

# Recognition as an Ethic of Living Beings

## A Brief Proposal

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Can the concept of recognition provide a meaningful framework for a distinctly *ethical* understanding of the relationship between humans and non-human nature? There are some immediate barriers to answering this question in the affirmative. In both historical and contemporary writings on the topic, the concept of recognition is employed to articulate a unique relation and interaction between two individuals who are potentially or actually equals. The equality in question concerns their status as deserving of certain forms of respect and treatment as free and rational persons, and the adjectives, *mutual* or *reciprocal*, that are so often attached to the concept, are inseparable from the very idea. By definition then, recognition applies exclusively to a relation between human beings, and even more emphatically, according to Fichte, between individuals with a recognizable “human shape” (see FNR §§5-7).<sup>1</sup> In the more well-known, Hegelian paradigm of recognition, this idea is further developed into a theory of historically developing social practices and institutions that are essential for mediating mutual recognition — in the shapes of love, respect, and esteem — in complex human societies. At first glance, the prospects for employing the concept of recognition for understanding relationships between human beings and non-human nature do not look at all promising.

Acknowledging that there is something of an uphill battle to employing recognition as a viable concept beyond the scope of human relationships, I will nonetheless attempt to develop a brief proposal that this concept can provide a helpful framework for an ethical understanding of relations within living nature. I use the term *ethical* here in a broad sense recalling Hegel’s conception of ethical life or *Sittlichkeit*, which he also refers to as “the living good [*das lebendige Gute*]” (PR §142). Ethical relationships draw on character, dispositions, and the

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<sup>1</sup> All abbreviations are listed in references below.

cultivation of habituated interactions, which gain their meaning from species-specific modes of living and can be judged as good or bad for some aim. For self-conscious creatures, ethical life and relationships can give rise to expectations or obligations, but the latter are not necessary for something to have an ethical character. My suggestion will be that we can understand the relations between living beings as ethical in this broad sense, and that recognition is an appropriate concept for capturing, at least in part, the ethical character of these relationships. There are two key aspects to expanding the concept of recognition that I will pursue here. First, it is important to reestablish the essential connection between recognition and the concepts of life and love, which is most clearly articulated in Hegel's early writings. Recognition, paradigmatically expressed in love and friendship,<sup>2</sup> crucially involves the apprehension of life and living form. Second, I will consider the possibility of proto-recognitive activities and processes in non-human life-forms, as well as the possibility of recognition and proto-recognition across life-forms, both human and non-human. In exploring these possibilities, what will hopefully emerge is the importance of the concept of recognition for understanding non-instrumental and ethical relationships among and between living beings, expanding the concept beyond its current, human-centric application.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "We already possess this freedom in the form of feeling [*Empfindung*], for example in friendship and love. Here, we are not one-sidedly within ourselves, but willingly limit ourselves with reference to an other, even while knowing ourselves in this limitation as ourselves" (PR §7Addition).

<sup>3</sup> Several recent works try to extend recognition as an ethical concept beyond the human domain. In a forthcoming volume on the concept of recognition edited by Matthew Congdon and Thomas Khurana, Jay Bernstein argues for the idea of the recognition of nature's right through the lens of ecocide, and Owen Ware argues for the recognition of non-human animals as persons through classical Yoga philosophy. Heikki Ikäheimo does not directly discuss the recognition of non-human animals, but leaves open "the question of whether animals of other species could, in principle, develop person-making features" (2022: 69). Chapter three of Connie Wang's dissertation on Hegel's Anthropology (2025) argues for a Hegelian conception of disregard for the natural world, akin to disrespect and misrecognition, that is indicative of a kind of psychic illness or *Verrücktheit*. Although here I am interested in expanding the concept of recognition beyond the human domain, elsewhere I have defended a conception of humanism that attends to species-specificity without speciesism, one that is compatible with inter-species recognition (see Ng 2021).

Let me begin with two brief passages from Hegel's fragment on love, written in late 1797 or early 1798:

True union, or love proper, exists only between living beings who are alike in power and thus in one another's eyes living beings from every point of view; in no respect is either dead for the other. (FL 1:245-246/304)<sup>4</sup>  
 ...love is a feeling [*Gefühl*] of something living... (FL 1:246/305)<sup>5</sup>

What exactly is the conceptual connection between love and life suggested by Hegel here? Tracing the development of his philosophical system, Dieter Henrich has argued that love and life share two key conceptual characteristics that are central for the basic operation of Hegelian thought. First, the movements of love and life exhibit self-reference and autonomy; second, their movements involve separation and opposition, such that self-reference and autonomy are attained precisely through a relationship to an 'other' (Henrich 2003: 314). While helpful, this is admittedly rather abstract, and Henrich is interested in tracing a thread from Hegel's early writings to his mature *Science of Logic*, demonstrating how he arrives ultimately at a logic of negation as the basis of his philosophy. Moving in a different direction, I want instead to consider the more substantive connection that Hegel draws between love and life in these passages, which allows us to understand some distinctive features of recognition.

To start, Hegel suggests that love is a relation and feeling that can only exist between living beings. Why is this the case and how should we understand this claim? On the face of it, there is something obvious about the claim: insofar as love consists (at least) of feeling, and feeling is something that only obtains for living beings, love is something that can only be felt by living beings. But the claim says more than this: love exists *between* living beings who are alike in power. This builds reciprocity into the feeling of love, such that proper or true love requires some degree of what Hegel will later call a "doubled movement" in his famous account of recognition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (PhG 3:146). Love is a reciprocal feeling in which each feels toward the other, and this feeling toward the other is at the same time, for both, an enactment of a feeling of self. That there can be a degree of reciprocal feeling and self-feeling is what

4 "Wahre Vereinigung, eigentliche Liebe findet nur unter Lebendigen statt, die an Macht sich Gleich und also durchaus für einander Lebendige, von keiner Seite gegeneinander Tote sind." See Katz 2020 who takes up this quotation to develop an understanding of marital love and sexual hierarchy in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*.

5 "...die Liebe ein Gefühl des Lebendigen ist..."

makes the living beings in question “alike in power.” Crucially, love accommodates degrees and modalities of reciprocity without requiring the demanding sense of political or moral equality essential for full-fledged respect recognition. In this context, what matters for being alike in power concerns their character and mutual relation simply as living beings. Elaborating on this feeling between living beings who are alike in power, Hegel suggests that they are for each other “thoroughly [durchaus] alive,” and in no way dead.<sup>6</sup> Love is thus, fundamentally, a feeling and apprehension that grasps living form and a relation to another insofar as this other is thoroughly alive — that is, dynamic, in development, purposive, self-producing, corporeal, needy, desirous, finite, and vulnerable.

The substantive connection between love and life concerns the importance of the distinction between life and death for the feeling of love. This, I will argue, extends into the concept of recognition, although not in the usual way in which this is understood, where the focus is on the importance of a life and death struggle, rather than on the connection between recognition and the apprehension of living form and the kinds of agency this engenders. Living form and the distinction between life and death matters for love for at least two reasons. First, the distinction helps to mark the difference between relating to an object or mere thing and relating to a living object or *subject-object*. This difference, I will argue, is the difference that makes intelligible and possible the relation of recognition, but for now I want to focus on the broad form of agency that is opened up in relating to a living subject-object as opposed to a mere object. In the reciprocal feeling of living form, one grasps in the other a form of activity that is self-organizing and self-determining — the feeling for the other as thoroughly alive grasps that this other sets its own ends. In the language of Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, the living being is a *natural end*, or a “cause and effect of itself” (CJ §64). Insofar as this other being sets its own ends (consciously or unconsciously, with intention or inchoately), it can be distinguished from other objects that do not, from things that are mere means without their own self-determined ends. In relating to a living subject-object, what is opened up is the possibility of a relation to another being not as a mere means, but as a being that sets its own ends and that our action might be shaped to take those ends into account. This mirrors a relation that is found in the feeling of respect,

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6 Knox’s translation is a creative interpretation, but I think the idea that the beloved is grasped as living “from every point of view” helpfully captures what is distinctive about a loving relation to another.

but far from being restricted to rational beings who can represent the moral law, Hegel presents this structure as first possible in the reciprocal feeling of living form — the reciprocal feeling of beings who set their own ends as the cause and effects of themselves.<sup>7</sup> Broadly, then, what the feeling for the other as thoroughly alive opens up is the possibility of a non-instrumental mode of relationship and non-instrumental action in relation to living others. Love as a relation to another being as thoroughly alive, as purposive, dynamic, end-setting activity, enables the possibility of non-instrumental agency and interaction between living beings.

The distinction between life and death matters for love for a second reason: in connecting love so closely with life, Hegel appears to be suggesting that love can only be felt for living beings and not for mere objects. How then can we account for what we feel as a love for places, objects of sentimental, historical, or aesthetic value, or even those who were but are no longer alive? One way to account for this is to claim that in such cases, we see and treat these objects *as if* they were alive, which minimally amounts to grasping them as having a history, as destructible, and as contributing non-instrumental value to living beings. Perhaps most important of all, the feeling of love entails that we relate to the object as vulnerable to violation, damage, and injury. From the perspective of love and recognition, this vulnerability and susceptibility to violation is, in some respects, more significant than the sheer fact of finitude or mortality. Although the latter are surely part of what it means to grasp living form, vulnerability to violation and injury are the flip side of the possibility opened up by

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7 Kant writes: "...though respect is a feeling [*Gefühl*], it is not one *received* by influence, but one *self-wrought* [*selbstgewirktes Gefühl*] by a rational concept... Respect is actually the representation of a worth that infringes on my self-love" (GMM 4:401). The structure of respect as the mutual restriction of self-interest is key for Axel Honneth's account of the relation of recognition and how this concept develops from Kant to Fichte and Hegel. Respect "means conceiving of the value of an object in a way that compels us to set aside our mere self-interest in order to do justice to the value of that object" (2021a:104). Extending this to his Hegelian account of recognition, he writes: "the young Hegel believed that 'respect'... occurs in love almost as a matter of fact. ...forms of reciprocal recognition such as love represent modes of 'being with oneself in another'" (2021a: 125). See also 2021b: 24–25 on the importance of the idea self-limitation for recognition in Kant, Fichte, and Hegel. For a different account of the connection between love and Kantian respect for persons that focuses on the capacity for valuation, see Velleman 1999.

non-instrumental agency and interaction. If the feeling for the other as thoroughly alive opens up the possibility of a non-instrumental relationship that takes the other's self-determined ends into account, a purely instrumental relation to living form opens up the possibility not just of death — which is part of the trajectory of life — but of violation, injury, damage, abuse, and desecration. When Hegel writes that in the relation of love, living beings “against one another are in no respect dead [*von keiner Seite gegeneinander Tote sind*],” there is an acknowledgement that things can be treated as dead in different respects, such that the feeling toward the other as thoroughly alive is subject to deterioration and deformation in their ongoing interaction. Once non-instrumental interactions between living beings are opened up in loving feeling, purely instrumental interactions can threaten the thoroughly living character of the parties in the relationship. Objects of love are uniquely susceptible to violation and injury insofar as they are felt as, or treated as if, thoroughly alive.

This essential connection between love and the feeling apprehension of living form, which opens up both the possibility of non-instrumental agency and the threat that purely instrumental actions can be violent and injurious, is crucial for understanding the concept of recognition. The substantive connection between love and life extends to the relation of recognition, in which individuals reciprocally relate to others to both acknowledge and promote their self-determined ends, which in turn promotes their own. As an ethical, non-instrumental relation to another, recognition regards and treats others as thoroughly alive and in no respect dead, as purposive, dynamic, and in development, free to determine their own ends and deserving of protection from violation and injury. It is not just that love is a paradigmatic form of recognition — there can be no recognition without love as the feeling of something living, as the reciprocal feeling of living beings alike in power relating to one another as living from every point of view.

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In light of the connection between love, life, and recognition, I want to explore two further possibilities that will contribute to the effort of expanding the concept of recognition beyond its application to the domain of human relationships: first, the possibility of proto-recognitive activities and processes in non-human life-forms; and second, the possibility of recognition and proto-recognition across life-forms, both human and non-human. What I hope to develop in rough outline is the idea of the *recognition of living form* as an ethically significant engagement with nature, broadly understood.

Can non-human life-forms engage in activities and processes that can be identified as proto-recognitive? As I suggested above, both historical and contemporary discussions of recognition generally answer this question in the negative, not primarily on empirical grounds, but on the basis of defining recognition as a reciprocal relationship between potentially equal, free, and rational persons. Although there is now overwhelming evidence supporting a wide range and degrees of cognitive and moral capacities among non-human life-forms, my aim is not to address the empirical question of whether particular kinds of creatures, or animals as a broad category, have the capacities required for recognition.<sup>8</sup> Instead, I will continue to develop Hegel's account of living form towards addressing the following questions: What must living form be like for relations of recognition to be possible? What is the general shape of the processes and activities of beings who are the cause and effect of themselves? What kinds of non-instrumental interactions emerge from these processes?

A being that is the cause and effect of itself must be able to produce itself in at least three ways.<sup>9</sup> First, it has self-organizing shape or structure in which parts and whole mutually maintain and produce one another, i.e., it exists as a living body. Second, the living body engages in processes through which it assimilates and exchanges materials with an environment to continually maintain and produce itself across its lifetime. Third, it has the power to produce another of its own kind, reproducing the species. The processes and activities at work here can be given different levels of description, for example, as mechanical or chemical processes, but there are two further kinds of activities that Hegel introduces as unique powers of living beings manifest in their processes of self-production, which tracks the forms of agency discussed above.<sup>10</sup> The first is “external purposiveness” or instrumental agency: in this mode of activity, the subject “exercises violence over the object,” “takes away its specific nature

8 On the cognitive, social, and ethical capacities of animals, see Andrews 2020, De Waal 2016, and Godfrey-Smith 2020.

9 I develop Hegel's account of life in chapter seven of Ng 2020.

10 On animal agency, see Steward 2012: esp. chapter four; and Godfrey-Smith 2024: chapter three, esp. 56ff on forms of animal action. Although my discussion takes animal agency broadly as its focus, this does not entail that plant life is excluded from the picture presented here. In the *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel discusses the history and life of the earth as a whole, calling it an “inanimate organism” (PN §341), and plant-life is expressive of a primitive form of subjectivity (PN §343). On communication and intelligence in plants and fungi see Simard 2021 and Sheldrake 2020.

[*eigentümliche Beschaffenheit*],” and “makes it into a means... [conferring] upon it its own subjectivity as its substance” (WL 6:482–483). Instrumental agency reduces the object to a mere means for the subject, treating it as dead or renders it so. The second form of agency is non-instrumental and is introduced as a possibility not for a living individual *qua* individual, but for living beings insofar as they participate in a *Gattungsprozess*, or a process of species-life. A reciprocal, non-instrumental form of activity and relationship arises as a possibility when a living being relates to another living being of its own kind. Hegel writes of this relationship that it is “immediately reciprocal [*unmittelbar gegenseitig*]” and has the character of “longing [*Verlangen*]” (WL 6:485). The relationship is immediately reciprocal because conspecifics share an identity of form. The relationship expresses reciprocal drive (*Trieb*) and longing because the relation between identical living forms generates self-feeling in relation to another, concretely expressed in species activities such as communication, competition, cooperation, mating, caring for the young, niche construction, and other collective endeavors. *Verlangen* means longing and desire but it also means request and demand, bringing us into the conceptual orbit of *Forderung* (a claim, demand, or requirement) and *Aufforderung* (a request, demand, or invitation), the latter famously employed by Fichte to develop his concept of recognition. In that context, *Aufforderung* is translated as *summons*, describing a non-coercive invitation from one free, rational being to another to exercise its free efficacy. What makes the summons and the form of relationship it initiates non-coercive is that a subject is free to act or not act in response to the invitation.<sup>11</sup> In this relationship, which Fichte calls “free reciprocal efficacy [*freien Wechselwirk-samkeit*],” each party to the relation is engaged not as a mere means, but as a being with the power to set its own ends (FNR: 33).<sup>12</sup>

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11 Fichte emphasizes that this relationship should not be understood in terms of causal determination: “The rational being’s activity is by no means to be determined and necessitated by the summons in the way that — under the concept of causality — an effect is determined and necessitated by its cause; rather, the rational being is to determine itself in consequence of the summons” (FNR: 35).

12 For Fichte, the possibility of issuing and cognizing the summons depends upon the power of reflective judgment and the concept of an end (see FNR: 35–36). *Wechselwirk-samkeit* and *Wechselwirkung* are key concepts in German idealism, and for Alexander von Humboldt, Schelling, and Hegel, the reciprocal causality of *Wechselwirkung* is closely connected with the teleological organization of life. See for example, WL 6:237–240. Werner (forthcoming) explores the concept of *Wechselwirkung* as the logical basis of the concept of recognition.

My suggestion is that Hegel's account of the non-instrumental reciprocal agency between living beings participating in the same species-process mirrors and prefigures the relationship of the summons.<sup>13</sup> Reciprocal longing between living beings, which here extends far beyond a relation between rational beings, is distinct from causal processes and instrumental agency for at least two reasons. First, and connected with the discussion above, reciprocal longing is possible only between beings that set their own ends. In the species activities noted above, there is not only a reciprocal feeling that conspecifics are living beings that set their own ends, but a feeling of longing that our ends may be reciprocally fulfilling: shaping my action on account of your ends may serve to realize my own. Second, and drawing on a key feature of Fichte's summons, the relation and activities of reciprocal longing are non-coercive in that they do not reduce the other to a mere means, signaled by the fact that participants remain free to *not act*.<sup>14</sup> Even when provoked, a competitor can back down or refuse to fight; a pursued mating partner can rebuff its pursuer; a youngling can wander away from the protective care of its parents. In the relation and agency of reciprocal longing, what is present is the free reciprocal efficacy characteristic of the summons. The activities of species-life, insofar as they express reciprocal, non-instrumental agency, are realized through *proto-recognitive relationships*. Recognition in the fully developed sense characteristic of self-conscious individuals has its basis the non-instrumental species-activities of living beings, and is possible on account of such activities. Put another way, we could say that recognition is an actualization of the relation of reciprocal longing that is a power of living beings participating in species-life, a relation in which varied forms of non-instrumental and ethical agency first become possible.

If proto-recognitive relations are manifest in the relation between conspecifics, what of the possibility of proto-recognition or recognition *across* life-forms, and especially across human and non-human forms of life? Here, although I will continue to build on ideas from Hegel and Fichte, there will also be ways in which I will depart from the strict confines of their accounts. Hegel's account of reciprocal longing opened up the structure of Fichte's summons to

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13 By contrast, Khurana 2025 argues that the second-personal relations of recognition are a unique form of political sociality characteristic only of human beings, distinct from what he calls the logical and material sociality of living beings. My suggestion is that the free reciprocal efficacy characteristic of living beings participating in a species-process as such is a form of *ethical* sociality.

14 See FNR: 33.

living beings participating in the same species-process, which gives us a more precise way of understanding his claim that love is a feeling between living beings who are alike in power. Although earlier, I interpreted “alike in power” in a more open-ended manner, letting this simply refer to the power of living form as such, Hegel’s distinct interest in the relation between conspecifics is evident already in another of his early writings, where he states: “love is a feeling [*Gefühl*] of a life similar to one’s own, not a stronger or a weaker one” (SCF 1:363). Without denying that the relation with conspecifics enables unique possibilities of agency, or that species-life provides a necessary context for understanding and assessing dispositions, behaviors, and habits, how might we envision recognition or proto-recognition across species?

At a purely empirical level, this is in fact not so difficult to envision at all: there are abundant examples of helping behavior across species and many symbiotic relationships between species. Although the catastrophic destruction of species and ecosystems by human beings is at the forefront of much public and academic discourse, human beings are also uniquely capable of non-instrumental relationships with nature. The question is whether, conceptually, recognition can be helpful for capturing these kinds of behaviors and relationships and illuminate them in an ethically significant way. Let me begin by taking two steps toward answering this question in the affirmative. First, I think a weaker reading of being “alike in power,” in which the power in question concerns living form as such, is important for understanding how recognition across life-forms is possible. If this is admitted, along with an account of reciprocity that has different modalities and degrees of activity and passivity, then the reciprocal feeling of living beings can be viewed as proto-recognitive simply insofar as it makes possible forms of agency shaped in relation to the self-determined ends of another life. It should be emphasized that it is the recognition of living form as such that makes this possible: without the recognition that the other is a subject-object who lives as the cause and effect of itself setting its own ends, there could only be causal relationships and instrumental agency, mere objects and mere means.

This brings us to a second step: up to this point, I have spoken of feeling, apprehending, grasping, and recognizing living form in a rather vague and open-ended way. But rather than needing to be resolved into a single term, it is important that the grasp of living form is open-ended and can be realized in many degrees and modalities, from inchoate, unconscious feelings and sensations that can distinguish between living and non-living or identify symbiotic species, to self-conscious conceptual comprehension. A self-conscious grasp of

life continues to involve feeling and self-feeling, but it can also involve complex scientific theories and concepts; developed ethical relationships, obligations, and practices; and aesthetic judgment, engagement, and activity. These varied ways of grasping living form are appropriately called *recognitive* or *proto-recognitive* when the relationship engages the other *as living* — again, as a being that sets its own ends where this recognition can shape my activity with those ends in view, leaving the other free to continue in its power of self-determination. Recognition and proto-recognition of living form enables the possibility of non-instrumental, ethical relationships — both between conspecifics and across species — but it also allows us to grasp that purely instrumental relationships in such cases can be violating, injurious, and damaging. Recognition between and among living beings promotes (or at least does not impinge) the power of a living being to set its own ends, and misrecognition of life can undermine, threaten, deform, or destroy this power altogether. We can thus accept that recognition of living form has ethical significance and that recognition in an ethically significant sense across species is possible. Moreover, we can accept this while continuing to hold that there are special relationships and possibilities of agency between conspecifics, and that full-fledged forms of mutual recognition between human beings require more demanding senses of reciprocity and equality involving institutional mediation.

To conclude this brief proposal, I want to address two issues, one pertaining to love and the second pertaining to the relationship between human beings and non-human nature. The concept of love has always been central to the discourse on recognition and I began by discussing the connection between love and life proposed by the young Hegel. In conceiving of love as a feeling toward the other as thoroughly alive, I believe Hegel indeed captures something important that is part of our ordinary understanding of love, which requires that we are able to view the other as dynamic, as a being who sets its own ends, vulnerable to injury and violation. But one could also argue that this conception of love is too expansive, both undermining the distinctive qualities of love for a unique individual and requiring that a feeling of love underlies even our impersonal forms of recognition in respect and esteem. Regarding the love for a unique individual, I think the idea that the beloved is felt as alive from every point of view indeed describes what makes love so distinctive among our relationships. The connection between love and life can range from formal and general to highly specific, demanding, and concrete. On the formal end, there is Henrich's suggestion, noted earlier, that love and life are conceptually connected in exhibiting self-reference and autonomy alongside opposition and re-

lation to otherness. There is also the general but more substantive connection between love and life in which love grasps the other as a living form that sets its own ends as the cause and effect of itself. In the concrete, specific relation to an individual beloved, the feeling for the other as thoroughly alive is a difficult, painful, surprising, joyful, enlivening, and ongoing task that is only realized among a limited number of unique others. In these relationships, seeing the other as thoroughly alive requires being able to see them anew, as having dimensions of aliveness and development that we had not previously seen, and as continually pursuing ends that shapes the lover's own purposiveness. There are of course many impersonal relationships and interactions in which we acknowledge and respect that the other sets their own ends, but do not feel or know them as living — dynamic, purposive, vulnerable — from every point of view. But what unites all of these relationships and makes them relations of recognition is that the other is treated as a possible object of love insofar as they are grasped as a living form. From the personal to the impersonal, from conspecifics to heterospecifics, being able to grasp the other as thoroughly alive, and hence, as *loveable*, is what enables relations of recognition. To avoid the impression of undue optimism here, I should also add that alongside love as a non-instrumental relation and the possibility of instrumentalizing living others, hate can also arise as a non-instrumental relation between living beings, a feeling that arises in grasping that the other sets their own ends.<sup>15</sup>

My main aim in this essay has been to expand and reconsider the concept of recognition to show that it can be a helpful framework for understanding ethical relationships between humans and non-human nature. I have tried to show that that recognition of living form is itself an ethically significant relation, one that allows us to relate non-instrumentally not just to other, specific life-forms, but perhaps also to natural environments, ecosystems, and even the earth system as a whole. These latter contexts and systems both contain and sustain life, contributing both instrumental and non-instrumental value to interdependent living beings that pursue self-determined ends. Recognition of living nature can thus name an ethically significant relationship in which our actions are shaped not just with the ends of other living beings in view, but in which we see the promotion of living ends as essential for realizing our own — both as individuals and as a species. Moreover, as a form of self-conscious life,

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<sup>15</sup> See Gregoratto 2025 for a critical theory of love, and especially 2025: 161–169 for an account of recognition and the activity and passivity of affect from a “critical naturalist” perspective.

human beings are uniquely capable of recognizing living form in a conceptually mediated way, capable of sophisticated understandings of the internal aims of other forms of life and can direct our behavior to, if not promote, then at least to not undermine those aims. The concept of recognition, in the expanded sense proposed here, can thus play an important role in understanding the ethical character of ecologically oriented social struggles. Expanding the concept of recognition in this way also extends the boundaries of our ethical community beyond the free association of human beings to the free association living beings on earth, an idea that is urgently needed in our present age of climate catastrophe.

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