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# RECOGNITION AND THE HUMAN LIFE-FORM

BEYOND IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE

Heikki Ikäheimo



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**Ludwig Siep**, *University of Münster*



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# Recognition and the Human Life-Form

What is recognition and why is it so important? This book develops a synoptic conception of the significance of recognition in its many forms for human persons by means of a rational reconstruction and internal critique of classical and contemporary accounts.

The book begins with a clarification of several fundamental questions concerning recognition. It then reconstructs the core ideas of Fichte, Hegel, Taylor, Fraser, and Honneth and utilizes the insights and conceptual tools developed across these chapters for developing a case for the universal importance of recognition for humans. It argues in favour of a universalist anthropological position, unusual in the literature on recognition, that aims to construe a philosophically sound basis for a discourse of common humanity, or of a shared human life-form for which moral relations of recognition are essential. This synthetic conception of the importance of recognition provides tools for articulating deep intuitions shared across cultures about what makes human life and forms of human co-existence better or worse, and thus tools for mutual understanding about the deepest shared concerns of humanity, or of what makes us all human persons despite our differences.

*Recognition and the Human Life-Form* will appeal to readers interested in philosophical anthropology, social and political philosophy, critical theory, and the history of philosophy. It also provides ideas and conceptual tools for fields such as anthropology, education, disability studies, international relations, law, politics, religious studies, sociology, and social research.

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# Recognition and the Human Life-Form

Beyond Identity and Difference

Heikki Ikäheimo



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**This book is dedicated to the memory of my father,  
and to my family and friends around the world,  
East and West, North and South.**





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# Foreword

Books in philosophy tend to reflect—one way or another—the life experiences of their authors, and this one certainly does. I was born and mostly spent the first four decades of my life in Finland, which was at that time a culturally very homogenous country. As a post doc in Philosophy, I spent three years in Frankfurt am Main and from there moved to Sydney, Australia, where I currently live and work. The move from Europe to Australia was a thoroughly eye-opening experience for me—both as a person and as a philosopher. In Central Europe, the thought that one’s theoretical framework in critical social thought may not apply, or is not designed to apply, beyond the historical or cultural landscape and institutional specificities of Central or Western Europe, or maximally ‘the West’, does not necessarily strike one as problematic. Seen from Australia, it is a non-starter.

In Western Germany, the neighbours (say, the French, the Dutch, the Danes, the Czech, and so on) are similar to an extent that though one may have only or mainly one’s own historical and cultural circumstances in mind in building the foundations of one’s theory, one can nevertheless be comforted by the thought that quite a bit of the theory is likely to be relevant and useful in the neighbourhood as well. Things look completely different in a deeply multicultural society in which cultural differences span across the differences between ancient Australian aboriginal civilizations and those of recent European, Asian, and other immigrants and where the closest neighbouring country is Papua New Guinea.

The working hypothesis of this book is that there is much more to be said about what makes social life good or bad, or better or worse, with a reasonable claim for universality than has tended to be acknowledged in critical social thought in recent decades. What I wish to show is that the idea of the recognition dependence of all human life can be highly fruitful in this regard: it promises to provide philosophically serious and intuitively easy-to-grasp means for articulating, and debating, the idea of a shared human life-form and what makes instantiations of it better or worse, not just in this or that human society but in any of them.

I am grateful to Arto Laitinen for many years of philosophical discussion and cooperation; Jussi Kotkavirta (†), Eerik Lagerspetz, Michael Quante, Ludwig Siep, Manfred Frank, Axel Honneth, Nicholas Smith, Pirmin

Stekeler-Weithofer, and Paul Redding for their generous support in various stages of my work, and all of the above, as well as Andy Blunden, Andrew Chitty, Bruin Christensen, Jean-Philippe Deranty, Loughlin Gleeson, John Goris, Federica Gregoratto, Carl-Göran Heidegren, Volker Heins, Onni Hirvonen, Matthias Iser, Mark Kelly, Heikki Koskinen, Kristina Lepold, Thomas Lindemann, Simon Lumsden, Doris McIlwain (†), Douglas Moggach, Cat Moir, Petteri Niemi, Emmanuel Renault, Sari Roman-Lagerspetz, Risto Saarinen, John Sutton, Arvi Särkelä, Hans-Christoph Schmidt Am Busch, Titus Stahl, Dieter Sturma, Ariane ten Hagen, Italo Testa, Simon Thompson, Jessica Whyte, Andreas Wildt, and Robert R. Williams (†) for inspiration, collegiality, friendship, and philosophical teaching. To Ming-Chen Lo I am indebted for more than that. This book was finished in February 2022 during the Covid-19 pandemic, after two years of separation from my family and many of my friends. Not all of them made it through this time, including Arto's and my teacher Jussi, and my father Carl-Heinz Ossian Ikäheimo, who died of Covid, suddenly, on February 5, 2022. Both of them are with me wherever I go.

The Australian Research Council, Macquarie University, and UNSW Sydney funded the writing of this book. Chapter 1 includes a section from Heikki Ikäheimo and Arto Laitinen: 'Analyzing Recognition: Identification, Acknowledgement, and Recognitive Attitudes Towards Persons', in Bert van den Brink and David Owen (eds.): *Recognition and Power—Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 33–56. I thank Arto for permission to use it.

Some of the material of the chapters is included, in a more introductory form and excluding most of the overall argument, in Heikki Ikäheimo: *Anerkennung*. Berlin, De Gruyter 2014.



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# Introduction

Every single reader of this book, whether or not he or she has explicitly reflected on it, knows from personal experience how good receiving, and how painful being left without, adequate recognition from relevant others may feel. We expect others to recognize our presence in the social space we inhabit with them, we expect recognition for our achievements or contributions, and we expect that our rights are duly recognized. In the political arena, ethnic, religious, sexual, and other minority groups express demands for recognition for their existence, special characteristics and needs, or rights. But what exactly is recognition, and why exactly is it so important?

During the last three decades, recognition has become one of the most intensively discussed themes in social and political philosophy, and there are many different answers to these two questions. The aim of this book is, first, to give a selective, simultaneously historical and systematic overview of the answers and, second, to elaborate on them and utilize them for developing a synoptic conception of the significance of recognition in the many senses of the term for human life, a conception that provides conceptual foundations for immanent social critique with potentially universal applicability. Those foundations will mainly refer not to what unites us with some yet distinguishes us from others or from most (namely “identities”) but rather to what unites us all (namely humanity or human personhood). The standpoint developed in the book, by means of a reconstruction and internal critique of classical and contemporary accounts, is one of *recognition-theoretical anthropological universalism*. This is a standpoint rejected by default, and often without much reflection, by many; yet, as I will argue, there is much more that speaks for it than the quick rejections give credit for.

One of the immediate advantages of this approach, though by no means the only one, is a partial dissociation of the theory of recognition from issues of identity. The toxic nature that discourses on identity have taken on in recent years—both outside and sometimes within the academia—is one of the reasons why a fresh start for discourses on recognition, a return to foundations, is a good idea. It will turn out that while individual and collective identity are phenomena deeply affected by recognition, they are only part of a larger whole which recognition is in crucial ways constitutive of. This whole is what I call the human life-form or, to be more precise, the

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life-form of human persons. The life-form is something that we all share despite differences at the level of identities, and this fact is of decisive ethical and political importance.

The overview that the book offers will be historical in the sense that I will discuss the views of both of the pioneers of the recognition discourses, J. G. Fichte and G. W. F. Hegel, and compare and contrast their views with those of three contemporary authors: Charles Taylor, Nancy Fraser, and Axel Honneth. It will be systematic in that I will concentrate on clarifying what exactly is the phenomenon, or are the phenomena, that these authors understand by the term ‘recognition’, what exactly makes it, or them, important in their view, and what kinds of philosophical problems are involved in their respective conceptualizations of the issues at stake. The book also begins and ends with chapters that are purely systematic in nature, discussing questions and introducing conceptual clarifications and tools meant to be useful for thinking about and discussing the phenomenon of recognition and its importance independently of and beyond the views of the five authors mentioned or my own synoptic account.

The overview will be deliberately selective in that I will focus on only a small number of central past and contemporary authors on the theme<sup>1</sup> and in each case discuss either only one representative text (in the case of Fichte, Hegel, and Taylor) or a limited number of texts (in the case of Fraser and Honneth). Focusing on a relatively small selection of representative texts means that each of them can be given a thorough philosophical reading from the point of view of the concept or concepts of recognition at work in them. As this reading of key texts on recognition by the classics and contemporary authors will show, the approaches, theoretical and practical commitments, and conceptual understandings of the phenomenon or phenomena of recognition present in the literature differ from each other in many significant respects. Yet all of the authors discussed share one basic conviction: that recognition, whatever it is exactly, is in some ways massively important for individual and collective life with the human form. To grasp synthetically the different variations that this assumption takes, I will work on the idea of the close connection of recognition to human personhood in the many senses of ‘recognition’ and ‘personhood’. Understanding how the different authors grasp (whether explicitly or implicitly) this connection will enable us to distinguish the different variations from each other while seeing them as contributing, from different viewpoints, to a general understanding of the importance of recognition for human persons. To anticipate, “personhood”, as I will use the term, not merely refers to the common notion of juridical personhood but covers a whole host or inter-related psychological, intersubjective, and institutional features and structures that I argue are distinctive of what I call the life-form of human persons or, in short, the “human life-form”. This is what we all share despite our differences.

The book starts, in Chapter 1, with a clarification of several terminological and conceptual issues around the idea of ‘recognition’. Each of these

issues is important for thinking in a clear and differentiated manner about the constellation of phenomena at stake in the needs, desires, demands for, and discourses on recognition.<sup>2</sup> These issues include the semantics of the term ‘recognition’ as well as of the German word *Anerkennung*; the question of whether recognition of persons has one or many forms; the relationship of attitudes, attitude complexes, concrete interpersonal relations, and social and institutional spheres in thinking about recognition; attitudes, acts, and expressions of recognition; and finally the question of whether recognition is responsive to or constitutive of its objects. The clarifications introduced in this chapter will be utilized in the subsequent chapters for making sense of the texts by Fichte, Hegel, Taylor, Fraser, and Honneth as well as in the concluding systematic chapter.

The first one of the texts, discussed in Chapter 2, is the first part of Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s *Foundations of Natural Right*. I will take a close look at what Fichte had in mind in this text in arguing that something he called ‘summoning’ (*Aufforderung*) is necessary for the development of individual human beings into “free rational beings” or “persons” and at what exactly he meant by “recognition”, which he thought of as necessary for summoning to occur in the first place. Utilizing clarifications introduced in Chapter 1, I will focus on a number of key ambiguities in Fichte’s treatment of the theme. These ambiguities are not merely problems for Fichte but important to comprehend for anyone who wants to think about and discuss in a coherent manner the phenomena Fichte is tackling. In brief, Fichte, despite his impressive and almost heroic attempt to get his head around the themes he is dealing with, fails to think in an adequately differentiated manner about the key concepts of personhood, recognition, and freedom. Reconstructing and thinking through Fichte’s attempt and its arguable ultimate failure will enable us to start making headway on these important and closely interrelated themes.

Chapter 3 turns to Hegel, who knew Fichte’s work on summoning and recognition and in whose own work one can find a response to a central problem that burdened Fichte’s thoughts: how to reconcile the idea of freedom with the idea of being affected and thus ‘determined’ by other persons in or through recognition? Hegel’s concept of “concrete freedom” is an attempt to accommodate human beings’ necessary dependence on and determination by each other in a meaningful concept of freedom. This chapter analyzes Hegel’s thoughts on recognition in the many senses of the term, in connection to his concepts of concrete freedom and “spirit” in the ‘Self-consciousness’ chapter of his *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*. On my interpretation, ‘recognition’ stands in this text for several interconnected phenomena that together are central in what distinguishes a “spiritual” (*geistig*) life-form from a merely “natural” life-form or, in other words, the life-form of human persons from simpler animal life-forms. For Hegel, recognition has a central role in the realization of what he conceives of as the evaluative essence of this life-form: concrete freedom. One of the crucial insights that will be teased out of Hegel’s text is the decisive difference



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between two “modes” of what I call “purely intersubjective recognition”: one conditional and not fully personifying (in a sense to be explained) and the other unconditional, fully personifying, and thus genuinely moral. As we will see in Chapter 5, a lack of differentiation between these two modes plays out in problematic ways in some of Axel Honneth’s recent important and influential work.

Chapter 4 moves on to a rather different historical and conceptual landscape, one in which the theme of recognition has been discussed intensively during the last three decades. It analyzes the partly conflicting views of the contemporary political philosophers Charles Taylor and Nancy Fraser on the role of needs and demands for ‘recognition’ in the political sphere by ethnic, sexual, and other minority groups and on what are the best ways to conceptualize these needs and demands and their relation to other issues of political importance. Many of Fichte’s and Hegel’s original insights on the nature and importance of recognition are not present in Taylor’s and Fraser’s accounts, yet these accounts add new elements into a synoptic view of the complex of phenomena that the term ‘recognition’ stands for. In brief, whereas Fichte and Hegel offer important insights into the constitutive importance of recognition for *what* we are, namely human persons, Taylor focusses on the importance of recognition for *who* someone is or, in other words, for the qualitative self-identity of persons.

It is exactly this emphasis on issues to do with ‘identity’ or ‘self-identity’ in Taylor and similar accounts of recognition that Nancy Fraser criticizes in her own writings. On Fraser’s view, these accounts bolster an unfortunate tendency in Western political discourses during the last decades to overemphasize issues to do with ‘recognition of identities’ while ignoring questions of just distribution of material and other resources. Fraser’s own positive contribution to the discourses of recognition centres on the idea that recognition is one of two elements, alongside just distribution, of “inclusion” of individuals and groups in social life as equal participants. The critical examination of Taylor’s and Fraser’s views in Chapter 4 introduces several themes crucial to the view outlined in the final chapter. As I will argue, deeper than issues of recognition of particular identities is always the more fundamental issue of recognition as a human person. Also, for inclusion to be a meaningful ideal, it will, first and foremost, have to mean inclusion in personhood and thereby the life-form of human persons. What such inclusion, or exclusion as its opposite, involves will be discussed systematically in the final chapter.

Chapter 5 discusses what is certainly the most ambitious attempt so far to utilize the concept of recognition in social and political philosophy, namely Axel Honneth’s work, nowadays often associated with a new recognition-theoretical ‘paradigm’ in critical social and political thought. I will first focus on Honneth’s original programmatic formulation of his recognition-theoretical approach to social and political reality in his 1995 monograph *The Struggle for Recognition* (German original 1992), pointing out several internal tensions in it and discussing ways in which these

tensions have played out in Honneth's subsequent work on recognition. One of Honneth's major innovations is the idea that recognition has three forms or dimensions. This idea also partly organizes the discussion of the other authors in this book, starting with Fichte, who focuses exclusively on one of the three Honnethian dimensions of recognition—one which I call the 'deontological dimension' having to do with norms, laws, authority, and respect. In Hegel, we find then, next to the deontological dimension, a second dimension of recognition—one which I call the 'axiological dimension' having to do with valuing, self-concern, concern for others, and love. Finally, in Taylor, we find something closely resembling the third Honnethian dimension. This is what I call the 'contributive dimension' and it has to do with contributing to the good of others and being appreciated for it.

After analyzing key ambiguities in Honneth's thinking—between what I call the purely intersubjective and the institutional layers of human interaction as well as between universalist anthropological and historicist motives in his work—I will turn to Honneth's more recent project of grounding critical social philosophy on an ambitious account of freedom in his book *Freedom's Right*. I will track the largely unarticulated role of recognition in that project and argue that the project ultimately fails in two respects. First, Honneth does not distinguish between the two modes of purely intersubjective recognition: the conditional and the unconditional. This leads to, among other things, an obfuscation of a crucial distinction between instrumental and non-instrumental modes of regarding others, something the young Karl Marx was clear about and something without which Honneth ends up painting an implausibly optimistic or inaccurate picture of market interactions. I will argue, however, that the general project of "moralising the market"—one of the central themes in *Freedom's Right*—can be saved by means of the conceptual tools that I develop throughout the book. The idea of "concrete interpersonal relations", introduced in Chapter 1, will turn out to be especially important for doing that. My suggestion will be, in short, that moral expectations are *not* inbuilt in market relations *as* market relations, contrary to what Honneth thinks. Rather, they are inbuilt in concrete interpersonal relations in general, of which the "market relation" is only ever an aspect.

Second, Honneth ends up in *Freedom's Right* with a position that is poorly suited for addressing audiences outside of the confines of the historical and institutional context (mainly of Western Europe or Western Germany) that his method of "normative reconstruction" in the book focuses on. This pauses the oscillation in Honneth's thinking since *The Struggle for Recognition* between universalism and historicism—or a position grounding its critical arsenal on putative universal-anthropological facts and one grounding them on principles putatively institutionalized in a particular historical and cultural context—in the historicist end. The resultant Euro- or Germano-centrism is unfortunate, but it is by no means a position that the recognition-theoretical paradigm is forced to adopt. Indeed, as I will argue, unarticulated aspects in Honneth's own treatise

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point towards a different grounding of social critique, one not bound up with any particular historical, cultural, or institutional context but rather referring to what are universal constitutive features of the human life-form.

Finally, the concluding Chapter 6 utilizes the insights and conceptual tools gathered and developed in the five preceding chapters for outlining a synoptic view. The standpoint of recognition-theoretical anthropological universalism presented in it builds both on positive insights of the five authors discussed and on immanent critiques of particular insufficiencies in their positions. Chapter 6 begins by thematizing one of the decisive issues that distinguish Fichte's and Hegel's accounts of recognition from those of the three contemporary authors. Whereas Fichte and Hegel felt comfortable with conceiving of recognition as something essential for the constitution of "free rational beings", "persons", or "humans" *in general*, contemporary authors have tended to be very cautious about such generalizations, restricting themselves to much less ambitious claims concerning the importance of recognition only in their own respective societies or in societies similar to them (that is, modern, Western, democratic, liberal, capitalist). While there is ample reason for caution here, this prudent caution should not be confused with an *a priori* rejection of *any* claims about the possible universal importance of recognition for good or flourishing human life.

I will first (6.1) clarify the conceptual landscape in which claims for or against the universal importance of recognition for humans are made and evaluated. Here the aim is to clear up a number of potential confusions and misunderstandings that can stand in the way of an unprejudiced consideration of claims and arguments about the importance of recognition in the many senses of the word for human life in general, regardless of cultural and other differences. This is a preamble for what I will do in the rest of Chapter 6 (6.2. and 6.3): draw the outlines of a universalist, 'anthropological' take on the simultaneously ontological and ethical importance of recognition. It draws on a number of specific ideas from the authors discussed in the earlier chapters, such as Fichte's idea of the "summons"; Hegel's ideas of humanity, "spirit", and "concrete freedom"; the theme of dignity as well as a fusion of horizons in Taylor; the idea of inclusion in Fraser; and Honneth's multidimensional conception of recognition. The model also employs the conceptual clarifications presented in Chapter 1 and in the subsequent chapters and builds on the immanent critique of Honneth's historicist account in *Freedom's Right* presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter 6 presents an ideal—if fully successful, *the* ideal—of human life with its individual and social aspects in terms of the various elements of what I call 'full-fledged personhood'. The general criterion proposed for measuring the goodness of any society (whatever the details of its institutional structures) or of any human relationship or network of relationships (whatever the cultural specifications) is the extent to which it supports or is compatible with the realization of the various elements of what it is to be a human person in the full sense of the term. As I elaborate throughout the

book, there are multiple ways in which the different forms of recognition are crucially important for our being what we are, namely human persons. A central feature of the conception that I will put forth is that it does not reduce personhood to a legal status, nor to a moral status, nor to this or that particular psychological capacity or set of capacities, nor is it abstractly individualist. Rather, it is designed to grasp the constitutively relational nature of human life and the interlocking of the various, inner and outer, features and structures constitutive of full-fledged personhood.<sup>3</sup>

All in all, the synthetic conception of the importance of recognition developed in the book aims to provide means for articulating deep intuitions shared across cultures about what makes human life and forms of human interaction better or worse, and thus tools for mutual understanding concerning the deepest shared concerns of humanity, or what makes us all human persons despite our differences. This is crucially important at a time when apparent differences in worldviews, amplified by the divisive echo chambers of the latest forms of communication, are cracking dangerous rifts within and between nations, religions, and cultures. This, together with the looming prospect of environmental catastrophes and resulting wars or survival and extermination, makes it of utmost importance to focus not on what separates us but on what unites us all—not our “identities” but what makes us all human persons—and on what is required for survival and living well on this finite planet in the constitutive relations with each other that we depend on. By tapping into the universal fact of the recognition dependence of human persons and their life-form, the book aims to provide a conceptual foundation for immanent social critique with potentially universal applicability and extra-academic intuitive plausibility across cultures.

But independently of this ambitious goal, the book is meant for anyone with an inquisitive mind and genuine interest in philosophical reflection on what exactly it is that we want when we want recognition and why exactly we want it and need it so badly.

## Notes

- 1 The most important omissions in this regard are the following. First, I will only mention (see the beginning of Chapter 4) but not discuss Alexandre Kojève and the French tradition of utilizing the general idea of recognition starting from Kojève (see Roman-Lagerspetz 2021a; see also Honneth 2020, Chapter II for another account of the idea of recognition in French thought beginning with Rousseau). Second, I will utilize but not discuss separately at length (see, however, 6.2.1) an important strand of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy in which the concept of recognition figures in central roles and whose most prominent proponents include Robert Brandom, Terry Pinkard, and Robert Pippin. A central theme of this strand of contemporary Hegelian philosophy—that of collective self-governance by norms and the constitutive importance for recognition for it—is a theme appearing and reappearing throughout the book, starting from my discussion of Fichte. Third, there are philosophers, such as Aristotle (see Williams 2010 and Ikäheimo 2012),

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Rousseau (see Neuhouser 2008), or Marx (see Chitty 2000, Quante 2009, Brudney 2010, and Ikäheimo 2018), in whose work the concept of recognition is less explicitly present but who have nonetheless had important insight concerning the theme and who have recently been interpreted from recognition-theoretical points of view. Fourth, there are also several critiques of various aspects of the recognition-theoretical way of thinking that will not be discussed in this book (Oliver 2001, Markell 2003, McNay 2008, Bedorf 2010). For engagement with the critiques to be productive or enlightening, a thorough analysis and understanding of the object of the critiques are first required. My impression is that quite often the critiques do not address the concept or idea in a sufficiently differentiated and thoroughly worked out form. This is what this book aims to provide. Finally, and relatedly, a distinction is sometimes made between an ‘optimist’ and a ‘pessimist’ tradition in thinking of recognition, the latter claiming that recognition is something that inevitably entangles subjects and objects of recognition in networks of power. Perhaps the most influential author in that tradition is Judith Butler, whose account of recognition is, in part, influenced by Kojève as well as Louis Althusser (see Roman-Lagerspetz 2021b and Lepold 2021). Butler’s ideas will make a brief appearance in Chapter 6, and I have elsewhere discussed her idea of conditions of “recognizability” (Ikäheimo, forthcoming) as well as how her insights could, in my view, better be cashed out in terms of a differentiated social ontological model (Ikäheimo 2017). Ikäheimo, Lepold & Stahl (2021) include a dialogue between Butler and Axel Honneth on their respective accounts of recognition and explicitly thematize the issue of optimism versus pessimism about the role of recognition in individual and social life. I would like to think that my account is neither optimist nor pessimist but realist. Siep, Ikäheimo & Quante (eds.) (2020) offer entries on numerous other authors that I do not discuss in this book.

- 2 They are also important for anyone who wishes to engage in a critique of particular ways in which the idea of recognition is used in the existing literature. It is all too easy to reduce the wealth of possibilities for thought that this concept contains to this or that particular way of using it.
- 3 As will turn out, the conception is also not speciesist since it does not stipulate a necessary connection between being human and being a person, even if my focus will be on human persons.

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