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## Acceptance Governance

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Acceptance governance<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

There is a form of power whereby *the moral relationship* governs those who are part of, or affected by, the relationship. Called “acceptance governance,” it develops “power-with” in a decolonial manner, reframing agency as guided by accountability. Power-with leads to minimal moral relations between worlds out of which processes of acceptance build justice and right relations from the bottom up. There are two senses of acceptance, however, the second being accepting the conditions of acceptance. Power-with then becomes grounded in “power from,” a new form of power uncommon in the literature. In addition to cohering with a number of indigenous traditions as well as with ecological versions of civic republicanism, acceptance governance provides one way to internalize ecological reflexivity within norms of planetary governance and contributes to our analysis of institutional and personal capacities for participation, knowing, and healing from injustice common to significant strands of ESG research today.

Sharing a society does not necessarily mean that people share a community .... I wonder what it means to choose ... community during conflict, and to commit to grow together for what you see as a long period of time, binding yourself to those people.

~ Cassese et al. “To Learn Is Beautiful, But Who Gets To? Katherine Starting Out,” 2021

Labour is blossoming or dancing where

The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,

Nor beauty born out of its own despair,

Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,

Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,

How can we know the dancer from the dance?

~ William Butler Yeats, “Among School Children,” circa 1926

## 1. Introduction

Should one “welcome papers that discuss ... reformulations of notions of justice, responsibility, and agency in the context of earth system governance,” including “fundamental transformations at all levels of societal organization” (Biermann, 2019, 1), the speculative argument that follows will advance broadly decolonial efforts in ESG research through a version of the method that ESG scholars call, “critical” (Dirth et al., 2020; Biermann and Kalfagianni, 2020). The Socratic tradition takes assumptions that appear justified and runs with them even if they challenge conventions. While disconcerting, the point of this exercise is to stretch the mind to wonder. Wondering is important at a time in history when “ontological” questions are central to governance in ways that they have not been previously, perhaps in all of recorded history (Mai and Boulot 2021; Du Toit et al., 2022; Kim and Blanchard, 2022).

Let us say that “acceptance governance” goes some distance to satisfying a view of governance whereby *the moral relationship* governs those who are part of, or affected by, the relationship. In this paper, I want to *delineate the normative core* of this governance-form. Acceptance governance sits well within civic republicanism (Pettit, 1998) and

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within a number of indigenous traditions (Whyte, 2018; Winter, 2022). Acceptance governance is worth understanding in order to develop an acceptable frame for agency for Earth System Governance (ESG) work. Moreover, acceptance governance is at least indirectly relevant to several prominent themes in conventional ESG research, notably, the form and limits of participation in governance (Kashwan et al., 2020; Glass and Newig, 2019; Hughes et al., 2021; Bäckstrand et al., 2021; Reynolds et al., 2020; and McAfee et al., 2022), modalities and practices of access to and internalization of knowledge (Raynor et al., 2021; Vij et al., 2021; Vadrot et al., 2022; Hofmann, 2022; and Drakopoulos et al., 2022), and the recent figure of healing from injustice (Johnson and Sigona, 2022), including through "just transitions" (Stevis and Felli, 2020). These last points I will return to at the paper's end.

The way in which this work frames agency departs from what I have elsewhere called the "Standard Definition of Agency" or the "Standard Discourse of Agency" (SDA). Earth System Governance work on agency is wide-reaching and heterogenous. Yet there is a tendency to understand agency through the institutional or practical bodies that are influential or responsible in the world. In previous work, I argued that fragmentary coloniality haunts ESG discourse on agency through the form of power called "power-over (Bendik-Keymer, 2019; 2021b)." Adaptation to international systems maintaining traces of imperial forms of governance appears to be the cause of this unintentional inclusion of power-over in matters of governance otherwise understood as multi-lateral, trans-national, mixed-form, and pro-democratic. This realization led to asking what an acceptable frame of agency is that presumes governance as emerging from the moral relationships between agents. Such a view of governance has the double advantage of being acceptable and of cohering with many traditions of indigenous law, thus making it further resistant to fragmentary coloniality in the world system. It is morally important to shift talk about agency as *influence* or *power-over* things and people to *agency-as-accountability*. What logic of accountability to consider and its broad outlines shaping how we should approach governance are the focus of this work.<sup>1</sup>

Acceptance governance also prepares the way to answer the call from within the ESG community to articulate "ecological reflexivity" concerning the more than human world including through an expansion of subjects of normative importance (Dryzek and Pickering, 2019, chapters 3 and 4; cf. Kotzé et al., 2022; Gellers, 2021; Hickey and Robeyns, 2020; Visseren-Hamakers, 2020). It does this through the use of a broad concept of power, yet uncommon in the literature, called "power-from" – in contrast to the more common "power with," "power in," and "power over" (Allen, 1998; Oxley, 2017). One purpose of this paper is to put

<sup>1</sup> This paper's outlook is in favor of work on agency that looks at complex interactions across entire socio-ecologies as many new materialists – especially Jane Bennett and Bruno Latour – have done, despite their different ontologies (Bennett a vitalist, Latour an occasionalist; Nail 2022). But it focuses instead on accountability relations, rather than on determination relations. The sense of "relation" is different in each. This paper uses relationality in a way that is interpersonal (or *interpersonae* – e.g. with "Earth beings" not just humans). As such, it is categorically different than relationality as used to think about causality across the entirety of a socio-ecology. If you may wonder why I don't discuss the authors of causal determination such as Bennett and Latour, it is because they are not speaking to the same *form* of relating. Still, I wholeheartedly agree that their rich scholarship should be appreciated, specifically when it comes to how it complexifies (not eliminates) accountability. On this last point, see also Vogel (2015) who both keeps accountability clear as this paper intends to do and yet still accepts (as this paper does) complex causal determinations provided by the socio-ecology of the techno-sphere.

For ESG scholars trained in philosophy: New materialist forms of relationality develop the space of *causal determinations* (not determinism), which is one prong of Kant's Third Antinomy. The moral nexus that I draw on (following Strawson, Darwall and Wallace, the latter whom I mainly cite in 2.3) develops the space of *accountability* (not free-will *per se*), which is the *other* prong of the Third Antinomy.

"power-from" on the table for future research.

The first part of this paper will articulate acceptance as a mode of "power with." That part's subsections will contextualize the study in a government-by-relationship view (2.1), explain power-with against power-in and -over (2.2.), introduce acceptance governance proper (2.3), explain the status of "minimal moral relationships" in the mode of governance (2.4), note why "beings" not just "people" are involved (2.5), center the role of what Viveiros de Castro (2004) called, following Gilbert Simondon, "transduction" between incommensurable eco-social worlds (2.6), and explain the aspirational role of thick moral relationships in thought about justice within acceptance governance (2.7).

The second, shorter part of the account will explain the idea of power-from by first discussing the notion of *accepting the conditions of acceptance* (3.1) and then turning to power-from proper in its relation to the multi-species domain named by the expression, "the moral mesh" (3.2).

The concluding section contextualizes this article in a larger project (4.0) and discusses four implications for ESG research (4.1), before briefly touching on the notion of "Earthbound relationships" as a catchphrase for acceptance governance (4.2). The areas where acceptance governance might be useful appear especially when considering participation and knowledge in governance and when aspiring to growing beyond, even healing, past injustices. But they also appear in the ongoing commitment to ontological pluralism between worlds that is a hallmark of decoloniality.

## 2. Acceptance 1: power-with (unsettling power-in & power-over)

In the relational viewpoint[,] the individual begins life as an effect produced by the many others in the world of his immediate past; but he is not simply a function of these relations. He is an emergent from his relationships, and in the process of his emergence he also creates himself.

~ Bernard Loomer, "Two Conceptions of Power" 1976.

### 2.1. A governance-by-relationship view

The main point of this paper is to articulate the normative core of the logic that should govern action – and so agency<sup>2</sup> – by way of moral relationships. The question in the background is: What is it to be governed by moral relationships? In a nutshell, *this question reframes talk about agency as talk about accountability*. But what and how accountability structures action must be articulated:

Take two well established cases from the history of philosophy.

1. *The third in the relationship is the relation.*<sup>3</sup> In the relationship between two beings who can relate to each other, there are at least three elements: each relatable being and the relation between them that takes on a life of its own.

Take a friendship. Each friend is their own person. But they also share a friendship. Not only each person's good is at issue, but the well-being of the relationship itself. Thus, one may speak coherently of "giving time to the relationship" or "caring for the relationship."

Or take dancing together. Each dancer is their own agent, making moves. But they also share the dance. Not only each dancer's moves are at issue, but the synergy, dynamism, or meaning of the dance. Thus, one may speak intelligibly of not knowing "the dancer from the dance" (Yeats, 1933).

<sup>2</sup> And so, institutional agencies.

<sup>3</sup> In philosophy, Kierkegaard (1962) emphasized the "third" in the relationship, developing his "existential" reading of Hegel's logic.

2. *The authority resides in isonomy, not in a particular will.* Isonomy emerged in Ionia twenty-eight hundred years ago (Karatani, 2017). By the modern period in Europe, it became known as *equality under the law* – a quality of just, civic republican institutions where no arbitrary will lays claim to legitimate authority, but only what is justifiable as law for all equally does (Pettit, 1998).

In isonomy, no one person holds legitimate authority. Rather, what regulates common life is the law itself under which all are equally free to flourish within its bounds. Tyranny is thereby prohibited. So too are partial interests as guides for common life. Impartiality is a feature of equality under the law where the law itself rules.

In each case, a relation governs its relata, whereby “govern,” we mean, as the word precisely means, to “conduct,” even to “steer” – or *guide* some domain of life (Apple Inc, 2020b). The friendship guides the friends; the dance guides the dancers; the law guides the citizens or (as in the *ius gentium*) the people. There is nothing in principle odd about being governed by a relationship, let alone a moral one. What we should note is that being so governed, we must *act* differently than if we were not in the relationship. Governance frames acceptable agency.

If the notion of “being governed by the relationship” seems odd, perhaps that impression comes from the vestiges – the conceptual inertia – of a specific *form of power* in thought about the political: “power over” people as opposed to “power with” people (Partzsch, 2017; Oxley, 2017; Allen, 1998). The former form of power persists in the *realist* tradition of political and international relations theory, even fragmentarily in the Earth System Governance Project’s standard definitions of agency once one explores some ambiguities and ambivalences. It’s clearly not the *intent* of ESG standard literature to reproduce fragments of power-over, but realist commitments appear to internalize aspects of it through the way the background world is taken into the theory of agency. There, “agencies” “prescribe behavior” for people and have “influence” over them, including at times through “cultural domination” or “military might” (Bendik-Keymer, 2021b). Even if states are no longer considered the sole agencies that merit analyses as agents of governance, still there is an *a priori* conceptual schism between all beings that could conceivably be understood as agents and agencies considered as players in matters of governance. This schism replicates – as in a fractal logic – the assumption of state power over people as found within realist political and international relations theory, including but also exceeding such clear cut cases where states internally or externally dominate others. Such an analysis that I have made elsewhere is a premise for this paper.

Here, I intend to argue for a view of Earth system governance that proceeds *resolutely* from an anti-imperial form of power, namely “power with.” The planetary development of this form of power will be, in section 3, that power-with depends on and should be grounded by what I will call later “power-from.” The idealistic project argued for here is meant to push along the “long unwinding of European imperialism” (Bendik-Keymer, 2020b) by way of dissolving its extant fragmentary coloniality in governance forms. The argument should be understood as *intensifying* and *extending* ESG democratic and morally egalitarian intentions given the persistence of fragmentary coloniality.

Let’s imagine governance as a process that emerges *out of moral relationships*, specifically, ones that are *relationally autonomous*. Moreover, let’s understand autonomy decolonially as depending on each being’s *sense-making agency*, i.e., their capacities to make sense out of the world in their own ways, where the domain here is ontologically broadened by *analogical extension* to include the striving of all living forms as morally considerable for their own ways of making sense, subject to important qualifying disanalogies (Nussbaum, 2006, Bendik-Keymer, 2014, 2022c; on “analogical extension,” Bendik-Keymer, 2006, Mignolo and Walsh,

2018 on decolonial autonomy).<sup>4</sup> What is it to be governed not as “agents,” but as *relatives*, where what governs is not an “agency” but a moral relationship? Secondly, how should we view governance as a process depending on the formation of moral relationships?

## 2.2. Power-with against power-in & power-over

Alongside “power with” and “power over,” there is also “power in” or “constitutive” power (Bagg, 2021, 2018; Oxley, 2017; Allen, 1998).<sup>5</sup> Constitutive power is well analyzed within 20th century French social theory, for instance within the work of Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault. According to it, people are “subjugated” – made into subjects of a given order long before they are able to choose or express agency against that order. What it is to be an “agent” is preconditioned by the epistemic, practical, and institutional matrix that has formed them. In such a form of power, our power “with” each other may simply reproduce forms of oppression, marginalization, and domination (Oxley, 2017). Accordingly, we should reconsider our search for subjects of recognition as possibly re-inscribing unjust power relations (Bagg, 2021). This concern has been developed in a related manner by decolonial scholarship (Coulthard, 2014).

Pitting themselves against “power in,” those interested in forms of collective or personal autonomy broadly construed argue that the political cannot be a domain of subjection but must be a field of *subjectivation* – a knotty, French expression. The term *subjectivation* is contrasted in the French with *asujettissement*, “being formed as a subject,” or subjugation in a broad sense. “Subjectivation” refers to practices by

<sup>4</sup> To avoid misunderstanding, it is important to note the tradition of this line of argument that differs resolutely from, say, the line of thinking in animal ethics that privileges properties like sentience or consciousness. The argument here proceeds *analogically*. My paper argues for a way of approaching each other and the more than human world out of differentiated accountability practices born of seeking what is deeply acceptable to beings that unfold in their own ways. This must happen primarily between us as persons, but in so far as it does, it positions us to approach beings that are mysteriously and fundamentally different than us in their worlds as well.

As I have shown (Bendik-Keymer, 2022c) when non-alienatedly human, grown beyond narcissism and cycles of domination, we should be open toward these earth others, not simply assimilating them narcissistically in our designs to make things happen (the power-to and power-over forms of agency that are still fragmentary in political discourse in many places). In this line of argument, the “rights of nature” and even “rights for robots” (Gellers, 2020) all depend on non-narcissistic acceptance of others as a basic form of mind (*our* mind, just as we are the ones reading these things and having these debates!).

My approach is personalist in that I do not think that moral relations should proceed from an ontologically flattened attempt to account for moral salience (such as in biotic interests). Rather, I think that moral relations must (conceptually) be primarily interpersonal and then extended, projected, or analogically implicated (Bendik-Keymer, 2006; lecture 4) in ways that preserve ontological differences. As a result, I keep a space for the ontological difference of human agency, given its accountability practices (that difference is key), rather than flattening our agency out, as the new materialists do. At the beginning and at the end of the day, we are the ones being accountable for how we act. The fact that we are shapes the grammar of what even shows up as a possible “interest” in other forms of life, as well as avoids the “ventriloquism” of nature (Vogel, 2015) that makes a claim for what matters when something is affected (say, in the all-affected principle).

There is no way around the (inter)personalism without conceptual incoherence or social alienation. This is part of Wittgensteinian and Lukacian traditions that have are still catching on in environmental philosophy, mainly through the work of Steven Vogel and Cora Diamond (including Alice Cary).

<sup>5</sup> There is also “power-to,” which I discussed in my constructive critique of ESG views of agency as often seemingly *consequentialist* within (some) governance discussions (Bendik-Keymer, 2021b).

which beings become free and maintain their freedom.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, with subjugation in the broad sense – *asujettissement* – we aren't just focusing on people submitting to rule, but more broadly on a political culture where people are to be constituted in the first instance, before and against their wills (Butler, 1998).

Against the background of subjugation in the broad sense, “subjectivation” is a reverse (or counter) process in which beings search out for themselves what makes sense to or for them and enter into processes of living accordingly. Such autonomy isn't a once-and-for-all state of rational self-regulation or of independence from social constructions as “autonomy” is sometimes characterized (Bagg, 2021). Rather, it is a process of self-constitution that draws on how we find ourselves (including how we've been made), only to then *redirect* our lives and our world toward what we come to find makes sense. Moreover, autonomy is iterative, not absolute, adjusting and sometimes altering our sense of ourselves as we come to see things differently. The politics of “subjectivation” is a politics of discovering what makes sense for or to people out of possibilities that stretch, adapt, or alter their given worlds to some degree. It renders their identities somewhat fluid.

But even here is something interesting: autonomous *relationships* contribute to “subjectivation.” Relating to others autonomously is bound to produce some degree of *world trembling* in the worlds of any given being who is actively relating.<sup>7</sup> In the condition of finding one's world atremble, it is the *morality* in relationships that serves to govern and to protect the relatives in accountability. When power-with becomes the form of power for a “governance by relationship” view, the slow unsettling of constitutive power appears to follow as a matter of course. But we must understand how moral relationships are formed – how beings *become relatives* – and how moral relationships *involve unsettling accountability* if we want to grasp governance as a process of mutual “subjectivation.”

For many, Foucault's troubling point around, say, the politics of “intersubjectivity” and of “recognition,” was that being formed as a subject can include being formed into an understanding of power that, while not simply power over others (Bagg, 2021), yet *reproduces* the constriction of freedom in subtle forms (cf. Dhillon, 2017; Pasternak, 2017; Coulthard, 2014).<sup>8</sup> But such worries should themselves become unsettled when it comes to power that emerges *with* others as a feature of autonomous relationships broadly construed. Because autonomous relationships centrally involve spontaneity and the trembling of our worlds by the autonomous presence of others, they actually fall on the side of “subjectivation” (Bendik-Keymer, 2023, chapter 3). Thus, if one were raised to share power with others in autonomous relationships deeply and consistently, one would be “subjected” in the broad sense through one's upbringing, yes. But one would be destined precisely to *loosen* that subjection through the process of relating freely. In plain terms, you might be raised to share the world between us freely and then come to critically absorb the dimensions of that upbringing that made

sense – and to reject the rest – by relating freely! *By virtue of privileging the authentic relationship between people*, power-with unsettles the “constitution of each subject.” The French terms *asujettissement* and *subjectivation* are somewhat limited, then, but they open a conceptual field to begin to analyze governance by relationship. They also underline how talk about agency shifts when we embed agents in accountability practices by virtue of their moral relationships.

### 2.3. Acceptance governance: an introduction

ac-cept | ək'sept | verb [with object] 1. consent to receive (a thing offered): *he accepted a pen as a present*. • give an affirmative answer to (an offer or proposal); say yes to: *he would accept their offer and see what happened* | [no object]: *Tim offered Brian a lift home and he accepted*. • dated say yes to a proposal of marriage from (a man): *what if Elizabeth accepted Darcy the first time?* • receive as adequate, valid, or suitable: *the college accepted her as a student* | *credit cards are widely accepted*. • regard favorably or with approval; welcome: *the Harvard literati never accepted him as one of them*. • (of a thing) be designed to allow (something) to be inserted or applied: *vending machines that accepted 100-yen coins for cans of beer*. 2. believe or come to recognize (an opinion, explanation, etc.) as valid or correct: *this tentative explanation came to be accepted by the group* | [with clause]: *it is accepted that aging is a continuous process*. • take upon oneself (a responsibility or liability); acknowledge: *Jenkins is willing to accept his responsibility* | [with clause]: *he accepts that he made a mistake*. • tolerate or submit to (something unpleasant or undesired): *they accepted the need to cut expenses*. ORIGIN late Middle English: from Latin *acceptare*, frequentative of *accipere* ‘take something to oneself’, from *ad-* ‘to’ + *capere* ‘take’ (Apple Inc, 2020a).

A “governance by relationship” view grounded in relational autonomy and its minimal “moral nexus” of accountability (Wallace, 2019) can helpfully be conceptualized as a form of *acceptance governance*. I will discuss the minimal moral relationship further as its role unfolds across the first half of the paper. The main thing to begin with is that according to the view argued for here, governance is legitimate only when beings truly accept it.<sup>9</sup>

The different definitions of “accept” in English make clear that, save one secondary sense, to accept is clearly positive. One “consents,” “give an affirmative answer to,” “receives as adequate, valid, or suitable,” “regards favorably or with approval,” “welcomes,” “comes to recognize as valid or correct,” or “takes upon oneself” – and only in the last case given “tolerates or submits to” something. The Latin root is also connotative: it implies that one “takes something to oneself.” That imagery is quite strong.

I hear “accept” to mean what in English might be called “taking in.” One doesn't just keep something at arm's length but takes it into one's world and life as part of one's will (this is the connotation of consent given), one's relations (this is the connotation of welcoming), or one's mind (this is the connotation of viewing something as correct or valid). I do not hear “acceptance” to mean merely acquiescing to something in the manner of merely “tolerating” it or, even worse, “submitting” to it.

The implications of joining “acceptance” with “governance” are

<sup>6</sup> I came to the terminology by way of Rancière (2004), himself modifying work by Foucault in his last period of the ethics of the self. Rancière's concern predates Foucault's terminology, however, and appears when he excoriated his erstwhile teacher Althusser for intellectual authoritarianism (Rancière, 2011). Politics as “the police” in *Disagreement* is the subjection of putting everyone in their place, found in Rancière's early Vincennes lectures of the time of *Althusser's Lesson* (included in the volume translated into English). That notion of politics, it seems, led Althusser to create the concept of “ideological state apparatuses.” In *Disagreement*, Rancière contrasts politics as “the police” with politics as an event of collective agency.

<sup>7</sup> I develop the concept of *world trembling* in forthcoming work on the politics of wonder (Bendik-Keymer, 2023).

<sup>8</sup> “Constriction,” because the Foucauldian concern is with the matrix of what is possible in terms of what can make sense, both theoretically and practically – i.e., in an *episteme* and in its institutional and practice-based *dispositif*. Foucault avoids reproducing the “subject” by preferring the “thought of the outside” (of what is “beyond the possible” in a given order) instead of simple “autonomy.”

<sup>9</sup> Please keep in mind that the primary scene of this form of governance is interpersonal, but on its basis we can extend personification analogically to other kinds of beings (Bendik-Keymer, 2006; lecture 4). What it is for other beings to accept the relationship is a complex matter of multispecies reciprocity that serves as a problem for the next steps after this paper. However, it has been well explained in legal ethnographies such as Pasternak's (2017), where an “ontology of care” involves a complex and historically rich set of practices for working out, across disanalogy, what reciprocity amounts to with populations of Earth beings that cannot be accountable to us or mutual with us in the terms of interhuman autonomy. See also Winter (2022) for an intergenerational version of multi-species indirect reciprocity.

strong. In acceptance governance, the governance occurs autonomously. One takes the “steering” – or as I will say, *guiding* – in, even welcomes it. It is viewed as “correct,” which is to say that it truly *makes sense* to or for you. You view it as in your “interest,” where “interest” is meant robustly from its Latin root, *inter* and *esse*, that which is *between being* or, simply, *becoming: when a being accepts the governance, that being becomes with it.*<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, consider governance as it is often understood as an imposition of rule to which one begrudgingly submits or merely tolerates as, say, practically needed. In such a case, it is not unreasonable to feel the traces of “power over” others haunting governance, even if, technically, one gives merely tolerant or begrudging endorsement of some prescription of behavior. When governance is viewed as something one has to put up with, it scarcely guides one’s life and connects with one’s moral world of care and concern.

Still, does the criterion of acceptance in governance introduce the specter of arbitrariness at odds with moral obligation? When we privilege autonomy, can one refuse to accept moral accountability? Yet to moralize acceptance by joining it with governance through moral relationships would seem to presume some minimal moral capacity on the part of one who can do the accepting.

We should follow relational autonomy all the way down to the capacities that it presumes are important for recognizing in beings who are to be relatives. *The minimal moral assumption of relational autonomy is that beings make sense of the world in their own way.* Accountability, accordingly, is *to that capacity of sense-making.* Thus, to speak of the criterion of acceptance alongside moral relationships is redundant, *provided that the being who is in question for its acceptance is actually engaged in sense-making.*<sup>11</sup>

Here is where sense-making agency comes in. *Someone who arbitrarily refuses moral accountability by simply shrugging it off is refusing to engage in sense making.* For them to consistently engage with the logic of acceptance and with moral accountability, they must engage in *objection* to a perceived claim of accountability that they are inclined not to accept. Engaging in objection, they are not being arbitrary. Rather, the question becomes *what makes sense for the beings involved, between them.* Seen in this light, acceptance *implies* moral relating in the minimal sense of being accountable to what makes sense between beings. Since moral relationships understood through relational autonomy then likewise imply the criterion of acceptance, the logical order between the criterion of acceptance and minimal moral relationship understood through relational autonomy is what philosophers call “bi-conditional.”

When what is at stake is what makes sense to or for beings in a minimally moral relationship of relational autonomy, a process of relating is projected as a process of sense-making in common and in

<sup>10</sup> This last sentence provides a clue for multi-species relations where mutuality does not hold and where acceptance must be understood through analogical extension.

<sup>11</sup> This way of framing the issue of relational autonomy greatly extends moral considerability, here by way of the agents in question, not simply the patients. Rather than see a focus on sense-making as exclusionary, we should see it as *expansive*. It is a way that the strangely conscientious creature, the human being, can expand its moral universe through the sensibility and logic that makes sense to it. Call this “anthropocentric,” but one of the features of this anthropocentrism is that it allows us to recognize differences from us and to resist narcissism! In other words, this anthropocentrism is part of our grammar and structures moral *openness*. Moreover, it takes us to points where we may realize that although, say, the rock on lifeless asteroid Xc57yU4 is not in any sense part of acceptance logic, we may feel uneasy treating the asteroid thoughtlessly because we are used to bipolar accountability as part of our moral backbone. Then we may feel the pressure to identify in a more logically coherent way why we ought to be thoughtful with that lifeless rock even apart from any question of acceptance governance. What is at stake here is a way that a being such as the human approaches the moral universe and is able to develop greater moral capacities precisely as a result of its particular sensibility and frame of mind.

disagreement. This is where the “world trembling” quality of moral relationships come in, through the decentering of each being’s world as one truly tries to see what it is to accept each other being’s autonomy. Here, *the acceptance has to be worked out in the relating*, which also means across disagreement or opposition.<sup>12</sup>

Further, thicker layers of morality enter in at this point. First, there must be *processes* of relating on which those engaged in acceptance governance can draw. These processes may have to be developed together such that both the process to form relationships and relating become intertwined until processes are established. In cases of pluriversal relating (Escobar, 2020), the *initial* relating to form processes for *more* relating can take great diplomacy (Whyte, 2018), critical self-reflection on communication (or “transduction,” Viveiros de Castro, 2004), and the make-shift assemblages of only “partial connections” (de la Cadena, 2015). Within each being aiming to be autonomous in movements across worlds (Inoue et al., 2020), there will also need to be imaginative play (Lugones, 1987) and observation of how the others in the relationship live (Pasternak, 2017, concerning other kinds of beings than human beings).

Second, once processes of relating have become established, there will also need to be a movement toward thicker forms of moral relationship, away from relying primarily on thin moral concepts like “right” or even “rights” (Williams, 1985) and toward connotatively rich moral concepts like justice-for-the-innocent rather than abstract “justice” (Anscombe, 1958).<sup>13</sup> The reasons for this need are twofold. Half a century ago, Anscombe analyzed how modern moral philosophy struggles to make sense of right and wrong without connecting to a robust ontology making sense of human life. Williams refined this criticism by following out how thought about human flourishing nuances matters of principle to a high degree and to a large extent. A decade later, decolonial thought began to draw attention to how the “geography of reason” tends to act through form of administrative and thin rationality that epistemically oppresses and practically dominates the pluriverse of ontologies in which we can find deeply human and flourishing moral relationships (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). These conjoined influences serve as a historically rich caution against relying primarily on abstract and thin understandings of justice and suggest rather that thought about justice needs to be built up thickly, for instance, through good relationships developed over time. We should take this caution to heart in articulating acceptance governance.

The project of acceptance governance proceeds by suspending (not *rejecting*) talk about “rights” to make way for processes of relating grounded in bare accountability practices (see 2.4 below). In this way, it holds open the space for developing a thicker cross-world understanding of rights and of the right as it appears to people and might be analogically translated into relations with other kinds of beings. Thicker forms of moral relationship will be heavily cultural, too, since acceptance is not an abstract thing applied to beings’ existences but involves a full range of sensibilities and often emotions.<sup>14</sup>

The point is: acceptance governance becomes as much about the *production of processes of relating* as it does about the articulation of moral relationships that can govern by the relationship and involve the

<sup>12</sup> Opposition need not be verbal, though, and at the limit it may appear in signals that an organism makes, including chemical ones.

<sup>13</sup> In “Modern Moral Philosophy,” Anscombe roots intuitions about justice in discussing the killing of the innocent, something she did at the time existentially in her broadside against Truman’s honorary degree at Oxford (he had blood on his hands for the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japanese civilians). She contrasts this intuitive sense of justice with that found in abstract conceptions of justice at work in modern moral philosophy that are, for her, matters of abstract principle rather than in embodied and socially rich virtues.

<sup>14</sup> For historians of ethics: Not *Mortalität* but *Sittlichkeit* will be needed, and in cases where worlds are crossed, this will in turn demand the use of sometimes highly imaginative and iterative poetic imagination, as well as much practical trial and error.

acceptance of those whom I am here calling “relatives.” The production of processes of relating is meant to precede talk about rights and the right – although as we will now see there is some minimal deontic logic to them:

#### 2.4. Why minimal moral relationships?

Acceptance governance is *processual*, and its own process involves many embedded processes. The major process is the movement from minimal moral relationships toward more substantial, thicker ones. This movement depends on the development of processes of relating that can build minimal moral relations into thicker ones. It’s important to start first with the minimal moral relationships, since these are both the beginning and the *ongoing ground* of moral relationship developing. They are also the source of acceptance governance becoming worthy of guiding life between beings by the relationship.

Minimal moral relationships are important for two reasons. First, they ground acceptance governance in the autonomy of beings, thereby grounding relational autonomy in its core inter-being focus. Second, minimal moral relationships *provide a decolonial condition*. Whatever decoloniality is, it involves a commitment to the self-determination, freedom from domination, autonomy, or the world-determination of beings (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Jensen and Osterhammel, 2017; Viveiros de Castro, 2004; Lugones, 1987). In decolonial work, there is a basic moral commitment to respect for autonomy broadly construed encompassing self-determination, freedom from domination, or “worlding” (Inoue et al., 2020). One might see what the Enlightenment developed in its world of “autonomy” as just *one* articulation among many “autonomies” of an overlapping, similar – but with relevant gaps (Viveiros de Castro, 2004) – insight into what is implicit in indigenous virtues and social processes such as “diplomacy,” “reciprocity” or “trust” (Whyte, 2018): there is a minimal “moral nexus” (Wallace, 2019) between beings when we relate to them in their liveliness (cf. Song, 2021, on Ruism, Buddhism and the Enlightenment).

Since acceptance governance emerges out of decolonial critique of the fragmentary coloniality persisting within the concept of agency in Earth System Governance, it begins historically situated and is a viable “decolonial option” (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). “Acceptance governance” is intended to be, as a historical artifact of a specific world, (merely) one way to articulate the shared world between us while acknowledging the gaps the disagreements that must arise precisely when we insist on relationships, not simply assimilations or impositions (Viveiros de Castro, 2004). The minimal moral relationship that grounds and begins acceptance governance as a process that can *thicken* through relationship makes it a generative, decolonial option. In this way, it provides a bottom-up approach to talk about “the” moral right or talk about rights that make sense to others in their worlds.

#### 2.5. Beings as *personae* not just human people

There is one thing that the approach argued for here must qualify of standard discourse around relational autonomy, though. *Pace* modern inheritors of the Enlightenment (e.g. Wallace, 2019), we need *not* assume persons narrowly construed as self-conscious, self-determining beings capable of rational justifications and explications of intent. Following Stanley Cavell and Cora Diamond, we can project an analog to “autonomy” to all sense-seeking organisms (Bendik-Keymer, 2022c; 2021a). Other forms of life may not make sense in the way that *homo sapiens* do, but they seek sense of their own kind, in their own way. It is absurd not to view the chemical signals that guide many non-conscious organisms as not being a kind of sense for them, showing them where to go, “how to live.” We should understand this “analogical extension” (Bendik-Keymer, 2006; lectures 4 and 8) as the logical extension of a *species-located view of positive freedom*, where “positive freedom” becomes *species specific* such that in *homo sapiens* it involves, e.g., self-consciousness, justification and explication of intent, whereas in

other kinds of beings it involves *their* ways of sensing their lives in their environments and of realizing their being (Nussbaum, 2006, 2022; Bendik-Keymer, 2014; 2022c, 2021a). Moreover, our power to imaginatively extend “autonomy broadly construed” to the lives of other kinds of beings living in their own ways is insightful for understanding what it is to be human, that is, to grasp our *own* autonomy (Bendik-Keymer, 2021a; a stronger claim than the similar claim in 2006, lectures 4 and 10).

Opening acceptance governance to many kinds of beings that all have “autonomy broadly construed” as sense-seeking in their own ways is important both for decolonial justice and for planetary justice. Speaking to decolonial justice, we should note that many indigenous worlds do not narrowly construe those beings who belong to their version of (something like) the moral nexus (de la Cadena, 2015, Whyte, 2018; “something like” referring to what Viveiros de Castro, 2004, calls, after Simondon, “transduction”). To understand acceptance governance in such a narrow way as to *a priori* exclude such worlds, such people, and their *personae*(!) is, ironically, not accepting.

One major current of planetary justice, too, depends on a geo-ecological ground to justice by which the more-than-human world figures in the “ecological reflexivity” by which our institutions and communities adjust their behavior and norms to the way that they affect the more than human world and the geo-ecological conditions of life on Earth (Dryzek and Pickering, 2019; Hickey and Robeyns, 2020).<sup>15</sup> While including the more than human world in moral relationships is not the only way to ground institutions in ecological reflexivity, it is one way, one tried-and-true by many indigenous peoples (Bendik-Keymer, 2020b), in that the “relations of interdependence” and “kinship,” that emerge ground processes of ecological reflexivity by moral imperatives to be accountable to the more than human world and what we discover is “acceptable” to the beings beside us – those “relatives” too (Whyte, 2018; de la Cadena, 2015; note Mignolo and Walsh, 2018 also). In other words, a major form of planetary justice can be opened as a logical/conceptual field simply by taking on board a broad understanding of acceptance governance and the relatives in its moral relationships, i.e., by accepting “autonomy broadly construed” to involve other kinds of beings than the human. Some historians – despite their misgivings about such a term as “planetary justice” – go so far as to point to this possibility as crucial for navigating the “Anthropocene” (Chakrabarty, 2021, chapters 1 and 5). While the argument of this paper is not directly, then, about planetary justice, it does provide a logic that would allow planetary justice to be constructed from the bottom up and across the pluri-verse, that is, in light of what Chakrabarty also calls “philosophies of difference” (Chakrabarty, 2021).

#### 2.6. From justice to transduction, then toward autonomous relating

There’s more to say more about acceptance governance and the more than human world when, in part II of this paper, we turn to the second sense of “acceptance” that should be involved in governance. For now, let’s stick with the matter of moral relationships that can govern those who accept them emerging out of minimal moral accountability. This is to focus primarily on what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2021) calls “philosophies of difference,” rather than on “ecological” or “planetary” justice *per se*. Acceptance governance joins philosophies of difference with ecological justice to produce its mode of “planetary” justice. But one of the interesting consequences of focusing on acceptance governance and its commitment to relational autonomy is that *there is an initial*

<sup>15</sup> As a reviewer took pains to point out, another major strand of planetary justice work focuses on marginalized human beings first and foremost (Kashwan et al., 2020), leaving silent the justice status of non-humans. I agree with Nussbaum (2022) that these domains should not be seen as opposed in reality. Indeed, work to protect non-human life generally is most likely to protect human capabilities broadly in an intergenerational register (Winter, 2022).

minimizing (not “eliminating”) of talk about “justice” and a corresponding emphasis on relation-creating in a mode that is thick, not thin. I want to close part 2 of this paper in discussing this shift away from beginning with talk about “justice” and toward thicker relationships emerging out of processes of autonomous relating.

On a minimal moral understanding of justice, justice is the quality by which right relations between beings are right for or to those beings. This minimal understanding tells us next to nothing about the substance of justice, even of its procedure, which is a positive thing from the standpoint of the demands of pluriversal relations. It tells us only that justice concerns the minimal moral nexus itself. It is *this* sense of justice that must be assumed in acceptance governance, including as a “decolonial option” (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). In this sense, acceptance governance involves a minimal (but not thin) basis for justice out of which a thicker understanding of justice is to be developed from the bottom up. Acceptance governance does not eliminate talk about justice but decenters it in order to begin with the task of working out thick, accepting relationships between beings and their worlds.

Beyond such a minimally moral conception of justice fit to the bare notion of acceptance between beings, *whatever are to be right relations must be worked out*. In situations of fundamentally different ontologies, epistemologies, anthropologies, and the like – that is, in situations of different worlds (Inoue et al., 2020) or even of the “pluriverse” (Escobar, 2020) – the minimally moral relation here called “justice” can only be – and must be – the basis for *developing* right relations and the concepts and processes associated with them. This is a process of marking fundamental gaps in understanding as much as it could be of translation or synthesis.

Viveiros de Castro (2004) draws on a concept from Gilbert Simondon called “transduction” to describe the anthropological practice of *marking gaps* – rather than closing in on translations that eliminate, by erasing, *incommensurability, untranslatability, radically context dependent features of meaning, or ambiguity*. In “transduction,” one approaches beings one seeks to understand by artfully aiming for “controlled equivocation.” Controlled equivocation seeks some aspect of translatability *while simultaneously marking the remainder that is a gap between worlds*.

These gaps are fairly common between cultures - and even more so between different kinds of Earth beings! - and so transduction should be neither unexpected nor as hard to do as it might seem. It should be a form of basic honesty to the different worlds of others and of fidelity to the meaning of one’s own. But Viveiros de Castro suggests that our world of academic study of culture, guided by social sciences that originated within the *epistēmē* of coloniality within anthropology, has a tendency towards assimilation and translation under the guise of social scientific objectivity. For that reason, he implies that it can be hard to learn transduction as an art, for the art amounts to keeping open the pluriverse, that is, the dynamic awareness that one’s reaching to understand another world comes from a different reality and that one’s words and concepts should be placed in scare quotes as one seeks to understand what is going on.

Viveiros de Castro’s claim seems to be correct on a cursory glance at anthropology, at least in its structuralist apex in the late-middle twentieth century, let alone when looking at earlier periods in which “savages” where subsumed in the “clarifying” eye of Europeans and their explanations (Lévi-Strauss, 2021). But the matter is no doubt complex, even with objectivity. What matters here is that transduction and Viveiros de Castro’s sensitivity to the ineliminable gaps that occur in how different cultures conceptualize their worlds mark out a way to begin to see what acceptance governance should involve. We can also extend its basic insight to the worlds of different kinds of beings. These too involve gaps and controlled equivocation.

If we are to truly have *acceptance* between people – something that involves what Harry Frankfurt (1998, chapter 12) once called “whole heartedness” – then we must have thick moral relations, not thin ones. That is, we must have *connotatively rich* moral relationships, not simply abstract, tentative, or merely doxastic relations. Those simply are not acceptance. But to arrive at thick moral relationships in a situation of

differing worlds demands a process of relating that brings the worlds into conversation and encourages trust, not hiding. Transduction is a communicative modality that fits the demands of such trust since it does not erase the gaps between worlds. Instead, it honors them. Transduction is also suited to considering how one might understand the alien environments of other beings than the human, whether they speak, call out, chemically signal, or not.

The idea here is that minimally moral relations provide the normative ground for processes led epistemically and communicatively by transduction. In these processes, what must then be articulated with both art and patience is what it could mean *in connotatively thick ways* to speak of “right relations,” let alone “justice.” As a point of process, then, we move from presuming that “justice” must be established to following out the thread of “right relations” through relational autonomy and transduction toward the discovery and articulation of what could amount to actual acceptance of right relations between beings. One moves from “justice” to autonomous relating, that is, if one wants governance that is isonomic and capable of guiding action with acceptance and the moral demand to be accountable to others’ presence or lack of acceptance. Imagine for a moment how such a robust mode of governance might affect how we think of participation, legitimacy, co-creation of knowledge, open discourse, credibility, and even post-colonial healing - things to which I will return at the article’s end (4.1) when discussing ESG research.

## 2.7. Thick moral relationships & justice

We may now be in a better position to think about the bottom-up (and cross-worlds) approach to matters of right, rights, or justice that this paper positions. A good example what I’ve been discussing appears in Pasternak (2017) when the author becomes an ally of the Algonquins of Barriere Lake. In chapter 3 of Pasternak’s study, she explores what a “legal order of care” means for the Algonquins, grounded as it is in ecological, moral relationships attending to the land the Algonquins inhabit. As she tries to show how the order she is “transducting”<sup>16</sup> is *like* Anglophone laws and *like* Anglophone forms of sustainability, she also *alienates* these laws and these forms. She points to *disanalogies*; for indigenous law is not external to life, but internal to it, more like a moral philosophy; sustainability in Algonquin life isn’t simply focused on human sustainability, but on tending to the whole ecological order through a complex mesh of relations that must be balanced when folks, with inherited practices to stabilize and enlighten them, can. Pasternak’s extensive ethnography thus shows us three things: (1) how thicker forms of relationship emerge out of minimal right relations of respect (her for the Algonquins, them for her respect) into concepts such as *allyship*, and (2) how transduction allows worlds to relate partially and, when guided morally, deeply – *without assimilating themselves to each other*.<sup>17</sup> Her advocacy and scholarship also show (3) how a different eco-social world can involve thick relationships of acceptance with other Earth beings. We will return to this last point shortly.

Where acceptance governance leaves things when it comes to “justice” is then, to a significant extent, to the side of “justice,” and yet, ironically, precisely out of concern with isonomy and right relations. Except in cases where justice becomes connotatively rich and thick,<sup>18</sup> acceptance governance should lead us to prioritize thin moral relations<sup>19</sup> before talk about “justice.” Then on the basis of right relations before talk about “justice,” acceptance governance should favor *mutually*

<sup>16</sup> Not her word, but, I believe, her *practice*.

<sup>17</sup> Another excellent example of transduction and minimal moral relating growing thicker to the level of a poignant and rich vocabulary for life is found in Biehl (2005).

<sup>18</sup> As it was, one should point out, for the Catholic Anscombe in “Modern Moral Philosophy” (1958).

<sup>19</sup> I.e. Sticking just to the moral nexus.



arrived at, even co-created, thick moral relationships and their semantically rich and contextually connotative concepts beyond talk about justice (Heller, 1987)! This may seem both especially demanding and disconcerting. But it seems to be so only if one adopts an administrative bias toward adjudication that, one could argue, is itself a fragment of coloniality (Bendik-Keymer, 2021b). From the standpoint of cultures favoring right relations – and these include many indigenous ones (Whyte, 2018; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018) – focusing on *respecting each other enough to get to know each other, learning to trust each other and become intelligible in each other's worlds, and forging diplomatic and strong alliances between worlds* are better ways to proceed with governance between worlds than appeals to an exogenous architecture of adjudication. I take this insight primarily from Kyle Whyte's (2018) work on the qualities of good relationships.

If for isonomy, we must keep track of acceptance, and if acceptance demands whole-heartedness, then the moral relationships that come to be able to guide beings *together and equally* in their “partial connections” between worlds (de la Cadena, 2015) must be trustworthy and autonomous through and through. They must make sense to or for the beings involved. In many cases, this can occur only by *making sense together as an emergent process* (cf. Bendik-Keymer, 2020a). As beings make sense together, they adjust their right relations and develop something different than “justice.” They develop, rather, *community* (see Pasternak, 2017; Whyte, 2018, and Winter, 2022 for multi-species community). It then seems that the focus on justice *prior to community* is a stand-in for the threat still knocking around and lurking within a still imperially structured world where administrative agencies need to “secure” the peace, given that community is so far from a reality.

### 3. Acceptance 2: power-from (born of power-with)

[W]e must shift the logics of the petro-economy, which are emboldened to contaminate whole rivers and watersheds with oil and diluent .... If we fail to do so, we may go the way of the dinosaurs, and it will be because the dominant human ideological paradigm of our day forgot to tend with care to the oil, the gas and all of the beings of this place. Forgot to tend to relationships, to ceremony (in all the plurality of ways this may be enacted), to the continuous co-constitution of life-worlds between humans and others.

~ Zoe Todd, “Fish, Kin and Hope” 2017.

#### 3.1. Accepting the conditions of acceptance

Now there is a second dimension of acceptance to consider. As Chakrabarty (2021, chapter 3) notes, one of the things that planetary scaled and slowed<sup>20</sup> crises like global warming have done is to bring into the open the *planetary* as a “humanist category” of thought.<sup>21</sup> As Chakrabarty (p.81ff.) points out, the planetary is alien to us in the sense that it operates in terms of *habitability*, not sustainability. What he means

<sup>20</sup> In chapter 2, he speaks of planetary “scales” and “speeds,” but this point about planetary time is that it is on an order of slowness that human beings cannot experience, except in the case of tipping point activity. But then the build-up to the tipping points have been imperceptibly slow and the results of the tipping points exceed the likely lifetime of any species, let alone the self-destruction-prone *homo sapiens*.

<sup>21</sup> The planetary as Chakrabarty rightly understands it is incomplete and epistemically underdetermined. It differs fundamentally from the “globe,” that idealization that Latour (2017) has shown to be complicit in colonial projects and which might plausibly be linked to the social imaginary of the early centuries of colonialization in their reduction of Earth to a globe for mapping and dominion. I focus on Chakrabarty's text in part because it gives us a broad socio-natural history of the planetary that provides a place for many of the things that acceptance governance is trying to do, i.e., to involve the planetary *while being decolonial*.

is that, while the planet can regulate itself in such a way as to be habitable for multi-cellular life, its biochemistry and biophysics could make it such that life is unsustainable for us. This is a way of reminding us that *homo sapiens* is headed for extinction; the question is when. It is also a way of reminding us that the planet's integrated Earth system can kick back in a non-linear way that throws the possibility of human sustainability into disarray. In work on the sixth mass extinction, I once named this the possibility of “auto-destruction” given the current socially produced causes of our planetary situation (Bendik-Keymer and Haufe, 2017).

One question is what the possibility of our auto-destruction – and even beyond it the certainty of our extinction someday – means for governance between us. How should the planetary as a reality that exceeds human control to the point of exceeding human sustainability figure in the moral relationships that govern us through mutual acceptance? This question brings back another that gripped existentialist culture in the mid-20th century, often called by the name of *nihilism*: how should we view our own lives when the universe doesn't care?

Focusing on acceptance in governance provides us with the beginning of answers. The minimally moral dimension of acceptance governance and its commitment to relational autonomy make it so that *the nihilistic (version of the) question of the planetary is not something that one can morally ask*. The answer as to how we should view our lives in the universe when the planet doesn't care about us is: we should view our lives morally, that is, with a commitment to relational autonomy broadly construed where we focus on “right relations.” Nothing changes even if we face our demise, for moral obligations are binding and, as Kant (2012) noted well, become moral precisely when one is perturbed enough to disregard them *but does not* out of obligation. The question becomes what a moral relationship of mutual acceptance demands of us given the emergence of the planetary as a category of thought.<sup>22</sup>

In such a case, again, the answer is straightforward – at least initially. A moral relation to the planetary demands that we respect the broadly construed relational autonomy of beings, including of other forms of life by analogy and disanalogy. Moreover, this commitment implies that we care about and for the conditions of their autonomy, or, in the terms of acceptance governance, the *conditions of their acceptance*. That does imply a commitment to sustainability broadly construed. Chakrabarty is right that habitability for multi-cellular life does not imply sustainability for a given order of life. He is right that the Earth system does not care about our morals. But holding a moral standpoint presumes that we be capable of stepping outside it enough to face the cold world in its objectivity; for only then can we make moral demands of it and exercise good judgment. To moral beings, descriptive claims are under the authority of moral responsiveness. That is, “what is” is to be seen with moral concern.

Accepting the conditions of acceptance implies accepting their finitude. The sustainability of the Earth for our current order of life will end someday, even within the next centuries if the sixth mass extinction persists. To come into being as a form of life is to go out of being at some point. The simple energetics of entropy imply that much (Nail, 2021). Respect for our autonomy *in our dying* is a basic principle of bioethics and is not at all paradoxical. We are not timeless beings, but beings of flesh and blood who die. The question is how we “go out.” The moral answer, although this reads tautologically, is that we must go out morally. We (morally) have to (radically) *accept* our finitude, including our eventual extinction, in a way that is at least minimally moral.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> This is why I am not swayed by Chakrabarty's view that the planetary is alien to morality. That is a descriptive claim. From the moral point of view, the question is how to relate to it. There seems to be some tangle among categories in Chakrabarty's discussion of the planetary.

<sup>23</sup> In this article, we have not discussed the psychological-religious notion of “radical acceptance,” but it is relevant to acceptance governance and could be an area for future work.

Acceptance governance goes so far as to imply that we should develop thicker and more connotative practices, rituals, and relationships paying respect to how we make sense of the world in *plural* ways even in our dying.

### 3.2. Power-from & the moral mesh

Skywoman bent and spread the mud with her hands across the shell of the turtle. Moved by the extraordinary gifts of the animals, she sang in thanksgiving and then began to dance, her feet caressing the earth. The land grew and grew as she danced her thanks, from the dab of mud on the Turtle's back until the whole earth was made. Not by Skywoman alone, but from the alchemy of all the animals' gifts coupled with her deep gratitude. Together they formed what we know today as Turtle Island, our home.

~ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 2013

Acceptance governance makes sense in the context of Earth System governance because it includes acceptance of our biogeological finitude and conditions, including that of all our relatives in this current order of life.<sup>24</sup> This implies a commitment to what is sometimes called “multi-species” justice (Celermajer et al., 2021); and it implies a commitment to sustainability (and to sustainability's precondition, habitability). From the standpoint of the minimal moral relationships grounding acceptance governance between worlds in the pluriverse, our inherited order of life is a *moral mesh* by which we can remain “ecologically reflexive” (Dryzek and Pickering, 2019) about whether the conditions of acceptance are themselves being regarded with care. Our respect for our relatives in this order of life implies as much. We must respect *their* conditions of acceptance, and this is to be committed to taking in the Earth system *as a whole and as a condition*.

By “moral mesh,” I mean a *field of moral accountability with Earth others* (Plumwood, 2001), not at all simple but nonetheless evident, on which we can rely to gain feedback about how to morally improve our institutions, practices, and other social processes.<sup>25</sup> This could imply a mesh that teaches us “how to die in the Anthropocene” (Scranton, 2015). But it more immediately teaches us how to steer toward sustainability. The moral mesh signals to us, in our relations, how well we fare in our relations. It is thus part of the governance of ourselves *by our relations*.

The possibility of a moral mesh within acceptance governance opens the possibility of a fifth kind of power: *power-from*. The other kinds are power-to, power-over, power-in, and power-with. Power-from is *enabling power*, a precondition for any other form of power. There can be no other kind of power if it is not at first empowered to be what and how it is. The enabling conditions of the four commonly discussed forms of power are constituents of their “power-from.”<sup>26</sup> What acceptance governance brings into view is that *power-from must be accepted as a basic condition of acceptance*. In everyday terms, we cannot share power with each other<sup>27</sup> if we fail to care for our Earth system conditions of possibility. Dryzek and Pickering (2019) are, with this friendly amendment, right: the first virtue of institutions in this “planetary age” (Chakrabarty,

<sup>24</sup> It's worth arguing that a minimally moral orientation also implies respect for the ways our ancestor beings made sense of the world, at least in memory – a point many indigenous cultures have internalized into rituals and law (Winter, 2022).

<sup>25</sup> “Morally improve” is a friendly amendment to Dryzek and Pickering (2019) discussion of ecological reflexivity as the first virtue of institutions. Strictly speaking, it cannot be a virtue unless the reflexivity is in the service of morally acceptable or morally guided improvement. In Cavellian terms, ecological reflexivity must be “perfectionist,” i.e. open to ever-improving in a moral way (Cavell, 2018).

<sup>26</sup> Are their enabling conditions of a *given* form of power-from? Yes. Power-from regresses to the most basic conditions of the cosmos, namely, indeterminate but ordered energy (Nail, 2021). This is not an infinite regress.

<sup>27</sup> I.e., enjoy power-with.

2021) is their conscious incorporation of power-from.<sup>28</sup> What acceptance governance adds is that such incorporation must occur, by implication, from minimal moral relationships with or to all our relatives. *It is the moral mesh that does the work*.

This dialectical conclusion is striking. Although “power-from” emerges when accepting the conditions of acceptance and is in this sense prior to our being with each other as the condition for our being able to do so, it is the moral imperatives and general orientation provided by isonomy that, when allowed to analogically move across the species boundary of the narrowly human (cf. Bendik-Keymer, 2006; lecture 4), should lead us to care about and for “power-from” as a condition on getting our relations right. In other words, *although the Earth makes community possible, it is community that should lead us to care about and for the Earth*. Of course, what “being governed by the relationship” means in practice always involves transduction, and this applies just as much to how thicker moral relationships emerge around the moral mesh channeling and protecting power-from. So, it remains a task of acceptance governance to arrive at jointly acceptable relations regarding the moral mesh, including a vocabulary that can move across cultural gaps with diplomacy and acceptably gappy reciprocity in sharing the Earth in perpetuity and morally. Yet morally speaking, power-from is born from power-with as a normative focus.

One reason acceptance governance makes sense is that it locates power-from as a condition that must be approached morally. Power-to, power-over or power-in might lead us to power-from, but only as *instrumental* conditions on agency, domination, or production. Power-with leads us to regard caring about or for the conditions of acceptance between relatives as *extrinsic* ends (van Jaarsveld, 2021), not simply means. Part of being with each other is caring about and for the community supporting us. This community is not simply a means, for it is part of us, but it is also our enabling condition. So too with the Earth's integrated system. It is not simply a means to living in right relations with our relatives but involves the moral mesh of relatives behind any given relative. This mesh is part of us *and* it is our condition, like family. To act as if the Earth system *to and for us* consists apart from the moral mesh is to alienate Earth system science from the moral grammar that makes us social beings. But this is what colonial science has done and fragmentary coloniality in science still does.<sup>29</sup>

## 4. Coda: the goal of a loving world

This article forms the last part of a three article study called *The Problem of an Unloving World*.<sup>30</sup> Beginning in environmental philosophy, the destination has been to speak to the ESG community through the critical and speculative language of philosophy as an expression of interdisciplinary collaboration in our common endeavor. I am betting that this intent has not made this reading easy for many ESG scholars, however. So, please allow me some more general conclusions and some pointers toward our community:

A loving world is fundamentally different than an unloving one, but as I've argued previously, our world of the international system where ESG largely operates cannot be called, with a straight face, loving (Bendik-Keymer, 2021b). Rather, it is fraught with recurring imperial tendencies, wantonness, and other low-quality relationships, often impersonal or narcissistic. At the very least, self-work is needed to become acceptable agents (Bendik-Keymer, 2022a). But when turning to ESG, *agency itself* must be transformed to become thoroughly acceptable. Unsurprisingly, this is what acceptance governance can accomplish. It does so, perhaps surprisingly, by reframing talk about agency to a focus on moral relationship – or, if we keep talk about agents, then from agency operating quasi-anarchically in the world system to

<sup>28</sup> This is my amendment of their position.

<sup>29</sup> Including in Chakrabarty's historiography.

<sup>30</sup> Part II of the project is Bendik-Keymer (2022b).

agency-in-and-as-accountability. The reason why this paper has spoken so little about agency directly is that the form of power that the paper articulates has reframed agency in terms of moral relationship. This goes some distance to envisioning a world that we could trust as potentially loving.<sup>31</sup>

#### 4.1. *Between us at ESG*

And yet the argument has been exceptionally idealistic. What use might it have in contexts where things are not so ideal? There are at least four ways that acceptance governance's speculative and idealized form might be useful as a heuristic for social science and policy debate:

##### 4.1.1. *To illuminate modes of and limitations to participation*

First, acceptance governance can help us set the bar high (to be normatively ambitious; cf. [du Toit and Kotzé, 2021](#), 3.1) for the ways in which people who do not truly participate in governance might co-determine the processes that would allow their true inclusion in governance ([Kashwan et al. 2020](#)) - their "extended engagement in forms of policy-making" ([Glass and Newig, 2019](#), 3.1) and their role in not only agreements but the very study of them ([Hughes et al., 2021](#)). It might similarly challenge us to search for "legitimacy" through processes that are so deeply relational that the process of legitimation is part of the ongoing governing authority of the relationship (cf. [Bäckstrand et al., 2021](#)). This, too, might apply to how we study new technologies when these emerge as potentially unacceptable by being removed from relationally autonomous processes ([Reynolds et al., 2020](#)). At the same time, being sensitized to acceptance governance might make some knowledge and governance practices *more* valuable because they appear more deeply relational ([McAfee et al., 2022](#)).

##### 4.1.2. *To nuance and guide how forms of knowing and awareness show up or disappear in the knowledge/power structures of governance*

Acceptance governance can also help us come to terms with the power of our knowledge practices and technologies as well as with the obstacles created by how knowledge remains removed or opaque to those concerned. Being committed to acceptance governance predisposes us to be vigilant for how "awareness, information, and capacity" can become "barriers" to governance ([Raynor et al., 2021](#)) while also guiding us toward the importance of the "co-creation" of knowledge and of "safe spaces for continuous dialogue, interaction, and raising concerns" ([Vij et al., 2021](#), 3.2.1). A commitment to acceptance governance should additionally help us better discover *with others in the public* what it might take to better "mainstream" obscure but important knowledge ([Hofmann, 2022](#)). Moreover, given acceptance governance's decolonial implications, it is well poised to include traditional and indigenous knowledges in co-creation of knowledge ([Vadrot et al., 2022](#), 4.2). Yet this does not exclude acceptance governance from helping us see that in some emerging cases of planetary science, we may actually need to rely on new technologies *in order to* advance acceptance in a way that truly makes sense to people ([Drakopoulos et al., 2022](#)).

##### 4.1.3. *To provide a deeper register for the reach and sensibility of truly just transitions so that they involve healing to the point of those involved finding their lives genuinely acceptable*

More powerful still, acceptance governance seems especially important for keeping in view the central importance of "internal recognition" for healing ([Johnson and Sigona, 2022](#); [Coulthard, 2014](#)). In acceptance governance, the beings themselves (as who they are!) are wanted in the relationship and are to be protected in the ways that *they* make sense. Should we then seek to conceptualize the conditions of policies and practices for just transitions ([Stevis and Felli, 2020](#))

<sup>31</sup> I.e., because morally conscientious relating and interpersonal accountability are necessary conditions on what is truly loving in relationships.

whether through decolonization or through labor justice (where self-determination and restoring social alienation and damages to self are important), figuring out what processes *can* develop true relationship that is soulfully acceptable to all involved moves to the fore. It becomes a powerful heuristic that teaches us how to proceed. Here, governance, learning, and healing go together with justice - yet another sign of how thick justice has become on this conception.

##### 4.1.4. *To prepare us for the governance practices that allow new ontological understandings to emerge into the open of planetary politics*

Finally, as we in ESG research continue to push the bounds of the inherited ontologies that have come to us through imperial, industrial, and capitalist modernity, acceptance governance can help in legitimating modes of relating whereby we develop processes for "transduction," especially in contexts where ontologies are challenging ([Mai and Boulot, 2021](#)). Acceptance governance then helps with confronting "epistemologies of mastery and exploitation" ([Du Toit et al., 2022](#)) but also more specifically with the myriad questions we now face about the "subject of justice" and the expansion of concern to beings that are not human ([Kotzé et al., 2022](#); [Gellers, 2021](#); [Hickey and Robeyns, 2020](#); [Visseren-Hamakers, 2020](#)). Should ESG be determined not to privilege ESS (Earth System Science) *to the exclusion of* ancestral approaches to the planet, acceptance governance seems quite useful.

#### 4.2. *Earthbound relationships*

For people still haunted – and thereby fragmentarily constituted – by the long unwinding of European imperialism, to be "bound" can acquire the connotations of being tied up, even subjugated. Such is the inertia of power-over in our power-in.<sup>32</sup> But to be bound can also mean to be *headed toward*, even *destined*. Furthermore, in cases where we speak of *commitments* – as we must in moral relationships – to be attached to others, "bound" to them, is the right thing ([Cassese et al., 2021](#)). Being bound to others – even *braided with* others ([Kimmerer, 2013](#)) – is, from a moral point of view, good, that is, what it is for moral logic to be congenial. When it comes to moral relationships, we are supposed to be bound to or braided with each other in moral terms and ways. Using equivocation carefully, we can then say that *in* any truly moral process we are bound (destined) to be bound (attached) to each other.

In this light, acceptance governance is:

*A view of governance that proceeds by and from earthbound<sup>33</sup> relationships.*

What the expression, "earthbound relationships," should convey might now, I hope, register more evocatively:

*The relationships that govern us by power-with must themselves care for the power-from of Earth's systems by way of the moral mesh of all our relatives.*

This, admittedly to my ears, decolonial idea is also a consequence of the Enlightenment idea of the moral nexus once that idea is expanded analogically, as it should be, by accepting the presence of the positive freedom of other forms of life. Framing agency through accountability, the transductions between worlds remain.

#### Credit Author Statement

Jeremy Bendik-Keymer: I did all the scholarly work involved in

<sup>32</sup> For instance here, *in* the word "bound"!

<sup>33</sup> And not, like some billionaires, *Mars-bound*, with a colonial fantasy of further extractive and capitalist exploitation and space tourism.

writing this paper.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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