

Article

# Elements of a First-Person Ecology: Historical Roots, Recognition and Ecospirituality

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**Abstract:** Starting from the observation that there is a gap between knowledge of the environmental sciences and practical engagement, for example, in climate change or biodiversity loss, this article explores one possible explanation for this situation—namely, the process of objectification inherent in science. It then proposes to remedy the situation by defending the idea of a ‘first-person ecology’. This term refers to a field of research and practice that looks at the relationship between humans and nature from the point of view of the embodied and situated nature of lived experience. The lived experience of nature at the heart of a first-person ecology is first studied from an epistemic perspective using the concept of recognition, inspired by the Frankfurt School philosopher and sociologist Axel Honneth. It is then approached from a phenomenological perspective, using the emerging field of ecospirituality to describe the characteristics of this experience.

**Keywords:** first-person ecology; science; objectivation; ecospirituality; recognition; lived experience; phenomenology

## 1. Introduction: The Knowledge–Action Gap in the Anthropocene

The IPCC’s first assessment report on the climate situation was published in 1990, and since then, five subsequent reports have been published, the most recent in March 2023. These reports summarize current scientific knowledge about climate change and its evolution, and they offer a stark illustration of the risks associated with climate change. Unless we limit global warming to 1.5 °C, a threshold recognized by the international community in 2015 and reaffirmed at COP 27 in 2022, we may not be able to avoid the worst effects expected as a result, which include increasingly extreme forest fires, the disappearance of densely populated coastal areas due to rising sea levels, heatwaves with temperatures approaching 50 °C, the destruction of crops due to drought, and an increase in the number and strength of hurricanes, producing floods and landslides.

Yet, since the first report was published, there has been no clear political will to address these challenges, either nationally or internationally, and it is proving difficult to implement mitigation and adaptation projects, even though the window of opportunity for effectively combating the deleterious effects of climate change continues to close. Climate change presents us with a conundrum. On the one hand, we are in possession of immense scientific knowledge about the probable evolution of the Earth’s climate and its consequences for human life, animals, plants and ecosystems if no action is taken to counteract climate change. On the other hand, we are witnessing inertia regarding the urgent decisions that must be taken in this respect, both at the level of individual behavior and at the level of national and international political choices. This applies not only to the climate but also to other global issues, such as chemical pollution or water use for plant growth [1–4].

There are many political, economic, social, psychological and legal reasons for this situation. In this article, we will look at this topic from a philosophical perspective. The French philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy has coined a striking phrase about humanity’s



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epistemic difficulty in preventing catastrophe: ‘We don’t believe what we know’ [5] (p. 142). In the same vein, we could say that we do not act in accordance with what we know about climate change and its catastrophic consequences.

In Section 2, we first provide a brief historical context that helps to understand this lack of connection between scientific knowledge and action. We believe that this gap is due to the objectivity sought by modern scientific knowledge, which implies abstraction from the researcher’s lived experience. We then suggest a way of responding to this hiatus with what we call a ‘first-person ecology’. By ‘first-person ecology’, we mean a set of research and practice that looks at the human relationship with nature from the point of view of the embodied and situated nature of lived experience. Our thesis is that a first-person ecology is, in some sense, if not a missing link, at least a philosophically indispensable link between knowledge and action. In this respect, Arne Næss and Aldo Leopold can be seen as pioneers of a first-person ecology, on an ontological and on an ethical level, respectively. However, neither of the two authors explicitly referred to a first-person ecology as the object of their research. This article proposes to further explore the conditions of possibility of a first-person ecology as a mediation between theoretical knowledge and practical engagement.

In the light of these two philosopher’s ideas, in Sections 3 and 4, we will explore two different ways of developing a first-person ecology: one based on the re-appropriation of the concept of recognition and the other based on ecospirituality as a fruitful way to describe the lived experience of nature. These two approaches, we argue, are complementary: the first takes a look at the experience of nature from an epistemic perspective, whereas the second explores ecology in the first person from a phenomenological point of view. In the field of environmental philosophy, a first-person ecology is rarely discussed, and when this is the case, it is mainly within the tradition of post-Husserlian phenomenology (for instance [6,7] and especially in line with the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty [8,9]).

Therefore, the discussion that we propose here relies on different traditions. Section 2 draws on the history of ecological thought, while Sections 3 and 4 draw on the Frankfurt School’s tradition of critical theory and religious anthropology and ethnology, respectively. These borrowings may at first sight appear quite disparate; nevertheless, they contribute, as we will see, to the main argument developed in this article. Indeed, brought together into a fruitful dialogue, they testify to a compelling convergence toward the need to return to lived experience as the starting point of all knowledge and source of action. In our view, this is where the main interest of our reflection lies. Such a convergence helps to establish a first-person ecology as an important existential resource for the environmental sciences. In the age of the Anthropocene, where environmental issues are global and the relationship with nature is primarily conceived from the objective perspective of scientific knowledge, i.e., in the third person, a first-person ecology appears as a way of redressing this bias. It allows abstract knowledge to be put into practice in real-life experience, thus providing motivation for ethical engagement.

## 2. The Dualisms of Modernity and First-Person Ecology

### 2.1. Ancient Knowledge, Modern Knowledge and Its Criticism

As the historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot points out, there was no real split between theory and practice in Ancient Greece [10] (p. 104). In the Stoic school, for example, knowledge of the order of the world had a practical and even existential significance: it allows us to act appropriately and brings a sense of fulfilment and serenity to our actions. Thus, knowledge has a strong experiential component; it is not only theory but also a practical attitude, a way of living and being. In other words, lived experience is both the source and the end of knowledge: to live well is to live consciously and freely. This presupposes further knowledge acquired through reason—a cosmology, a physics—that allows us to recognize ourselves as part of a cosmos and to desire only what depends on us [10] (p. 86).

In ancient schools of wisdom such as Stoicism and Epicureanism, theory served spiritual practice and was intended to lead to peace of mind and happiness. Even in the abstract, theoretically sophisticated philosophies such as those of Plato and Aristotle,

knowledge had a practical purpose in that it was the object of intellectual exercise. With the advent of science in the 17th century—the science that is still practiced today—the focus of theoretical knowledge changed. It was no longer simply a question of learning for the purposes of personal flourishing, and the close link between knowledge and practice was now being severed in favor of an effort to objectify knowledge, which became a purely theoretical understanding of the world.

Modern science developed considerably with the introduction of an epistemological separation between the knowing subject and the object to be known. To ensure scientific objectivity, the object had to be studied from the outside, avoiding any interference from human subjectivity, i.e., independently of the subject's lived experience. It was at this time that the distinction was made between the primary qualities inherent in an object—form, movement, spatiality, solidity, etc.—and its secondary qualities—smells, flavors, colors, etc.—which are not properties of the object but originate with the subject<sup>1</sup>. In other words, scientific knowledge proceeds from a third-person knowledge of reality—essentially, physical reality. And it is this perspective that provides it with the objectivity it requires<sup>2</sup>. As a result, everything that is remotely dependent on human experience—life, social relations, affectivity, psychological states, etc.—is ultimately reduced to elements of the physical world or excluded from scientific knowledge on the grounds that they are subjective phenomena, accessible only from a first-person point of view.

One of the thinkers who clearly understood the major change taking place in the development of scientific knowledge at this time was the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, who proposed the bracketing (*epoché*), or suspension, of our ordinary beliefs about the existence of a world independent of us, followed by the redirection of attention (reduction) to experience itself; in other words, we reflect on the experience of the world and not on the world itself [11]. Husserl sought to make explicit the pre-given world from which the world of science was developed. He points out that any attempt at scientific knowledge means that 'the everyday surrounding world of life is presupposed as existing—the surrounding world in which all of us (even I who am now philosophizing) consciously have our existence; here are also the sciences, as cultural facts in this world, with their scientists and theories' [12] (p. 104). Thus there is a pre-scientific world of which we are a part that, while not a reality in itself, is a reality for those who experience it in perception, affection or action.

Husserl takes the example of Galilean science. Although the world of everyday experience is relative to each subject, there is nevertheless a single world that is the same for all of us. This, according to the philosopher, is the obvious starting point for Galileo. Based on the use of geometry in his time, the scientist believed that applying geometry to nature would enable us to gain knowledge of a true being, beyond subjective perceptions. Husserl points out, however, that 'all this *pure* mathematics has to do with bodies and the bodily world only through an abstraction, i.e., it has to do only with *abstract shapes* within space-time' [12] (p. 29). In other words, Galileo and his successors replaced the world of lived experience, the 'everyday surrounding world of life' [12] (p. 104), with a world of mathematical idealities. And this world is now considered to be the only real world [12] (p. 48–49).

The abstraction of the world of life that exists in the lived experience of a subject, and the replacement of that world with a world of theoretical entities, is the price to pay for all scientific endeavor. As we have said, since science aims to place the knowing subject—the scientist—external to the object he is trying to understand (with, of course, all the difficulties and limitations that this implies, particularly for the human and social sciences), an external approach—in the third-person—is an integral part of the scientific objectification sought by researchers. But this neglects the 'surrounding world', i.e., everything that appears in our experience and that comes under a first-person perspective. It is the legitimacy of the latter that Husserl defends in his slogan, 'back to the things themselves'. Scientific knowledge is not the only path to knowing; there is also knowledge that is specific to lived experience, which considers precisely what science seeks to set aside in order to achieve objectivity. And because this knowledge concerns the affective, perceptive and conative dimensions of our experience, it is an essential resource for our readiness to act in a particular way.

The objectification by scientific knowledge, in the epoch of the Anthropocene, is redoubled. For it is not just a question of replacing the world of lived experience with theoretical entities; it is also a question of theorizing and highlighting the very abstract global challenges facing the environment—climate change, the decline in biodiversity, the disruption of major bio–geo–chemical cycles, etc.—and of the difficulty of dealing with them through pure technological solutions<sup>3</sup>. In such a context, a first-person ecology is emerging as an essential resource for practical commitment in the form of ethical and political action.

## 2.2. First-Person Ecology

Contemporary ecological issues are defined within the context of sciences such as geology, evolutionary biology and ecology, and more recently by Earth system sciences and climatology. Yet, the knowledge gained by scientists in these fields is increasingly distant from the real-life experience of the global problems posed by today's environmental challenges. While research may uncover a decline in the biodiversity of insects [14] or a disruption in the nitrogen cycle [15], for example, these are not events that strike the senses since they are not known through lived experience. As a result, such knowledge does not produce any effect; it does not lead to decisions or actions. This is why some environmental thinkers are advocating the need to return to lived experience. In their view, this return is essential if scientific knowledge is to lead to practical commitment.

It is in this context that the project of a first-person ecology comes into play. A first-person ecology covers a field of research and practice that, based on the researcher's own experience, focuses on the human relationship with nature. Each of us is an embodied and situated being. The world and our bodies as part of it reveal themselves to us through our own bodies—through perceptive, proprioceptive and interoceptive experience—and through the experience of being here. They are accessible to us through external bodily sensations (visual, auditory, olfactory, etc.) or internal sensations (bodily movements, balance, sensations of suffocation, hunger or thirst, etc.) and from a singular perspective: I am here and not elsewhere, I do not exist simultaneously in two different places in space or in different temporalities, such as the past and the future. In short, embodiment and finitude are essential features of the human experience. They unfold in all the dimensions of lived experience: sensorimotor (sensation, movement, gesture), affective (emotion, feeling) and mental states. The researcher who adopts a first-person ecology approaches the relationship with the environment from the point of view of exploring his or her own perceptual (external and internal), affective or mental experience.

Although the term 'first-person ecology' is relatively new, the idea it refers to is far from new. There are many ancestral activities that are de facto examples of a first-person ecology. Think of shamanic rituals, certain hunting practices, gathering, tracking, stalking and so on. Today, a first-person ecology is practiced—in some respects and to some extent—by ecologists, naturalists and gardeners, by shepherds, hunters, breeders and farmers, by town planners and landscape architects, by poets and philosophers, by anthropologists and ethologists, and so on. It is probably even practiced by each one of us, without even realizing it, when we go for a walk in the woods and observe the trees and animals, when we tend our garden, when we look after our pets, when we cook, etc. It can also be explicitly found in certain mindful bodily practices that may (or may not) be part of a spiritual framework, such as yoga, hesychasm or meditation. However, most of the time, as in the examples above, a first-person ecology remains implicit; it is not addressed as such. It is not seen as a specific approach to nature or the world. It is this explanation of a first-person ecology that we wish to focus on.

Without using the term, two thinkers on ecology have nevertheless envisaged a 'first-person ecology' as what we need to go through to translate scientific knowledge into action. The philosopher Arne Næss is a pioneer of the first-person ecology, outlining the ontology underlying this form of ecology as a condition for ethical action. For his part,

environmental scientist and ethicist Aldo Leopold emphasizes that lived experience of nature is a prerequisite for practical commitment to it.

### 2.2.1. Arne Næss and Deep Ecology

Deep ecology, first introduced by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss, is defined in opposition to ‘superficial’ ecology [16]. It questions the ‘deep’ causes of the ecological crisis we are experiencing and calls for a rethinking not only of the production systems, consumption patterns and our relationship with the non-human or with technology but also of the ontology that underpins all of this. In ecosophy T, the version of deep ecology proposed by Næss—named after Tvergastein, a place in the Norwegian mountains where Næss liked to retreat—the experience of nature is central. Ecosophy T allowed Næss to sketch out the rudiments of a relational ontology. He describes the experience of nature as ‘spontaneous’ [17] (p. 135): the green leaves of the tree I am looking at through my office window, and the joy I can feel when I see them, is such a spontaneous experience. Before any sort of analysis, nature is first experienced directly, below the subject/object split. The experience forms what Næss calls a ‘gestalt’, a totality that is more than the sum of its parts [17] (p. 135). This gestalt is constituted by his visual perception and affective experience of the tree with the green leaves and is made up of various elements set in relation to each other: the tree, the environment in which it is situated and against whose background it stands out, his eyes, which perceive it, and himself, who says he sees the green leaves and feels joy. The relationships between the tree, the environment, his eyes and himself are internal. These elements are not things in themselves, isolated from each other, but are what they are through the relationships that link them into a whole.

Yet, the scientific concern for a distinction between a perceiving subject and a perceived object or its environment leads us to conceive of these elements as separate entities. The relationships that link them are then external because the entities come to exist independently of each other. This means that the disappearance of one does not mean the disappearance of the others. According to Næss, it is such external relationships that scientific knowledge produces. The substantial entities of the world—for example, the tree itself as it exists independently of my perception (and not the tree with green leaves as I perceive it)—are in fact abstract structures elaborated by the sciences through concepts. They have nothing to do with the world as we experience it.

Næss does not deny that the world is structured, but for him it is structured upon internal relationships within a gestalt that we form through our lived experience of the world [18] (p. 49–50) rather than upon the abstract structures formulated by the sciences. For Næss, while ‘[c]oncrete contents and abstract structures make up reality as it is in fact’ [18] (p. 46), ‘the world has structures, but does not *reveal* them. [...] The factors introduced in abstract analysis should not, as is usually done, be identified with objects in the world. They do not belong to the content of the world we are genuinely part of. Abstract structures are structures *of* the world, not *in* the world’ [18] (p. 51–52). In other words, we must not confuse the reality of the world as it is experienced in the form of a gestalt with scientific knowledge about the world. Such knowledge is not the world itself but its reflection. It is part of the world only as a cultural fact; it is not part of the world in its function of representing the world.

Næss draws on gestalt theory to propose an ontology adapted to the lived experience of reality, a relational ontology that is based on phenomena rather than a substantial ontology based on objects that are distinct and separate from the knowing subject. The world based on the abstract structures elaborated by the sciences is detached from all the properties that give it its ‘flavor’—the colors, smells, sounds and feelings it arouses. It follows that there is no longer any reason to consider this world as valuable, and there is thus nothing to stop human exploiting it as a mere resource. This is the practical challenge that Næss had in mind when reflecting on ontology [18] (p. 47) and it is what motivated him to suggest an alternative ontology to classical scientific ontology, one that recognizes the lived experience of the world as part of the world’s reality.



### 2.2.2. Aldo Leopold and Land Ethic

The second figure we would like to mention is the American forester and ecologist Aldo Leopold, a pioneering figure in land ethics. In a famous passage from the *Almanac*, Leopold recounts an experience that seems to have been the source of his ethical commitment to preserving the environment. An avid hunter in his early days, he gradually became a defender of nature, developing through his activity and his thinking an ethic that aimed to protect ecosystems (biotic communities) and the various parts that make them up (their members).

Leopold's story intentionally condenses three periods of his life. It aims to provoke in readers a real awareness and a radical change in the way that they perceive nature, just as the event itself did—albeit over a much longer period—for Leopold himself [19] (p. 246). The author of the story presents himself and others as a wolf hunter who deals a fatal blow to a she-wolf. As he approaches the dying animal, he suddenly understands what he did not know: 'We reached the old wolf in time,' he recalls, 'to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain' [20] (p. 138). What Leopold would later learn about ecology was that fewer wolves does not mean more deer but too many deer. Through narrative reconstruction, he highlights the irreplaceable contribution of a lived experience: it allows us to experience the moral sense of a behavior that scientific knowledge alone does not permit.

Deep ecology and Leopold's land ethic have become important currents in environmental ethics. The various ways in which they have been appropriated since their emergence should not blind us to the fact that both hold that lived experience is a prerequisite for the practical application of knowledge from the environmental sciences. In order to act, we need to feel genuinely concerned by the situation that these sciences bring to light, and this requires the mediation of subjective experience.

Næss and deep ecology highlight lived experience of nature as the locus of a knowledge that goes beyond the subject–object dualism, which is not knowledge by a subject of nature-as-an-object but knowledge that, through experience, is, so to speak, knowledge of nature-by-itself<sup>4</sup>. As for Leopold and his land ethics, he attests that practical commitment to the environment in the form of ethical and political action requires experience as a predisposition to act in a particular way.

In what follows, we will explore the lived experience of nature, as illustrated above, as the basis of a first-person ecology. We propose to do this from two perspectives. In Section 3, we adopt an epistemic perspective on the experience of nature, thus bringing together experience, knowledge and action. Here, we turn to a 'philosophy of recognition' inspired by Axel Honneth's 'theory of recognition'. We believe that this approach is well-suited to the task, given its association of a cognitive dimension (that of rationality) with lived experience—namely, that of recognition (i.e., a critical mode of rationality). Finally, in Section 4, we present a phenomenological description of the experience of nature by drawing on the field of ecospirituality. We think that this approach perfectly highlights the different dimensions of the experience of nature.

Ecospirituality and recognition can, each in their own way, help to give conceptual consistency to a first-person ecology defined as a stance mediating between scientific knowledge and action. This, we think, makes it possible to connect the embodied and transcendental dimension of (ecospiritual) experience with the cognitive and social dimensions of critical rationality. Both ecospirituality and recognition can therefore contribute to the development of a first-person ecology as a condition for bridging the gap between scientific knowledge and action. There are many tools available today in the social sciences—political, legal, psychological, social—that provide practical responses to environmental challenges. A first-person ecology does not pretend to replace them. But we argue that these tools are unlikely to be effective unless they are grounded in the lived experience of nature that a first-person ecology seeks to provide.

### 3. Recognition: The Experience of Nature from an Epistemic Perspective

In this part, we approach a first-person ecology from an epistemic perspective: lived experience of nature is not just any experience; it is an experience *of* nature, i.e., of an intentional object. We argue that the lived experience of nature has a cognitive aspect, which is not yet an objective mode of knowledge, that needs to be made explicit. Making this link between cognition and experience explicit can help to understand the knowledge–action gap. To this end, we will draw on Axel Honneth’s critical theory of recognition. The question we can ask is twofold: First, can the concept of recognition contribute to the development of a first-person ecology and, conversely, what can a first-person ecology contribute to a philosophy of recognition? Second, how can the concept of recognition help to bridge the gap between knowledge and action? As we shall see, these questions force us to rethink the concept of recognition as it has been understood so far. In particular, they lead us to ask whether it is even possible to conceive of a recognizing attitude toward nature.

#### 3.1. The Concept of Recognition in Axel Honneth’s Critical Theory and Its Limits

Nature does not play a major role in the development of Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition, as a third-generation social philosopher and critical theorist from the Frankfurt School, despite the long critical tradition of Frankfurt school critical theory toward instrumental rationality involving the domination of nature<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, there is a general agreement on the idea that we cannot understand our relationship with nature in terms of a concept of recognition [22] (p. 276) [23] (p. 61). The reason is that the normative framework of this concept is limited to interpersonal relations, that is, to what Arto Laitinen [24] calls the ‘mutuality–insight’ in which ‘only recognizers can be recognized’ (p. 320). In the mutuality–insight only *persons* can be recognized. As Honneth [25] puts it, ‘the original mode of recognition consists in [...] the affirmation of positive qualities of human subjects or groups’ (p. 329). In a later work, A. Honneth [23] develops a different understanding of recognition that contrasts significantly with the original concept. He calls this new understanding ‘antecedent recognition’. Antecedent recognition contains key elements that, in line with a broader understanding of recognition based on the idea of adequate regard [24] (and below in Section 3.2) could help to develop what we might call rather than a theory, a *philosophy* of recognition [26]. However, as we shall now see, antecedent recognition fails to conceptualize such an attitude in the context of a first-person ecology.

Honneth defines antecedent recognition as ‘a kind of antecedent interaction that bears the characteristic features of existential care’ [23] (p. 41). Here, recognition requires some *form of attachment* and is antecedent to an understanding of the world and of other persons based on purely epistemic concepts. As Honneth puts it, ‘our actions do not primarily have the character of an affectively neutral, cognitive stance toward the world, but rather that of an affirmative, existentially coloured style of caring comportment’ [23] (p. 38). This socio-ontological conception of recognition differs significantly from the original definition. What is important here is not so much the affirmation of the positive qualities of an individual as an elementary intersubjective interaction that does not yet involve the perception of specific values of the individual [23] (p. 51).

At first sight, the concept of antecedent recognition, because it asserts the ontogenetical primacy of recognition over our cognitive, epistemic grasp over the world, might seem, from a first-person ecology perspective, suitable for explaining our lived experience of nature. However, a closer look at the conceptual and ontogenetical basis of the concept shows that this is not the case. In fact, as Honneth himself admits, the developmental psychology and social theories on the basis of which he constructs the concept of recognition are limited to the interpersonal world [23] (p. 60). Recognition is therefore not a necessary condition for our knowledge of nature in the same way as it is for our relations with other persons [23] (pp. 63–64). In fact, recognition of nature is only possible as a derivative consequence of a recognizing attitude toward other persons, i.e., ‘respecting those aspects of meaning in an object [nature] that human beings accord that object’ [23] (p. 63). In other words, Honneth’s definition of ‘antecedent recognition’, despite its emphasis on

the primacy of recognition over cognition, contains a strong anthropocentric bias that is incompatible with a first-person ecology.

### 3.2. A Non-Anthropocentric Stance of Recognition: Love as a Form of Adequate Recognition

To conceive a non-anthropocentric recognizing attitude toward nature in line with a first-person ecology, we first need to change the framework in which recognition has so far been understood from a ‘mutuality–insight’ to an ‘adequate regard–insight’ [24]. In the adequate regard–insight, recognition means responding appropriately to *any* normatively or evaluatively significant features of *any* other being [24] (pp. 323–326). It follows that there can be a variety of forms of recognition. What is important here is that these varied forms of recognition are *all* responses that are called for by the normatively significant features of the other [24] (p. 338).

We propose that *adequate recognition*, i.e., responding to the normatively significant features of *any* other being, can be the basis of a recognizing attitude toward nature and that love can be conceived of as a form of this [26]. However, the concept of love that is required here needs to be as neutral as possible<sup>6</sup>. We could say, following Harry Frankfurt [27], that ‘love is a species of caring about things’ (p. 129). Or we could take the view of environmental ethicist Cheryl Hall [28], for whom ‘being green’ (supporting, protecting, preserving or restoring nature), depends on love as ‘an abiding commitment *to act* on behalf of another who is *accepted and appreciated* for who they are’ (pp. 216–217, our italics). To this we can add Humberto Maturana’s definition of love as ‘the domain of those *relational behaviours* through which another arises as a *legitimate other* in co-existence with oneself’ [29] (p. 55, our italics)<sup>7</sup>. The only difference between Hall’s and Maturana’s definitions is that for Maturana, love is a biological (i.e., embodied) characteristic of human beings. Hall notes that both perception and action are required. As she puts it, ‘[t]rue love is a combination of caring perception and caring action’ [28] (p. 217). We can therefore say that love is a cognitive-emotional embodied disposition through which an other is accepted. This definition is sufficiently neutral so as to accept different forms and recipients or beneficiaries of love.

Based on this understanding of love as a way of responding to the normatively significant features of *any* other being, it is clear that the other here need not itself be a recognizer, i.e., a person, as is the case with mutuality–insight. The other, any other, ‘arises’, is ‘accepted, *is recognized* without necessarily being an active participant (a recognizer). It is therefore based on love as a form of adequate recognition that we can conceive of a recognizing attitude toward nature in the form of an affirmative, existential form of caring comportment<sup>8</sup>. It is also important to note that, as with Honneth’s definition of antecedent recognition, a recognizing attitude toward nature is antecedent to an objective understanding of, and relationship with, nature in purely categorical terms [26].

### 3.3. Recognition and a First-Person Ecology

In the two sections above, we have provided some elements that can help to develop a non-anthropocentric recognizing attitude toward nature. With these elements in mind, we can return to the two questions that we posed at the beginning: First, how can the concept of recognition contribute to the development of a first-person ecology and, conversely, how can a first-person ecology contribute to a theory or philosophy of recognition? And second, how can the concept of recognition contribute to addressing the problem of the gap between knowledge and action?

#### 3.3.1. Letting Go, Letting Be and Self-Realization

We believe that an important contribution of a philosophy of recognition to a first-person ecology is the practice of *letting go* and its corollary: *letting* (the other) *be* (autonomy)<sup>9</sup>. We have defined recognition of nature as a form of adequate recognition based on love, which we have then defined as the cognitive-emotional embodied disposition of a caring subject through which the other (in this case nature) is accepted as legitimate in co-existence with oneself. According to Elisa Aaltola [30], the practice of letting go is rooted in our



ordinary, lived experience of nature; as she puts it, in ‘the small things surrounding us that we often overlook as disinteresting or insignificant, such as trees, rocks or birds flying past’ [30] (p. 199). This practice is key to a recognition of nature based on love. As Aaltola argues, drawing on the work of Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil<sup>10</sup>, ‘[l]earning love towards other animals requires setting aside stereotypes, agendas of use and the subject–object distinction, and simply letting go: we should just breathe, detach from presumptions and let the animal be’ [30] (p. 200)<sup>11</sup>. Thus, recognition of nature, when it involves an active letting go, contributes to a first-person ecology by helping to overcome the subject–object dichotomy and our self-directedness<sup>12</sup>, and by helping, through the notion of *letting be*, to conceive of ‘earth others’ as independent, legitimate beings, and therefore, ultimately, to conceive of nature’s autonomy [32] and our relationship with other natural beings as mutual self-realization [33].

Just as the above philosophy of recognition contributes to a first-person ecology, the latter also has much to contribute to a philosophy of recognition, especially regarding the idea of self-realization or autonomy<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, the concept of recognition and the relations-to-self that constitute the spheres of recognition are meant to include the intersubjective conditions that are necessary for identity formation [34]<sup>14</sup>. However, nature is not included here as an equally necessary condition for the self-realization of individual identity. This is the case, as we have seen, with the concept of ‘antecedent recognition’, which excludes the notion of an attitude of engaged praxis, care, or intimate involvement with nature, despite the intuitions of the authors (Lukács, Heidegger and Dewey) who inspire Honneth’s work.

Finally, a first-person ecology could contribute to an understanding of nature as a condition of self-realization (which is one of the central ideas of the theory of recognition). This point would require an explanation that goes beyond the scope of this essay. It suffices to say that, as a field of research that shares the basic premises of a first-person ecology, ecopsychology could help us here to understand the importance of our relationship with nature for self-realization [35,36]. Moreover, we have seen that (antecedent) recognition posits a form of intersubjective attachment as the basis of self-realization. In this regard, the biophilia hypothesis [37] could be used to elucidate a *form of attachment* to the natural world that can be directly linked to a recognizing attitude toward nature based on love (for a more detailed account, see [26]).

### 3.3.2. Recognition and the Knowledge–Action Gap

In Section 1, we have seen that modern science introduced an epistemological separation between the knowing subject and the object to be known. Indeed, the specificity of modernity is the understanding of scientific knowledge as *objective* knowledge, i.e., knowledge that proceeds from an external, third-person, point of view. We have also seen that this separation between the subject and the object has created a gap between scientific knowledge and action. To address this problem, we have suggested that a first-person ecology, that is, a focus on our lived experience of nature, is an indispensable link between knowledge and action. Here, we will argue that a philosophy of recognition, inspired, as we have seen, by Honneth’s theory of recognition, could help elucidate this knowledge–action gap.

It is helpful to remember that recognition and cognition have not always been separated<sup>15</sup>. As Paul Ricœur [38] has shown, it is only after a long trajectory that recognition detaches itself from knowledge (p. 21). In this ‘final stage’ in which recognition is separated from cognition, two modes can be distinguished that define the ‘modus’ of the relationship between recognition and cognition. As Honneth puts it, ‘We have, on the one hand, forms of knowledge sensitive to recognition, and, on the other, forms of knowledge in which every trace of their origin in an antecedent act of recognition has been lost’ [23] (p. 56). Honneth calls forms of knowledge in which recognition has been lost ‘reification’. Reification is the process by which we lose sight of the fact that knowledge is grounded in recognition. In Honneth’s words, it is ‘the process by which we lose the consciousness of the degree to which we owe our knowledge and cognition of other persons to an antecedent stance of empathetic engagement and recognition’ [23] (p. 56). However, as with the concept of

‘antecedent recognition’, the concept of reification only applies to our relationship with other persons.

But we have seen that we can conceive of a recognizing attitude toward nature based on love as a form of adequate recognition. Therefore, if reification is the process and the result of ‘forgetting’ that our interactions with other persons depend on an antecedent stance of recognition, by analogy the *reification of nature* can be interpreted as forgetting (losing consciousness of) our lived experience of nature in our knowledge of nature. Honneth notes that the two kinds of stance that define the modus of the relationship between recognition and cognition are either transparent to each other or obscure [23] (p. 56). In the current ecological context, we could say that our knowledge of nature is characterized by the oblivion and concealment of a lived experience of, and recognizing attitude toward, nature. To put it another way, we have defined a recognizing attitude toward nature in terms of love as a form of adequate recognition, and we have said that love as a form of adequate recognition can be defined as a cognitive-emotional disposition that requires both perception and action; therefore, the reification of nature is the process and the result in which love as attention, that is, vision as a form of attention towards the natural world, fades into the background [23] (p. 194) (see also note 8 above). This explains the knowledge–action gap and shows the importance of developing a first-person ecology to help create the conditions for bridging the gap between knowledge and action.

#### 4. Ecospirituality: The Experience of Nature from a Phenomenological Perspective <sup>16</sup>

In the previous sections, we have suggested that bridging the gap between knowledge and action in the Anthropocene requires the mediation of lived experience of nature. We have suggested that we can interpret this mediation in terms of a philosophy of recognition. We propose now, drawing on the field of ecospirituality, to describe the phenomenological characteristics of the experience of nature from which a first-person ecology can be developed. Ecospirituality embodies a holistic approach to ecological awareness that transcends mere scientific or environmental considerations. It invites individuals to explore their relationship with the natural world not just as external observers but as integral participants in the web of life. Ecospirituality and a first-person ecology converge in their emphasis on the lived experience of ecological interconnectedness, and therefore ecospirituality provides a foundational framework for phenomenological descriptions within the field of a first-person ecology.

The aim is not to present ecospirituality as a necessary and sufficient condition for collective change but to use specific descriptions from particular texts to elucidate the characteristics of a first-person ecological experience. Alternative approaches could have been employed to articulate this first-hand encounter with ecology, such as ecofeminism or environmental aesthetics. However, ecospirituality serves the purpose of translating and expressing a first-person experience of ecology. In this sense, it is suitable for a phenomenological description of the features inherent in this type of experience. Therefore, our intention is not to appropriate the language of ecospirituality for ourselves but rather to use this phenomenon to illustrate and describe, at a meta-conceptual level, the structures underlying the first-person ecological experience.

##### 4.1. The Ecospiritual Phenomena

‘Ecospirituality’ is a multifaceted concept that arises at the confluence of two significant movements: the ‘ecologization of religion’ in its broadest sense and the ‘spiritualization of ecology’ [39]. This convergence gives rise to what we understand as ecospirituality, a term encapsulating a rich tapestry of phenomena. On the one hand, ecospirituality involves the active engagement of religious traditions, drawing upon their diverse resources, to address ecological concerns. This involvement manifests through various means, such as the integration of environmental themes into religious teachings, the adoption of eco-friendly practices within religious communities (often termed the ‘greening of religions’ [40]), and the incorporation of rituals, prayers and meditative practices that foster ecological

awareness and stewardship. On the other hand, ecospirituality signifies an openness within the ecological discourse to explorations of transcendence and existential meaning. This dimension invites inquiries into the profound interconnectedness between human existence and the natural world, challenging conventional notions of human–nature relationships. It finds expression in movements like deep ecology and ecopsychology. Additionally, outdoor practices and naturalist practices contribute to this evolving discourse by offering alternative perspectives on the human experience in relation to the wider cosmos.

While ecospirituality finds resonance across diverse cultural and religious traditions worldwide [41], it remains a minority perspective, particularly within Western societies undergoing processes of secularization. Nevertheless, contemporary manifestations of ecospirituality have been extensively documented through disciplines such as ethnography, history, and the sociology of religion [41–46]. Scholars have employed various terms, such as ‘spiritual ecology’ [41,47], ‘dark green religion’ [46], and ‘earth spiritualities’ [48–50], to elucidate the diverse manifestations of ecospirituality within different cultural contexts. These terms serve as signposts in navigating the intricate terrain of ecospiritual expressions, offering insights into humanity’s evolving relationship with the natural world and the spiritual dimensions inherent within it.

#### 4.2. Ecospirituality as First-Person Ecology: Unveiling Four Key Characteristics

Ecospirituality exemplifies a paradigm of first-person ecology by fundamentally interpreting ecological issues as rooted in ‘inner ecology’ [51], signifying a transformative journey of the self and its interconnectedness with others and the world. At its core, ecospirituality manifests as a *poietics* of the ecological self [52], wherein individuals undergo a profound metamorphosis, pushing the envelope of the ego and societal constructs to embrace a broader sense of being.

By ‘poietics’, we refer to the transformative process facilitated by ecospiritual experiences, enabling individuals to nurture and cherish a self that extends beyond the boundaries of the personal or social self. The notion of the ‘ecological self’ embodies a departure from conventional self-identification, encouraging individuals to engage in a decentering process aimed at exploring ecological relationships and embracing otherness as inherent aspects of their existence, transcending the confines of ordinary personal narratives<sup>17</sup>.

Within the diverse spectrum of ecospiritual encounters, four distinctive characteristics emerge, framing it as a quintessential, albeit not exclusive, illustration of a first-person ecology: affective, decentered, transformative and predisposed to action.

To illustrate this point, let us consider the ecologization of Zen Buddhism as articulated by the renowned poet, peace activist, and Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. He underscores the urgency of restoring our connection with the Earth in the face of imminent environmental peril, advocating for an ecospiritual revolution to confront these challenges head-on [53]. Thich Nhat Hanh promotes mindfulness practices, such as poeticizing everyday actions through *gathas* (short poems) and infusing ecological consciousness into routine activities like breathing, sitting, eating and connecting with the earth.

##### 4.2.1. The Affective Dimension of the Ecospiritual Experience of Nature

A first-person ecology describes the lived experience of nature through embodied consciousness, acknowledging not only the cognitive level but also delving into its affective depth. The affective experience of nature intricately involves and dynamically transforms our attention, sensitivity and emotions. This notion resonates with Thich Nhat Hanh’s profound understanding of ‘mindfulness’ characterized as ‘the energy of being aware and awake in the present moment’ [54]. An illustrative practice of this mindfulness is found in the ‘walking meditation’ presented as a *Love Letter to the Earth* [53], opening with these words:

Dear Mother Earth,<sup>18</sup>

Every time I step upon the Earth, I will train myself to see that I am walking on you, my Mother. Every time I place my feet on the Earth I have a chance to be in touch with you and with all your wonders. With every step I can touch the fact

that you aren't just beneath me, dear Mother, but you are also within me. Each mindful and gentle step can nourish me, heal me, and bring me into contact with myself and with you in the present moment.

Walking in mindfulness I can express my love, respect, and care for you, our precious Earth. [53] (p. 108)

Engaging in mindful walking entails a state of complete presence, wherein we are attuned to our bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts and the surrounding environment without imposition of judgment. Each step becomes a sacred act of grounding ourselves in the Earth, facilitating a sensitive exploration of the experience of nature. Moreover, this practice serves as a conduit for evoking devotional sentiments such as wonder, tenderness, love, compassion, and respect. Thus, the seemingly mundane act of walking transforms into a transcendent experience, not only allowed us to forge a connection with something greater than ourselves—an essence that is both cosmic and sacred, yet immanent within us—but also heightening our awareness of the sensations, emotions and thoughts that arise from such a participatory experience.

#### 4.2.2. The Decentered Dimension of the Ecospiritual Experience of Nature

The experience of nature within ecospirituality unfolds as both decentered and decentering—an avenue to access non-egotistic perspectives or encounters. This aspect aligns closely with a first-person ecology, which underscores the ecocentric subjective experience and perspective of individuals within ecological systems. It signifies a departure from the confines of the Kantian and post-Kantian 'transcendental ego', offering instead an immersion into the participation of the ecological self in the cosmos through explorations of body and mind.

Shifting the focus from the ego to the present moment enables individuals to perceive themselves as integral components of the environment rather than isolated entities. Thich Nhat Hanh articulates this shift, declaring in direct address to the Earth, 'Our nature is your nature, which is also the nature of the cosmos' [53] (p. 109). This shift in perspective fosters a profound sense of interconnectedness and interdependence with nature. In such an experience, the conventional inside–outside dichotomy dissolves, giving way to a recognition of constant, reciprocal interrelationships. Thich Nhat Hanh employs the concept of 'interbeing' to elucidate this cosmivision. To experience interbeing is to acknowledge the inherent otherness within our ecological self. Within the Buddhist tradition, this decentered experience facilitates awakening to a deeper reality transcending the ego, connecting individuals to a cosmic dimension:

Walking in this spirit I can experience awakening. I can awaken to the fact that I am alive, and that life is a precious miracle. I can awaken to the fact that I am never alone and can never die. You are always there within me and around me at every step, nourishing me, embracing me, and carrying me far into the future. [53] (p. 109)

The 'I' that transcends mortality and solitude is not the ego but rather an ecological self, intricately entwined in the living dynamics of the Earth and the cosmos. This understanding resonates deeply with a first-person ecology, wherein the lived experience of nature by an embodied consciousness presupposes a process of decentering [21]. It involves merging the ecological self into the intricate web of ecological interdependencies.

#### 4.2.3. The Transformative Dimension of the Ecospiritual Experience of Nature

The ecospiritual experience of nature initiates a profound transformation, challenging the entrenched dualistic mindset prevalent in modern, neoliberal societies. It offers a departure from conventional Western perspectives, inviting individuals to transcend dualistic structures and embrace a holistic understanding of existence. Thich Nhat Hanh's mindful walking practice exemplifies this transformative process, emphasizing the interconnectedness of mind and body, as well as the intrinsic consciousness within nature itself.

I will touch the truth that mind and body are not two separate entities. I will train myself to look deeply to see your true nature: you are my loving mother, a *living* being, a *great* being—an immense, beautiful, and precious wonder. You are not only matter, you are also mind, you are also consciousness. Just as the beautiful pine or tender grain of corn possess an innate sense of knowing, so, too, do you. Within you, dear Mother Earth, there are the elements of Earth, water, air and fire; and there is also time, space, and consciousness. [53] (p. 109)

At its core, this transformation operates at the ontological level, aligning with concepts such as ‘reflexive monism’ [56] or panpsychism [21], which aim to avoid both dualism and materialism. At a psychological and practical level, according to Thich Nhat Hanh, by dismantling dualistic separations, which often lead to emotional distress and existential suffering, ecospiritual experiences facilitate healing and empowerment. Through reclaiming ecological relationships, individuals reintegrate themselves into the larger systemic dynamic of nature, alleviating egoistic tensions and fostering a sense of participation in the interconnectedness of life:

I shall walk with my own body and mind united in oneness. I know I can walk in such a way that every step is a pleasure, every step is nourishing, and every step is healing—not only for my body and mind, but also for you, dear Mother Earth. [. . .] At every step I can take refuge in you. At every step I can enjoy your beauties, your delicate veil of atmosphere and the miracle of gravity. [53] (p. 110)

Thich Nhat Hanh’s teachings underscore the unity of body and mind in the act of walking, emphasizing the pleasure, nourishment and healing inherent in each step. Rooted in an ethics of care, this wisdom extends beyond personal well-being to embrace our interconnectedness with the Earth. It encourages a collective responsibility to confront and mend harmful relationships with nature. By embracing this responsibility, a first-person ecology and ecospiritual experience can initiate transformative changes in deep subjective structures, paving the way for a more sustainable future.

#### 4.2.4. The Predisposition to Action in the Ecospiritual Experience of Nature

Finally, a first-person ecology describes a lived experience of nature that predisposes a person to action. According to Naess, when you deeply inhabit a place and relate to your fellow inhabitants, you realize that to protect that place is to protect yourself [57]. Ecospiritual experience, including mindfulness practices, engender a profound attunement to the present moment, nurturing a sense of accountability and empathy. This heightened awareness translates into a readiness to advocate for environmental protection and sustainability. Thich Nhat Hanh encapsulates this sentiment in the conclusion of his walking meditation:

Dear Mother, you wish that we live with more awareness and gratitude, and we can do this by generating the energies of mindfulness, peace, stability, and compassion in our daily lives. Therefore, I make the promise today to return your love and fulfill this wish by investing every step I take on you with love and tenderness. I am walking not merely on matter, but on spirit. [53] (p. 110)

Ecospiritual experience predisposes individuals to engage in ecological action, which can manifest in various forms, including making conscious lifestyle choices, actively participating in environmental movements, or advocating for change. Drawing on ecospiritual resources can also aid in fostering environmental activism.

Describing the dimensions of ecospiritual experience provides a phenomenological lens through which to understand the nature of a first-person ecology. Ecospiritual practices facilitate the cultivation of attentive and compassionate relationships with the environment, shaping a first-person experience of interconnectedness. These practices delve into how individuals inhabit these relationships in personally and collectively meaningful ways. At the core of this experience lies an earthly condition defined by living connections, which are interpreted and engaged with differently based on historical and contextual factors



and interwoven into the ‘Great Story’ [58] of the universe. Consequently, the experiential framework shared by these practices embodies a *poietics* of the ecological self—an ecosystem of practices that mold and reshape a self deeply connected to nature. This framework implies an ethic of care aimed at safeguarding vulnerable relationships while challenging those that pose harm.

Indeed, a first-person ecology discovers in ecospiritual experiences fertile ground for understanding how embodied consciousness engages with nature. This exploration reveals that the experience of nature is inherently affective, transcending mere cognitive engagement. It is characterized by its capacity to decenter the individual, prompting a shift in perspective and fostering transformative encounters with the natural world. Moreover, this experience predisposes individuals to act, as it cultivates a deep sense of connection, responsibility, and reverence toward the environment.

## 5. Conclusions

Taking as a starting point the major environmental challenge of climate change, we have noted that scientific knowledge, despite its extraordinary development over the last 30 years, has unfortunately not yet led to any practical commitment, either political or ethical. This is what we have termed the problem of the knowledge–action gap in the Anthropocene. We have suggested that a first-person ecology is a way of bridging this gap, in that, based on lived experience of nature as a form of knowledge that predisposes to action, it can mediate between scientific knowledge of the environment and ethical and political action.

Drawing on traditions as diverse as phenomenology, religious anthropology and ethnology and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, we have sought to describe, from a phenomenological and cognitive perspectives, two different dimensions of the experience of nature on which a first-person ecology is based. This has allowed us to highlight the embodied, cognitive and transcendental dimensions of the experience of nature. In this respect, we believe that there is a real convergence between these traditions, which together reinforce the interest and legitimacy of a first-person ecology<sup>19</sup>.

At stake is the idea that lived experience of nature is a necessary, albeit not sufficient, mediation between abstract scientific knowledge and practical engagement. Indeed, although a first-person ecology aspires to play the role of mediator between scientific knowledge and practice, it needs to be concretized in the various spheres—psychological, social, political, legal, etc.—of human experience. To do this, it can draw on the expertise of the humanities and social sciences, such as psychology, sociology, political science or law. A first-person ecology, therefore, does not claim to replace the conceptual contributions of these disciplines. Rather, it should be understood as a condition of possibility for the effectiveness of the tools developed by these disciplines, thus enabling environmental science knowledge to be translated into action.

At the end of this reflection, a new problem arises, however: that of the relationship between a first-person ecology and the third-person approach of environmental sciences such as scientific ecology, Earth system sciences and evolutionary biology. How should we think about this relationship? If both the first- and third-person perspectives allow us to grasp something of reality, how can we conceive of the relationship between these two approaches so that together they point to the reality of the world and of nature? Yet, this question raises a new ontological and even metaphysical issue that goes far beyond the scope of this article.

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## Notes

- 1 The distinction between the first and second qualities goes back to *The Essayist*, published by Galileo in 1623. It was subsequently taken up in the rationalism of René Descartes and Gottfried W. Leibniz, as well as in the empiricism of John Locke. It has had considerable influence on the modern concept of scientific knowledge.
- 2 Scientific objectivity does not necessarily mean here a reality independent from the knowing subject. It means, above all, epistemic objectivity, i.e., intersubjectivity. Epistemic objectivity is a necessary condition for scientific objectivity, but ontological objectivity is not.
- 3 See Clive Hamilton et al. on the Anthropocene [13], in particular ch. 3 ‘Human destiny in the Anthropocene’ (Clive Hamilton) and ch. 4 ‘The Anthropocene and the convergence of histories’ (Dipesh Chakrabarty)
- 4 Knowledge of nature-by-itself is only possible based on certain conditions that a phenomenological analysis makes it possible to formulate clearly: on the one hand, the forms of our lived body (the sentient or living body, for example); on the other hand, the various modes—correlative to the lived body—of participation in nature. Ultimately, however, knowledge of nature-by-itself presupposes a radical de-objectification of the self and of nature-as-an-object—a de-objectification exemplified in the confrontation with our own death. For a systemic account of this process, see [21]. Such a radical decentering of the self can be found, for example, in Thich Nhat Hanh’s ecospiritual approach (see Section 4.2.2).
- 5 More recently, Harmut Rosa’s resonance theory [22] represents an attempt to ground a critical theory in which nature is a sphere in which resonance can be experienced.
- 6 As neutral as possible: love can and has taken many forms (the Greeks distinguished, for example, between *philia*, *storge*, *agape*, *eros*, etc.). In speaking of love, we mean an attitude or disposition that connotes a form of caring. Therefore, love, thus understood, is a form of the affective dimension of the experience of nature (see also Section 4.2.1).
- 7 Relational behaviors: emotions are dispositions for actions. Therefore, love is conducive to (caring) action. It follows that love is not only a form of the affective dimension of the experience of nature, but it also predisposes to action (see also Section 4.2.4).
- 8 We can draw a parallel here with Elisa Aaltola’s notion of ‘attentive love’. Attentive love is a way of relating to others, it allows us to perceive what others are like in themselves beyond pre-fixed definitions [30] (p. 194). Note that this definition of attentive love is quite similar to the definition of antecedent recognition: an elementary intersubjective interaction that does not yet involve representations or specific values of the individual.
- 9 The practice of letting go is reminiscent of many ecospiritual practices (see Section 4). In fact, Aaltola [30] explicitly refers to Zen Buddhist philosophy as a source of what she calls ‘un-selfing’ (see Sections 4.2.2 and 4.2.3 and note 11).
- 10 Aaltola applies her reasoning to animal ethics, but it can be generalized to all natural beings, and to nature itself.
- 11 Bryan Bannon [31] uses the term ‘letting be’ in a similar way to Aaltola’s [30] ‘letting go’. For Bannon, letting be requires that ‘we abandon representations of beings in order to free the being from the limitations imposed by the representation’ [31] (p. 47). Note that this practice is present in many ecospiritual practices (Section 4).
- 12 Aaltola, following Murdoch, calls this ‘un-selfing’, that is, ‘acknowledging that others may be utterly dissimilar from the definitions we have created, and from recognizing that we ourselves may be quite distinct from our inflated self-image’ [30] (p. 197). Above, we called this ‘decentering of the self’, which, as we have seen, is a dimension of the experience of nature (Section 4.2.2).
- 13 It is important to distinguish between this idea of self-realization or autonomy based on recognition and Arne Næss’ concept of self-realization. For Næss, self-realization means that the subject, based on an experience of identification with nature, participates in a metaphysical reality, an ecological self, that is, a broader understanding of the self beyond the individuated, self-interested self, so that the subject’s self-realization is actually the self-realization of nature in the form of an ecological self. Self-realization or autonomy based on a recognizing attitude of nature is quite different. Here, nature is understood as a condition of individual self-realization. To be sure, it is a *constitutive* condition of identity formation, but one that does not imply, at least at this stage, the identification of the self with an ecological self. This is a point that we cannot go into here (some aspects are developed in Section 4). What is important here is that, as a large body of (eco)psychological research has shown (see, among others, the work of Susan Clayton), nature plays an important role in the (social) formation of personal identity. It is in this sense, and to stay close to Honneth’s theory of recognition, that we can understand nature as a constitutive condition of self-realization. Self-realization as the self-realization of an ecological self requires a different consideration. This is an important distinction that our study brings to light.
- 14 These include the sphere of love (intersubjective relations constituted by an emotional attachment), the sphere of rights (relations of respect for the autonomy and dignity of persons) and the sphere of solidarity (relationships within a community based on shared values). See Honneth [34].
- 15 Honneth’s theory of recognition supposes, as we can guess from what we have said before, this separation between cognition and recognition.

- 16 We see ecospirituality as a socio-cultural phenomenon and not a means to construct a theological argument. It is important to clarify this point: considering such ‘religious’ phenomena does not imply, for us or any reader, any affiliation with a particular faith tradition. No act of faith is necessary to appreciate the contribution of these phenomena in illustrating the kind of experiences that broadly define a first-person ecology.
- 17 In the deep ecology/ecofeminist debate around the ecological self, we draw on ecofeminist critics of Arne Næss’s seminal conception of the ecological self, and we argue for a self that can recognize its participation in natural otherness as part of its own experience.
- 18 We acknowledge the ecofeminist critique that the feminization of nature may have contributed to its exploitation, and we recognize the importance of handling terminologies like “Mother Earth” with caution, if not reconsidering their usage entirely (see [55]). However, the aim of this article is not to engage extensively in these debates, as one does not need to fully endorse Thich Nhat Hanh’s text or agree with all his ecospiritual assertions to explore the type of experience that characterizes a first-person ecology. Particularly, as we will soon discuss, kinship is not the central focus here; rather, we will emphasize the affective engagement and emotions of gratitude and respect that may arise from such a metaphor.
- 19 Other traditions may converge with a first-person ecology, such as the human ecology tradition, especially in its philosophical dimension.

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