of an individual/abstract subject, and that relationships (in all their forms) are always vulnerable to change because to a certain extent they embody the possibility of change. In this sense, the *subject* as the source of *negativity* becomes reimagined as *relationships* as the embodiment of *vulnerability*. I will unpack this line of thought in what follows, beginning with a discussion of Žižek and his reading of Hegel on the nature of subjectivity.

2.1. Intellectual Context of Žižek's Thought

Žižek has engaged extensively in efforts to synthesize the work of G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx and Jacques Lacan in order to investigate the co-constitutive relationship between subjectivity and ideology. This section will deal exclusively with Žižek's reading of Hegel, which is arguably more important to Žižek's broader oeuvre than the influence of Marx. However, Žižek's own reading of Hegel very much takes place through a Lacanian lens, and, therefore, it is more so the influence of Lacan that needs to be briefly elaborated on here. Lacanian psychoanalysis is a vast field of study, and it is outside of the scope of this article to engage in a thorough analysis of said field; therefore, I concern myself mostly with the aspects of Lacan's thought which orient Žižek's reading of Hegel.

The most significant aspect of Lacanian thought is his tripartite schematic of human experience [10]. Human experience, for Lacan, is constituted by three zones—"Imaginary," "Symbolic," and "Real." The "Imaginary" is the zone we inhabit in our everyday life and characterizes how what we commonly call "reality" is experienced at the level of appearance. The "Symbolic" zone is constituted by "the 'big Other', the invisible order that structures our experience of reality, the complex network of rules and meanings which makes us see what we see the way we see it (and what we don't see the way we don't see it)" [11] (p. 119); see also [12] (p. 336). This brings us to the last zone of human experience in the Lacanian structure—the "Real." We can read "the Real" as representing that ultimate remainder which is "'impossible': something which can neither be directly experienced nor symbolized – like a traumatic encounter of extreme violence which destabilizes our entire universe of meaning. As such, the Real can only be discerned in its traces, effects or aftershocks" [11] (p. 120). Of course, the claim here is not that those who experience violence lack an awareness that such violence took place, or that they were implicated in the violent act. It is rather that there are some aspects of human existence which can escape linguistic signification, and because signification structures experience, these events escape total incorporation into a meaningful symbolic whole that can be perceived in conscious thought. In other words, there can be acts of violence that are so extreme, and/or, traumatic, that they cannot be reconciled within our everyday frameworks of meaning. But this does not only go for violence; it also applies to other aspects of reality that escape signification

into everyday frameworks of meaning, some of which are rendered inarticulable because of socio-political practices of exclusion.

This notion of the "real" will come into play as I now turn to an exegetical reading of the preface of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in tandem with one of Žižek's key texts on Hegel, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (2012). The key aspect of said reading will be the way that human subjectivity is framed as a source of "negativity" and "spontaneity."

2.2. Subjectivity, Negativity, and Hegel's Phenomenology

The thematic core of how we will understand subjectivity—i.e., the nature of the human self—in this section is helpfully encapsulated by comparing the two passages below, one from Žižek on some of the defining features of German Idealism as a philosophical tradition, and the other from Hegel who is the central figure of that tradition. It is also helpful to remember that this reading of Hegel ultimately seeks to foreground the perspective that there is a certain contingency (or lack of stability) at the root of all human existence that, when read in line with critical feminist theory and the ethics of care, bolsters an understanding of the self (and the world) as relational, fluid, and vulnerable (understood as both a physical and social vulnerability):

> Two features which cannot but appear opposed characterize the modern subject as it was conceptualized by German Idealism: (1) the subject is the power of "spontaneous" (i.e., autonomous, stating-in-itself, irreducible to a prior cause) synthetic activity. . . . (2) the subject is the power of negativity, of introducing a gap/cut into the given-immediate substantial unity. [12] (p. 106)

> In essence, Spirit is the result of its own activity: its activity is the transcending of what is immediately there, by negating it and returning into itself. We can compare it with the seed of a plant: the plant begins with the seed, but the seed is also the result of the plant's entire life. [13] (p. 82)

The distinct feature of Žižek's reading of Hegel is the emphasis that is placed on the "negativity" of the subject. When I refer to contingency above, it is considering this "negativity," which, as Žižek reads it, implies a kind of existential inability, or vulnerability, the result of which is that individual persons can never achieve a completely fixed or stable identity (or sense of their own subjectivity), and, by extension, a society at large can never achieve a fixed or stable ideological framework to bind subjects to a social framework. By the end of this article, I propose that this idea of "negativity" can be applied to the context of human relationships more broadly, and moreover, I suggest that this points to the simple fact that relationships as such—including relations of care—are always contingent, open, and in fact, vulnerable, to change.

If we are to accept this picture of the subject and its relations with the world (including other subjects) developed through Žižek's reading of Hegel, ahistorical ethical theories premised on the universalizability of moral rules and principles, and the impartial perspective, become theoretically and practically inadequate because they cannot attend to the particularities and fluidity of concrete human experience. On the other hand, a contextualist ethics such as the ethics of care, founded upon an explicitly relational ontology, is well-suited to deal with the simple fact that to be a human subject is to be in a constant state of flux which extends to various networks of relations that range from the personal to the political dimensions. If we are to stay true to the relational ontology of the ethics of care, we would be better served to understand the "negativity" at the root of Hegel's vision of the subject (as Žižek reads him) as a form of ontological and subjective vulnerability. Furthermore, this "negativity" should be understood as not merely a characteristic of an individual subject, but rather as the result of the dynamics of intersubjectivity itself—the fact that any human relationship is a constantly evolving entity resulting from the "negativity," or vulnerability, of the self-in-relation. With this broad perspective in mind, it is helpful to now look more closely at both Hegel's and Žižek's texts which develop these ideas.

2.3. Hegel's Subject

Here, I present a Žižek-inspired reading of Hegel's subject as radically contingent, i.e., as having no determined foundation, and thus as characterized by what Žižek above termed as a kind of spontaneity. This picture of Hegel's subject will be drawn out of a key passage from the preface to his *Phenomenology of Spirit* [5] and will anchor itself in Hegel's metaphorical illustration of human subjectivity as a kind of self-moving-void—i.e., as "the power of negativity" (see Žižek [12] and Kojève [14]).

From the beginning of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, the stated aim is to demonstrate how the history of philosophy has been "the progressive unfolding of truth . . . moments of an organic unity" [5] (p. 2) [1]. At risk of simplification—but perhaps a useful one for the purposes of this article—one of the main goals of Hegel's *Phenomenology* is to reflect upon, and spell out, the journey that human consciousness, the subject, or the "I," took to gain knowledge of itself, to become self-aware or self-conscious. This path that Hegel describes involves a set of progressive stages which include both an engagement with the natural world and with other human beings, or what will come to be recognized as other subjects. In this sense, it demonstrates how subjectivity is always relational, or, intersubjective; subjectivity is importantly constituted in its relationship with otherness. The influence of this aspect of Hegel's thought, especially as encapsulated in the dialectic of "lordship" and "bondage", is deep and pervasive and is perhaps most reflected in contemporary theories of recognition (e.g., Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth); however, it has also been mobilized by feminist theorists (e.g., Oliver [15]) as is explored further below. In either case, the interesting question from which varied readings of Hegel can emerge is whether the specific developmental journey that consciousness goes on was a pre-determined, necessary, or inevitable one? Or was it, to use Žižek's terms, "spontaneous"?

Žižek has elsewhere characterized Hegel's well-known *Philosophy of History* (1840) [13], in which he traces the emergence of self-consciousness throughout world history, as a "retroactive necessity," meaning that it only becomes 'necessary' as we reflect back on the journey, rather than being a necessary journey from the start; this idea of "retroactive necessity" is therefore also applicable to the description of consciousness in the *Phenomenology* [16] (pp. 129–131). Hegel himself emphasizes that it is only in 'remembering' the different stages that consciousness becomes self-consciousness and this characterization is at play in his initial discussion of "subject" (i.e., the human self) and "substance" (e.g., nature) – specifically regarding their eventual unity:

> [T]he living Substance is being which is in truth *Subject*, or, what is the same, is in truth actual only in so far as it is the movement of positing itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering with itself. This Substance is, as Subject, pure, *simple negativity* . . . . Only this self-*restoring* sameness, or this reflection in otherness within itself—not an *original* or *immediate* unity as such—is the True. It is the process of its own becoming, the circle that presupposes its end as its goal, having its end also as its beginning; and only by being worked out to its end, is it actual. [5] (p. 18)

The Žižekian interpretation can be distinguished from readings of Hegel that interpret the development of self-conscious reason through history as a kind of pre-determined and/or dominating force. For instance, such a "panlogical" reading of Hegel, which as Todd McGowan [17] notes is the defining common feature of his critics, would qualify as an example of what Leo Strauss saw as a characteristic of modern (political) philosophy more broadly and which is representative of what Strauss calls the "conquest of nature" [18] (p. 23, 27); what Strauss means here is that human rationality—as shaped by modern science—takes on an inflated and domineering role in both human and non-human existence. As opposed to this reading, thinkers like Žižek, and sympathetic readers of Žižek such as McGowan, emphasize the side of Hegel that describes the development of human consciousness and/or reason in history as "the spontaneous becoming of itself" [5] (p. 20), where "[i]t is reflection that makes the True a result" [5] (p. 21). As Žižek succinctly

explains, "the process of becoming is not in itself necessary, but is the *becoming* (the gradual contingent emergence) *of necessity itself*" [12] (p. 231).

The following passage from the preface of the *Phenomenology* is central to the picture of human subjectivity that is the focus of this article and, I would argue, to the Žižekian reading of Hegel's subject, and takes place within the broader conversation regarding the dialectical process whereby human subjectivity emerges in the world by distinguishing itself from what is other than it:

> The disparity which exists in consciousness between the 'I' and the substance which is its object is the distinction between them, the *negative* in general. This can be regarded as the *defect* of both, though it is their soul, or that which moves them. That is why some of the ancients conceived the *void* as the principle of motion, for they rightly saw the moving principle as the *negative*, though they did not as yet grasp that the negative is the self. [5] (p. 37)

Hegel's evocation of the image of "the *void* as the principle of motion" is significant here since it suggests that it is the radical contingency of the "I" and its ability to take itself as other, as object, which moves consciousness forward along its path. It is the tension ("disparity") within consciousness itself—between the formal/abstract "I" as the void, or the negative, and its existence in/encounter with the world as positive content that leads to a series of progressive moments in the ongoing process of attempting to unify what Hegel labels "subject" and "substance" within/by the human self. In this sense, the self becomes both the "principle of motion" as well as that which is moved: it is self-positing, self-negating, self-moving.

The above passage is, in a sense, the key to answering the question as to whether the path taken by consciousness was a spontaneous one. By characterizing the self as, at bottom, constituted by the negative, or the void, and attributing to this void the property of motion, the result becomes a productive tension (between the "I" and the world) that plays out over historical time, but one that is not inevitable since the moving force remains characterized by contingency—i.e., having no positive determination as its foundation. To reiterate, the void becomes the "principle of motion" when it is faced with a positive externality which must then be reconciled with it; however, one can argue that the void or the negative (for Hegel) remains throughout such acts of reconciliation, and it is this dynamic that makes it possible to develop an interpretation of Hegel's subject as the seat of radical contingency in the world. It is here where the influence of Lacan on Žižek is relevant to Žižek's reading of Hegel, as the void, the "negativity" of subjectivity, becomes associated with the Lacanian notion of "the real" mentioned above [12] (p. 646, 841, 959–960, 963, 967).

The connection between Hegel's subject as a void, or the negative, and Lacan's notion of the "real" revolves around the idea that there is a "gap" in human subjectivity that can never be permanently filled by a particular social identity, system of meaning, or political ideology connecting the subject to the external human and non-human world [12] (p. 963). Žižek reads Hegel's notion of "Absolute Knowing" not as a kind of positive "total knowledge," but as a naming of our inherent "limitation" (we might even say vulnerability), the reality "that there is no external point of reference from which we could perceive the relativity of our own "merely subjective" standpoint" [12] (p. 393). McGowan [17] effectively argues that Žižek's reading of Hegel goes beyond merely positing that there is an "epistemological" gap existing in human subjectivity, and that this gap, or "self-division," is also an "ontological" condition of the human and non-human world.

This theme of the contingency, "negativity," and/or limitations of Hegel's subject—as interpreted by thinkers like Žižek—can also be seen as the focus of the critical feminist readings of Hegel that are discussed in the following section. This discussion thus continues us down a road that involves rethinking the *negativity* of the subject as the *vulnerability* of the subject in such a way where, I argue, a philosophically interesting connection can be made between Žižek's Hegel and a feminist ethics of care. This connection also involves conceiving of Hegel's subject in more explicitly embodied and relational terms, a task which is effectively accomplished by feminist ethicists.

3. Critical Feminist Interpretations of Hegel

In this second main section, I present some important examples of feminist engagements with Hegel's thought; in particular, I am interested in demonstrating how such readings bear a resemblance to more open readings of Hegel's ontological and epistemological claims, akin to Žižek's reading. The discussion in this section is relevant to an understanding of how Hegel has been interpreted by critical feminist thinkers and also serves as a bridge to the third and final main section in which I suggest that these readings of Hegel can contribute to the ethics of care literature and its focus on the philosophical and practical importance of human vulnerability.

First, in Kimberly Hutchings [19,20] and Tuija Pulkkinen [21] we find an explicitly feminist reading of Hegel's formulation of "substance as subject." Second, Judith Butler [22–25] and Luce Irigaray [26,27] are both influenced by a reading of Hegel which foregrounds "the power of negativity," in relation to subjectivity—in the way described by Hutchings and Pulkinnen, in addition to Žižek [12]—while rethinking this "negativity" in a way which foregrounds its concrete embodiment and constitution within particularistic social relations. It is this shift to theorizing subject, substance, and the negative in more embodied and relational terms that make Hegel's notions more amenable to care ethics as a moral and political theory which foregrounds vulnerability as a key aspect of human and social life.

The feminist reading of Hegel I mobilize here is guided by two key aspects related to the *Phenomenology*'s [5] equation of "substance as subject." These two aspects are: (a) the possible feminist ontology and epistemology which can be drawn out of Hegel's philosophy as representative of what Hutchings [19] calls "the simultaneous identity and non-identity of being and truth"; and (b) an emphasis on what Pulkkinen [21] calls the "substance-subject," which refers to an open-ended and inherently self-reflexive ontology that can aid in the effort to overcome traditional conceptual oppositions. Hutchings and Pulkkinen indicate that readings of Hegel usually fall within one of three approaches—"closed," "open," and/or "deconstructive." The distinction between "open" and "closed" has to do with whether Hegel's philosophical system implies a fixed and definitive endpoint vis-à-vis the development of human consciousness in relation to the world, or an open epistemology and ontology which is non-totalizing and always open to a revision of its claims. The "deconstructive" approach seeks to destabilize Hegel's philosophy from within the text itself. Feminist readings of Hegel are typically "open" and "deconstructive" [28] (pp. 4–5). This article primarily follows the "open" interpretation as it is the one that aligns with Žižek's Hegel and, as I argue, is compatible with care ethics. That said, it is worth noting that Butler and Irigaray both incorporate elements of a "deconstructive" reading.

For Hutchings, and calling to mind the point by Žižek [12] above:

> The paradox of Hegel's 'absolute knowledge' is that, if we take it seriously, it is historically contingent and necessarily provisional. A feminist ontology and epistemology which took its cue from Hegel would be one which was premised on the idea of the simultaneous identity and non-identity of being and truth. The identity between being and truth refers to the dependence of thought on experienced being. The non-identity of being and truth refers to the limitlessness of being and the necessary partiality of any particular claim to truth. [19] (pp. 105–106)

Hutchings reads Hegel as foregrounding contingency in his epistemology, ontology, and ethics in the sense that the "limitlessness of being" refers to the hypothesis that human subjects, external nature, the relationship between human subjects and external nature, and the relationships between human subjects themselves, are "self-changing" according to an open-ended and dialectical process situated in historical time. Therefore, we can read a certain degree of spontaneity vis-à-vis "subject-knowers," "objects of knowledge," and relations among "subject-knowers" at the root of Hutchings's reading of Hegel and the "simultaneous identity and non-identity of being and truth" [19] (p. 109). For Hutchings, via Hegel, we can never know reality because reality, and us as part of reality, are in

continuous motion: "Hegel's notion of grasping the truth both as substance and subject expresses this idea of the solid but self-moving medium within which claims are both made and judged" [19] (p. 110).

This understanding of substance and subject, according to Hutchings, is a step towards moving past a number of conceptual antinomies as human subjects are constantly in a co-constitutive relationship with nature, and one another. As Nadine Changfoot succinctly puts it:

> He [Hegel] does not see the subject as an instrument or a medium for ascertaining knowledge and its truth. Instead, he attempts to overcome the dualism of subject and object by viewing knowledge as a phenomenon where subject and object are inseparable with their own history and development. [29] (p. 490)

Furthermore, for Hutchings's Hegel, like Žižek's, this is not a teleological process determined by a transcendent order, or preestablished structures in human cognition. The lesson of Hegel's *Phenomenology* is "to think differently" and beyond "mutually exclusive oppositions" [20] (p. 87). It is worth noting that along with the above distinction between "open," "closed," and "deconstructive" interpretations of Hegel, there is also a division between "realist" and "non-realist" accounts of his ontology. As Allison Stone identifies, Hutchings falls within the "non-realist" camp in that she does not presume that "Hegel believes that reality has a determinate character independent of human practices, and that we can gain knowledge about this reality because it is, in itself, organized conceptually" [30] (p. 304).

One of the key components of Hutchings's reading of Hegel which makes it potentially compatible with care ethics is the inclusion of the theme of human vulnerability. On Hutchings's [20] reading, it is mortality and the presence of death which inscribes a kind of ultimate limitation within the "simultaneous identity and non-identity of being and truth." As Hutchings explains:

> When Hegel distinguishes the realm of animal nature from that of spirit he does so in terms of a distinction between determinate and self-determining being. Self-determination involves a self-conscious recognition of limitation, fundamentally an awareness of death that is not available to animal species. Without this recognition of the mutual dependence of nature and spirit, spirit paradoxically becomes reduced to nature by treating itself as a natural kind that transcends the death of its members. As such, Hegel is cutting the ground from under the feet of any moral authority that . . . takes itself to be grounded in a unique, self-legislating, self-legitimating force that somehow transcends either nature or ethical life. [20] (pp. 93–94)

Thus, Hutchings links our corporeal vulnerability and dependence to the vulnerability and dependence of judgment (see [31]) in a way that calls to mind the broader tradition of standpoint theory in feminist thought (e.g., Haraway [32]; Hartsock [33]; Hekman [34]). The endpoint for Hutchings—who explicitly frames her discussion in reference to Butler and Irigaray—is a form of "Hegelian, heteronomous ethics" [20] (p. 88) wherein

> ethics becomes a painful and incremental process in which reckoning with our own incapacity to know ourselves is intrinsically linked to our potential capacity to communicate with others in ways that are non-assimilative and may make it possible to forge inter-subjective links in the construction of new forms of ethical life. [20] (p. 103) (see also [35])

This is especially relevant for feminism in the sense that, contra Nancy Hartsock [33], the inability to finally "know thyself" can equally be seen as a resistance to "gender codification" [29] (pp. 479, 485–486).

Pulkkinen claims that much of the hesitance in feminist theory when it comes to Hegel – apart from instances of sexism in his work—is with the humanistic portrayal which neglects that side of Hegel concerned with embodied and non-human being. The Hegel exemplified by Hutchings and Pulkkinen, on the other hand, maintains a fuller

understanding of the dialectical nature of subjectivity where "[t]he substance-subject is sheer (self-reflecting) activity and a perpetual motion in concepts: it is thought" [21] (p. 25). Yet, thought is inherent to the material world, and the material world to thought, and this is why Pulkkinen uses the notion of a "substance-subject," rather than replicating readings of Hegel which privilege "subject" over and against "substance" in order to uncover "the essential characteristics of a universalized human being" [21] (p. 24). This also further supports Žižek's reading of Hegel and why sympathetic commentators like McGowan [17] emphasize that the importance of Žižek—in juxtaposition to other radical or emancipatory readings of Hegel—is in the way that he not only focuses on the epistemological dimension of Hegel's reflections on the nature of subjectivity, but also on the implications that this has for a Hegelian perspective on the nature of being as such. The suggestion is that the nature of being is, in some sense, incomplete, and this sense of "incompleteness" [17] (p. 7), I argue, is posited for similar reasons as to why Hutchings [19] (p. 106) uses the language of "limitlessness" in their reading of Hegel. Both of these readings of Hegel suggest that the human subject, the natural world, and/or the relationship between subject and world, is always potentially unstable and open to change; furthermore, this is why Hutchings is most interested in the ethical implications of Hegel's thought, since such an understanding of both self and being seems to undermine dominant approaches to ethics premised upon the notion of the independent, rational, and autonomous self whose humanity is defined in opposition to material being—both human and non-human (e.g., Kantianism).

The above is important in the ways in which these feminist readings of Hegel foreground a relational ontology and epistemology, and, how this relational ontology and epistemology implies vulnerability and interdependency. Ontologically, human subjects are engaged in an ongoing relational process with other human subjects, as well as material being—both human and non-human. This is then seen as inseparable from the dimension of consciousness, meaning ongoing relations between subjects, as well as between the subject and material being—both human and non-human. Rather than reading Hegel's ontology and epistemology as a dialectical process moving towards a fixed endpoint, Hutchings and Pulkkinen instead focus on the ways in which the relational character of this ontology and epistemology suggests an inherent vulnerability and interdependency both at the level of embodied being, but also at the level of thought, which, in fact, are seen as inseparable. This reading of Hegel is more compatible with the reading of Hegel offered by Žižek, which, as McGowan pointed out, is in juxtaposition to the "panlogical" readings which are often "closed" and/or "realist" to use some of the categories cited above. A brief examination of how this reading of Hegel is also discernable in the work of two important contemporary feminist theorists, who have a significant presence in the above feminist interpretations of Hegel—Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray—further demonstrates the above claims and serve as a point of transition to the final main section of this article where I suggest that this particular reading of Hegel can be put into a philosophically interesting conversation with care ethics because it aligns with the latter's emphasis on relationality, embodiment and vulnerability.

Judith Butler's sustained interrogation of the politics of identity can be traced back to their engagement with the Hegelian themes of "desire" and "recognition" as found in *Subjects of Desire* [23]. Butler's presentation and mobilization of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in their earliest work is characterized by an "open" and "non-realist" reading (see above), which sees the development of consciousness as "neither static nor teleological" and one "that knows no closure" [23] (p. x) (see also [25] (pp. 172–174) [36,37]). Furthermore, the Hegelian subject is described as exemplifying "a critical mobility" [23] (p. xiv) and "is an ek-static one, a subject who constantly finds itself outside itself" [23] (p. xv). The theme of movement is crucial here, and the notion of "ek-stasis" suggests that the "substance-subject" is characterized by a perpetual moving from inside to "outside," or, between "identity" and "non-identity" [19]. For Butler, it is the interplay between desire and recognition that constitutes the source of this movement, and this is at the root of their theory of "subjection" which is subsequently developed in *The Psychic Life of Power* [22].

The foregrounding of desire in Butler's reading of Hegel is both theoretically and practically significant in the sense that it participates in an investigation of subjectivity which sees human subjects as a product of our embodiment and as being implicated in social relations of power. As such, it contributes to the larger goals of critical feminist theory by offering tools for social and political analysis and critique. If desire can be shown to be a crucial element in the development of a self-conscious substance-subject, then this means that we could be said to "reason in our most spontaneous of yearnings" [23] (p. 2) such that desire and rationality are co-constitutive and co-implicated in a way which undermines traditional humanist conceptions of the subject as "unified" and/or "coherent" [23] (pp. 2–6). Desire in this sense is not something that the subject is said to possess but is rather that movement which "perpetually displaces the subject" [23] (p. xv). We can see an affinity with the interpretation of Hegel offered thus far in the sense that the defining feature of Hegel's subject, for these thinkers, is that it is a subject that is constantly vulnerable to a "self-loss," and, in fact, moves itself towards this loss [23] (p. xv).

Desire, in Butler's reading of Hegel, is the source of motion which characterizes the relationship between subject and substance and constitutes said relation as the basis for the ontology of "substance-subject" elaborated by Pulkkinen [21]. Epistemologically, desire becomes the desire for self-knowledge in relation to a world that at first appears external:

> Insofar as desire is this principle of consciousness' reflexivity, desire can be said to be satisfied when a relation to something external to consciousness is discovered to be constitutive of the subject itself. On the other hand, desire's dissatisfaction always signifies ontological rupture, the insurpassability of external difference. [23] (p. 8)

In this sense, "desire is an interrogative mode of being, a corporeal questioning of identity and place" [23] (p. 9). "Negativity," as discussed above, is further rendered "corporeal" in the sense that it becomes an embodied approach towards difference, which participates in a "cyclical process" in an unending effort to gain a better "sense of self" [23] (pp. 18, 13). Butler's reading of Hegel therefore puts desire front and center in the constitution of the substance-subject. Subject and substance are enmeshed because of the movement caused by desire, "the subject's desire to discover itself as substance" [23] (p. 21). This point is crucial in the sense that it serves as the grounds for the "heteronomous ethics" which Hutchings [20] seeks to mobilize for critical feminist theory. "Desire" is that which moves the substance-subject towards, and in relation to, "otherness." The limitations of the human body, which house a physically and socially situated consciousness, simultaneously provides the grounds for an "infinite" engagement with the other propelled by a desire to recognize the self as a broader relation of "interdependence" with said other, as another self-conscious substance-subject [23] (pp. 35–41). In other words, for Butler, negativity becomes a founding element within the "embodied identity" [23] (p. 43) of a self-conscious substance-subject which recognizes its limitation, and thus "dependence" on, others as the means through which to fulfill its "desire-for-another-desire," and thus, a more "self-sustaining picture of himself." But, at the same time, the desire for recognition means that one's sense of identity is constantly open to being destabilized and shaped by the otherness it confronts [23] (p. 42).

This exposition of Butler's early reading of Hegel is significant for two reasons: first, is the idea that "desire" compels "an act of willful self-estrangement" in its effort to satisfy its desire as mediated by alterity [23] (pp. 49–50), which is helpful in terms of thinking about the notion of the "void" in Hegel's theory of the self as presented in the previous section; and second, this means that "desire" is connected to "recognition," as the desire to be "recognized" within an eventual "community" of "desiring" others [23] (pp. 57–58). This interplay, or tension, between desire and recognition as embodying negativity is key to understanding Butler's notion of "subjection" [22] as that which simultaneously constrains and enables human agency and again foregrounds the themes of vulnerability and interdependency in terms of how subjects come to be self-conscious of themselves in relation to a world of other subjects and external nature; however, Butler's work following

Subjects of Desire demonstrates how such relations, including relations of "recognition," are always implicated in multifaceted relations of power and, importantly, as situated in the realm of discourse. Butler also alludes to the relationship between the ontological and epistemological dimensions of Hegel's thought in a way reminiscent of both Žižek's and Hutchings's reading of the Hegelian notion of "universality," and in which Butler foregrounds the role of difference and opposition:

> And just as Hegel insists on revising several times his very definition of 'universality', so he makes plain that the categories by which the world becomes available to us are continually remade by the encounter with the world that they facilitate. We do not remain the same, and neither do our cognitive categories, as we enter into a knowing encounter with the world. Both the knowing subject and the world are undone and redone by the act of knowledge. [24] (p. 20)

Again, the focus on these approaches to Hegel seek to foreground the relational nature of both his epistemology and ontology in a way that can intersect with a feminist ethics of care. Indeed, this focus is the reason why this article presents commentaries on Hegel's work which suggest a picture of the Hegelian subject as being engaged in an open and fluid relationship with the external world at the level of both knowledge (subject) and being (substance), as well as in the interconnection between these two levels.

Irigaray, the final thinker I discuss in this section, is somewhat distinct in that they have been more openly hostile to Hegel's philosophy in their substantive body of work; however, the notion of "sexual difference" in Irigaray's work, at the very least, can be seen as incorporating the notion of "negativity" discussed throughout this article in a way which continues the effort to think about an ontological and epistemological perspective—coming out of Hegel's philosophy—which foregrounds an image of the self and world as always unfinished due to the fact that difference and opposition are an inherent feature of both social and natural reality. Therefore, they could be classified as ultimately offering more of a "deconstructive" reading of Hegel according to Hutchings and Pulkkinen [28], but perhaps this is only because Irigaray, unlike Žižek, Hutchings, and/or Butler, begins with a more "panlogical" [17], "closed" [28], and/or "realist" [30] interpretation of Hegel.

The moments in Irigaray's texts where Hegel is explicitly rejected all refer back to a particular reading of Hegel's "absolute spirit" [27] (p. 13) which does not easily align with the "open" and "non-realist" [30] readings offered by Hutchings [19,20], Pulkkinen [21], or Butler [23–25]. This leads to a reading which, somewhat similar to Simone De Beauvoir [38] and Hartsock [33], sees *spirit-conscious-of-itself* ("absolute spirit") as the paradigmatic form of abstract masculinity which has underpinned the traditional humanist subject and relegated women as its constitutive outside in both theory (particular vs. universal) and practice (family vs. politics). As Tina Chanter helpfully puts it:

> For Hegel the relation between family and state is both necessary and hierarchically arranged in terms of the relation between parts and whole. Similarly, the relation between the sexes is ordered according to the same schema, the female representing the family, and the male representing the state . . . . In a negative movement, the individual departs from his familial grounding in the organic life, supported by the mother, and moves on out into the public sphere, the realm in which his individuality acquires a higher, universal, communal significance. [39] (p. 108)

Therefore, even while Hegel acknowledges the integral role of the family to the broader political community in a way that is relatively progressive for his time, this apparent valorization of mothers, to some of his feminist critics, is nevertheless left open to the charge of maintaining traces of "phallocentric" logic [40] and traditional (gendered) hierarchies between nature-culture, subjective-objective, particular-universal, and family-state (among others) [19] (p. 53), [27] (pp. 22-25), [39] (pp. 88–95), [41] (p. 29), [42].

That being said, in both the *Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993) and *I Love to You* (1996) we see Irigaray explicitly, and simultaneously, mobilize "Hegelian logic" in which "the

relation between the universal and the particular becomes a central theme" [43] (pp. 457–458) in thinking through the ontological, epistemological and ethical consequences of taking seriously the "real" of "sexual difference." In this aspect of their work, Irigaray does not actually seem as distant from the interpreters of Hegel explored in this article. While the historical account of Hegel's social and political thought offered by Irigaray is one that (rightly) identifies the appearance of gendered hierarchies and logics in both the *Phenomenology of Spirit* [5] and *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1821) [44], they also mobilize aspects of Hegel's ontology and epistemology, as encapsulated in the notion of a self-moving substance-subject with negativity as its principle of motion. As we see below, there are substantive amendments to these aspects of Hegel's thought (as interpreted by feminist re-readings above); however, it nevertheless ultimately engages in an "open" and "deconstructive" reading of Hegel to aid in the task of thinking the "real" as "sexual difference" as both subject and substance. Taking this into account is helpful not only for clarifying the ontological status of sexed difference in Irigaray, but simultaneously opens the door to the possibility of reading Irigaray and Butler alongside the ethics of care, despite their differing theoretical commitments.

Given that Irigaray's positing of an ontology of "sexual difference" is often controversial [45] (pp. 26–27), it is perhaps helpful to first return to Žižek's notion of "retroactive necessity"—discussed above in the context of his reading of Hegel—and approach Irigaray's notion of sexual difference in a similar fashion. The notion of "retroactive necessity" may be a useful framing device in the sense that it allows us to see "sexual difference" as simultaneously socially constructed, on the one hand, but nevertheless a now stable feature of our (social) ontology with real and lasting effects, on the other. These two aspects of sexual difference are primary features of Irigaray's ethics. A focus on sexual difference takes seriously an analysis of historical relations of (gendered) power, but, at the same time, also points to a future which is more open to difference. It is in this reading of Irigaray's notion of sexual difference—as a retroactive necessity—which also provides the possibility of overlap with Butler's thought. As Hutchings remarks, Irigaray and Butler, despite their differences, both exemplify a form of "Hegelian, heteronomous ethics" [20] (p. 88). These ideas can be demonstrated by a brief look at Irigaray's *Ethics of Sexual Difference* [26] and *I Love to You* [27] in light of the analysis provided up to this point.

"Sexual difference" constitutes the "real" for Irigaray in the sense that "subjectivity" is co-constitutive with the embodied reality of being "sexed" [27] (pp. 13–14), [26] (p. 6). As Irigaray puts it: "It is evident that female and male corporeal morphology are not the same and it therefore follows that their way of experiencing the sensible and of constructing the spiritual is not the same" [27] (p. 38). In other words, everyone is born first as a natural being, a body, and this basic and simple reality is posited as an inescapable and ontological fact for Irigaray. Consequently, there is never just one "nature," "culture," and/or, "subjectivity," but rather, always a "sexed" nature, culture, and/or, subjectivity, and this means each realm is always "at least two" [27] (pp. 13–14, 35–37), [26] (p. 68). I argue that this fundamental aspect of Irigaray's thought aligns them with the above readings of Hegel which emphasize that human consciousness (subject) and human and non-human matter (substance) are always partial, incomplete, and fluid, especially in the sense that these two realms are engaged in an interconnected and ongoing relationship as described most vividly by Hutchings's idea of the "limitlessness of being" and the "identity and non-identity of being and truth" [19] (pp. 105–106).

The further ontological significance of this fact is the way it allows Irigaray to read Hegel's notion of "negativity" as rooted in nature and our status as embodied and "sexed" beings. Whether this claim is open to a charge of biological essentialism is up for debate, but I argue that we can read this ontological claim as one of "retroactive necessity" rather than biological essence; in other words, the claim here is that socio-historical conditions have made it so that the initial source of social identification vis-à-vis a subject is determined along the relational axis of sex—one is born a male or female. Depending on how one's embodied being is designated according to this relational axis significantly impacts the

trajectory of their further development as a subject in relation to other subjects, and leads to the two "sexes," each taken as a group, having their own "history" [27] (p. 47). These relations are always socially constructed, and one of Irigaray's main goals is to demonstrate how the history of patriarchy has predominately suppressed the development of a specifically "female identity" and culture, thus simultaneously limiting the relation between the sexes themselves in a way which is detrimental to society as a whole, and any truly emancipatory or egalitarian goals it may have [27] (pp. 5, 15, 27, 38), [26] (pp. 67–68).

Irigaray even frames this notion of sexual difference in the language of "negativity" when they write:

> The negative in sexual difference means an acceptance of the limits of my gender and recognition of the irreducibility of the other. It cannot be overcome, but it gives a positive access—neither instinctual nor drive-related—to the other. [27] (p. 13)

Irigaray distinguishes this from the "negative" presented in Hegel, which Irigaray sees as representative of a (masculinist) "mastery of consciousness" [27] (pp. 13, 35). There is sometimes an apparent disjuncture between Irigaray's assessment of Hegel's philosophy, and then their mobilization of particular aspects of Hegel's ontology. This seems to be primarily a result of Irigaray's reading of Hegel's absolute spirit as teleological, oriented towards a fixed "universal" end which subsumes all particularity, and thus excludes women from shaping human culture (e.g., [27] (p. 21), [26] (p. 108)). I argue that Irigaray is actually more aligned with Hutchings [19,20], Pulkkinen [21] and Butler [23–25] than it seems on first glance, and this is primarily based on the way that Irigaray incorporates a Hegelian understanding of "negativity" within their ontology and ethics of sexual difference; this involves the epistemological claim that human subjectivity is an always unfinished project, which is related to the ontological claim that concrete reality, or nature, is always self-divided, and we can see this self-division most clearly in the fact of sexual difference.

Therefore, the recognition of sexual difference is equally the recognition of difference as a fundamental attribute of nature, and thus presents consciousness with inescapable limitations vis-à-vis any effort to totalize or establish closure in either nature or culture. In other words, male and female—as rooted in relational and differential embodiment—are "irreducible" one to the other and represent within nature, as in human consciousness, its own *limit-point* [27] (pp. 39–41). Somewhat ironically, given that on the surface Butler and Irigaray begin with opposing orientations towards the whole of Hegel's thought, Irigaray mobilizes a re-conceptualization of the category of universality that is reminiscent of Butler's in their account of how particular instantiations of gender relate to its universal form:

> The universal thus results from a retroactive and non-projective constitution. From a return to reality and not from an artificial construct. I belong to the universal in recognizing that I am a woman. This woman's singularity is in having a particular genealogy and history. But belonging to a gender represents a universal that exists prior to me. I have to accomplish it in relation to my particular destiny. [27] (p. 39) (see also (p. 27))

At first glance, a reader may presume a divergence with Butler's approach given the assertion of "a return to reality" in the above passage. However, if we understand sexual difference as a retroactive necessity, and in relation to substance-subject, then the passage becomes surprisingly compatible with a reading of gender as constituted through "subjection" [22] and a relation to universality as theorized by Butler [24,25], at least at the level of formal logic. For both Butler and Irigaray, there is a co-constitutive relationship between thought and matter, which then entails that any notion of universality is one that has to be reproduced in concrete social practices. Furthermore, universality and particularity stand in a relation such that universality can be a space for change [24,25].

Therefore, Irigaray ultimately roots the idea of universality in embodied being by equating it with sexual difference:

> Without doubt, the most appropriate content for the universal is sexual difference. Indeed, this content is both real and universal. Sexual difference is an immediate natural given and it is a real and irreducible component of the universal. [27] (p. 47)

In the above passage, Irigaray identifies universality with negativity; sexual difference, as universal, is the name for the "irreducible" relation of difference that exists between the sexes as such. For Irigaray, sexual difference is that which concretely organizes subjectivity and the societies in which those subjectivities are located across socio-political time-space. It further reconciles universality and particularity within a non-totalizing "dialectic" of "sexual difference" in the sense that universality stands for the "irreducible" relation that exists between concrete beings who themselves each embody both universality-particularity as singular beings who nonetheless relate to one of the two universals of "gender" [27] (p. 51). Furthermore, even though Žižek's engagement with "French Feminism" has not been extensive or particularly collaborative [46], we could read Irigaray as positing that the "void," "gap" and/or "negativity" at the heart of Žižek's Hegel-inspired conceptualization of the subject becomes the more relational and productive gap that exists between the "competing universalities" [25] of masculine and feminine, where there is no possibility of reconciliation into a singular, unified notion of universal humanity. In other words, for Irigaray, it becomes the event of reconciliation without a "unisex[ual]" "absolute spirit" as its result [27] (p. 105), where each "I belong[s] to a gender, which means to a sexed universal and to a relation between two universals" [27] (p. 106). Lastly, if we read these claims as retroactively necessary—i.e., that they could have been otherwise–and according to the insight that external reality (nature as substance) and the way that nature is conceptually understood and posited by consciousness (as subject) is a co-constitutive relation, then we can interpret sexual difference as both really-existing but not essentially determined in any way.

So, why is Irigaray important to a discussion of how Hegel—especially as interpreted through Žižek—can be shown as having points of intersection with feminist philosophy, and ultimately with the ethics of care? The first reason is the simple fact that, despite being critical of Hegel's philosophy, Irigaray's notion of sexual difference can be seen as at least partly constituted by a "deconstructive" reading of some of Hegel's ideas; furthermore, and as demonstrated above, there are some interesting connections that can be made between Irigaray's philosophy and Žižek's reading of Hegel. The second reason is that Irigaray's re-mobilization of some of these Hegelian themes further explores an understanding of Hegel's epistemology and ontology as a relational epistemology and ontology that is a potentially interesting addition to thinking about the ethics of care as a contextualist ethics which contains important assumptions about the nature of the human self and its relation to being (including other embodied selves) and which foregrounds the dimensions of vulnerability and interdependency. Irigaray focuses on the idea of "sexual difference" to present these themes, and demonstrates the implications of sexual difference for thinking about both nature and culture; however, we can extrapolate from this fundamental difference (as Irigaray sees it), and apply it to thinking about relationships and differences more broadly (i.e., beyond differences between the "sexes") and, of particular import for this argument, to the relational ontology of the ethics of care which highlights the particularity of contexts when it comes to individual human selves—understood as embodied and vulnerable—and their relationships with others and the socio-political realm at large. In the final main section, I situate some of these ideas and lines of thought in the context of some contemporary literature on the ethics of care as a moral and political theory. I suggest that we continue to make Hegel's philosophy of the subject increasingly relational and embodied, and therefore more compatible with a care ethics' perspective, by rethinking the theme of *negativity* in the language of *vulnerability*.

4. Points of Intersection between Žižek, Feminist Readings of Hegel, and Care Ethics

In this final main section, I discuss some possible points of intersection between the readings of Hegel offered above and recent literature related to the ethics of care. As noted previously, the ethics of care is concerned with vulnerability, relationality, and interdependency as core features of the human experience which must be accounted for in our moral and political theories (e.g., Robinson [1]); these themes are central to thinking about the fluid nature of human relationships, and, by extension, points to the strengths of a contextualist ethics of care which explicitly seeks to bring to light and further develop forms of moral reasoning which attend to concrete others and the particulars of their various and multifaceted relationships in both the so-called "private" *and* "public" realms (see Gilligan [2]; Held [3]; Tronto [4]). The argument is that Žižek's focus on Hegel's picture of the human subject as a continuously unfinished project, and the relational ontology and epistemology that is connected to this claim and which is developed by feminist readers of Hegel, is even more compelling when we reflect on the nature of human vulnerability and relationship more broadly. For instance, the descriptions so far often call to mind the image of an abstract individual encountering the world, or a singular individual encountering another. In Žižek's discussion, as well as feminist interpretations of Hegel, it always came back to the notion of the human self as an incomplete entity or actively destabilizing force. However, what if we scale this up, and, consistent with the ethics of care's emphasis on concrete relationships, what if it is relationship—as such—rather than the abstract self, which is the source of the *negative*? Furthermore, what if we rethink the notion of *negativity* as reflective of our inherent *vulnerability*—both material and immaterial? Care ethics is key to this rethinking and this philosophical conversation–between Žižek's Hegel, feminist theory, and care ethics—can subsequently expand both the understanding and possible application of the concept of vulnerability within the ethics of care, as well as other related traditions which foreground a relational understanding of subjectivity.

The above also encourages us not to privilege the philosophical model of relationship as an encounter between only two abstract selves, and instead, to think about *relationship* as its own philosophical category which foregrounds the concrete vulnerability of *subjects-in-relation* in a way that can be scaled all the way up to political communities. Doing so would demonstrate the relational nature of all the different aspects of our lives, but also demonstrate their instability and thus fluidity. It is also in this sense that the ethics of care is not just an ethics for personal intimate relationships but is a broader moral and political theory capable of wide-ranging social analysis and critique all the way up to the sphere of international and/or global relations (e.g., Held [3], Robinson [47]). I unpack some of these lines of thought below by engaging with feminist reflections on vulnerability and Carol Gilligan and Naomi Snider's [48] recent reflections on the status of "relationship" in contemporary North American society.

4.1. Vulnerability

As Danielle Petherbridge notes, the notion of vulnerability has often appeared in the history of philosophy, and its remobilization is a key component of contemporary feminist ethics:

> Images of vulnerability have populated the philosophical landscape from Plato to Hobbes, Fichte to Hegel, Levinas to Foucault, often designating a sense of corporeal susceptibility to injury, or of being threatened or wounded and therefore have been predominantly associated with violence, finitude, or mortality . . . . However, more recently, feminist theorists have begun to rethink corporeal vulnerability as a critical or ethical category, one based on our primary interdependence and intercorporeality as human beings. [49] (p. 589)

Importantly, the foregrounding of vulnerability on the part of feminist ethicists, including care ethicists, takes the form of an "existential" premise. Hanna-Kaisa Hoppania and Tiina Vaittinen's understanding of the different meanings of "care" is helpful here:

> We understand care as a "corporeal relation". This is a form of political relatedness that does not begin with the practices of caring, as care ethicists would argue, but from the living organism of the vulnerable body that makes the labour of care an absolute necessity for human beings as individuals and as a species. Since all bodies are vulnerable to decay and disease and *no* body can exist without the aid of other bodies, the vulnerable body belongs to each and every one of us. This is, indeed, an existential fact of human life. [50] (p. 74)

For Sandra Laugier, our everyday practices of care come to reflect this sense of vulnerability as a key facet of our "ordinary reality," and requires a contextualist ethics that responds to the unique manifestations of this generalized vulnerability [51] (p. 219).

Vulnerability as explicated within a relational ontology of care also breaks down the binary between nature (substance) and society (subject), which, as explored in the previous analysis of the substance-subject, is an important component to feminist theory. Estelle Ferrarese [52] explains this point in a way that is reminiscent of Hutchings [19,20] and Pulkkinen [21] on Hegel when they write:

> Endowing oneself with a new ontology—that is by positing the idea that we are all vulnerable—might only confirm that there exist two levels of reality, each of them hermetic, or *pure*. In these conditions, the political, as representing the social world, would be distinguished—possibly to combine with it—from a natural world, which would be that of vulnerability. Instead, our view is that the task of theories of vulnerability is to recall the inseparability of the two levels. It is worth dwelling on the fact that it is the nature-social circle, and the impossibility of opening it, which makes it possible to grasp the stakes of vulnerability . . . . Social world and ontological vulnerability must be thought of conjointly in order to show how they engender and co-produce each other. [52] (p. 154)

Furthermore, in making this "ontological" claim there is an equally related epistemological claim in the sense that when the nature of (social) being is posited as vulnerable and relational, it follows that knowledge about said world must be equally vulnerable and relational. Knowledge claims are necessarily made within the fluid contexts of relations, relations which involve differing perspectives and positions of power, and this applies to both intimate relations of care, but also broader social, political and/or economic relations. As such, ethics should involve always being mindful of the vulnerability of human and non-human materiality, but also of the vulnerability of conscious thought, and by extension, of judgment [31].

4.2. Relationality

In *Why Does Patriarchy Persist?*, Gilligan and Snider [48] provide a relevant and contemporary examination of how vulnerability and interdependency, as philosophical concepts, take a very particular shape in contemporary Western society. The situatedness of this analysis is important, as we can think of the idea of a relational ontology as a formal principle communicating that life is relational, but then see that this relationality takes on many different forms in concrete social life, and some of these forms can even reflect a denial of our vulnerability and relationality as ontological features of our existence. Furthermore, Gilligan and Snider [48] demonstrate how a communal state of denial of our existential vulnerability and relationality can reflect gendered structures of power, and are especially constitutive of patriarchal norms. This is a helpful example of how we might think of subject and substance as engaged in a co-constitutive relation when it comes to how the individual subject, and a society, considers and mediates its material embodiment, and the particular example of patriarchy provides a helpful means by which to bridge the reading of Hegel (by Žižek and a selection of feminist theorists) with care ethics.

The underlying premise of Gilligan and Snider's study is that there is a fundamental "connection between the psychology of loss and the politics of patriarchy" [48] (p. 31). The "psychology of loss" entails deeply engrained gendered modes of engaging in social

relations which serve as a means to avoid the trauma of loss, which, as mentioned a number of times in the text, appears most obviously in the fact of human mortality [48] (pp. 88–91). These gendered responses are united in the fact that they "denigrate and detach from those very relational capacities necessary for repairing the ruptures that patriarchy and all forms of hierarchy create" [48] (p. 90). Within this process, the "sacrifice of love" enables various social divisions and restrains our opposition in the sense that we become less able and/or willing to recognize ourselves as relational, vulnerable, and interdependent beings, and, as such, stop responding to others in light of that relational fact and the corresponding need for care that can arise [48] (p. 33).

More broadly, and following Gilligan and Snider, we could say that the denial of a relational social ontology premised upon shared vulnerability and interdependency becomes a constitutive function for forms of social, political, and economic hierarchy. This involves a mutually reinforcing relationship between social, material, and political structures premised upon an individualist social ontology, on the one hand, and a particular psychological reaction to vulnerability on the other hand. This psychological reaction adopts an atomistic view of society as a requirement for participating in contemporary social relations as organized around a series of hierarchies and divisions. In other words, once these hierarchies are established, individual participation in social relations requires a form of subjectivity which pre-emptively suppresses "our relational desires and capacities" [48] (p. 12). Gilligan and Snider thus identify a key "paradox: we give up relationship in order to have "relationships," meaning a place within the patriarchal order" [48] (p. 14) (see also (p. 18)). Snider, in reflecting on her reaction to the death of her father puts this well when she writes:

> Could it be, I began to wonder, that my psychological response to death—the sacrifice of love to avoid further loss—highlights the psychological dynamic of a culture which forces the sacrifice of connection for the sake of hierarchy? [48] (p. 31)

In light of feminist readings of Hegel, which see the subject as engaged in a dialectical relationship with other subjects and the broader cultural/natural context with which they are co-constitutive, we could say that the picture of the self that appears out of Gilligan and Snider's [48] study is one that experiences a relation of "non-identity" [19] between their subjective desire and capacity for relation, on the one hand, and an objective world which is premised instead on norms more appropriate to an individualist ontology; to use other Hegelian language, we could perhaps say that there is an apparent conflict between the "subjective will" of individual subjects and the social, political and economic institutions in which they find themselves, and that the "subjective will" of individuals and socio-political institutions, as the "objective" expression of "human will" and reason, is thus in need of some sort of reconciliation [13] (pp. 40–42). However, Gilligan and Snider do identify a source, or strategy, for an attempted reconciliation between our intuitive sense of self as vulnerable and relational beings and the structures which constitute the broader social world; they call this "healthy resistance." As Gilligan and Snider write:

> Put simply, our relational desires and capacities, which are present in rudimentary form from the very outset, keep opening a potential for love and democracy while the politics of patriarchy keep shutting it down. Knowing this, the solutions become twofold: one, joining the healthy resistance and by doing so encouraging the psychology that would transform the political; and two, naming and taking on the cultural and political forces that, by subverting the capacity to repair, drive a healthy resistance into despair and detachment, thus paving the way to oppression and injustice. [48] (pp. 120–121)

In this sense, Gilligan and Snider [48] are suggesting that subjects within the "culture of patriarchy" can be the source of *negativity*, engaged in a process whereby the individual self is transformed alongside the broader social and political environment in a dialectical relationship. This source of negativity, however, depends on the human subject's embodied

desire for relationship and on a recognition of our inherent vulnerability and dependency on others. Hoppania and Vaittinen discuss a similar dynamic when it comes to the notion of *care*, in particular, when they write that: "when care is not adequately accounted for in some sphere of life, it starts to challenge that very sphere" [50] (p. 87). In both instances, there is a moment of contradiction, or "non-identity" to use Hutchings's [19] language, which then, through a process of negation, can lead to a form of transformation that seeks to reconcile the self-understanding of subjects—as ontologically vulnerable and relational—and what comes to be seen as an external (social) world that is structured around a denial of this fundamental reality. In a sense, *vulnerability*, and its denial by dominant cultural norms, is what can render those norms themselves as vulnerable [50] (pp. 87–88) and this very concrete example echoes the foregrounding of death in Hutchings's [20] reading of Hegel.

This continues a line of thought that seeks to make the Žižekian-Hegelian notion of the "negativity" of the subject a more embodied feature of human existence and was aided by the reflection on Hegelian themes in the work of Butler and Irigaray. With this present section, we see that via a mobilization of concepts such as *care*, *vulnerability*, and *relationality*, we can further render this notion of "negativity" as an embodied and relational "negativity" which can be implicated in how the relational ontology of the ethics of care can be an effective means to both understand contemporary social relations, but also constitute a contextualist moral and political theory by which to critique and potentially transform those relations—these concepts are both personal and political. The notion of relationality thus suggests a connection between the levels of philosophical reflection on the ontological and epistemological features of human life and also provides normative guidance for how to engage in relationship—both personal and political—considering our self-understanding as vulnerable and relational beings in need of care in particular and fluid contexts.

5. Conclusions

In this article, I have sought to uncover connections between Slavoj Žižek's influential reading of G.W.F Hegel and the feminist ethics of care. This adds to previous efforts to put thematic elements of care ethics in conversation with Žižek's philosophy [53]. I argue that this confrontation between care ethics and more 'mainstream' philosophy is valuable because it offers mutual contributions to both care ethics as a moral and political theory and the philosophy of Hegel and Žižek. For care ethics, a reading of Hegel through Žižek on the question of subjectivity contributes further resources to thinking about the nature and implications of vulnerability and interdependency in a way that does not require positing a 'thick' or essentialist description of either individual subjects or their relationships; on the other hand, uncovering some of the points of compatibility between Žižek's reading of Hegel, explicitly feminist mobilizations of Hegel, and care ethics, can contribute to Žižek's Hegelian reflections on the nature of the contemporary self and ideology within the social and political context of global capitalism in ways that better highlight the related themes of gender, embodiment, and relationality as potential examples and sources of the Hegelian negative reimagined according to a broadened understanding of vulnerability as a philosophical concept [2]. This was accomplished by first unpacking the theory of the self that is explored in Žižek's reading of Hegel, second, through a presentation of how Hegel has been interpreted and mobilized in critical feminist theory, and third, by demonstrating how the picture of the self and its relation to the world as presented by both Žižek and feminist thinkers can also be put into a philosophically interesting dialogue with the themes of vulnerability and relationality as presented by some contemporary theorists of care.

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Notes:

1. The in-text citations for Hegel's *Phenomenology* in this article refer to the paragraph numbering used in the referenced version of the text rather than the text's page numbers.
2. The question of whether Žižek himself would agree with this reimagining of the negative as a form of vulnerability is of course a subject for further discussion.

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