



Intersubjectivity and Milieu in Dialogue with Japanese Phenomenology



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Introduction

Neurosciences, cognitive sciences, Japanese phenomenology, ecofeminism, environmental psychology... all present a tendency towards a conception of the Self as interdependent, social, enactive, situated, embodied and embedded in its environment. This **convergence** open new doors for our understanding of **what it is to be a human being living in an interdependent environment**. For the Japanese phenomenologist **Watsuji Tetsurō**, human beings are in constant dynamic relation with other selves (intersubjectivity) and with their environment (understood as milieu). In our context of global environmental crisis, this perspective supports an **alternative paradigm fostering sustainable behaviours** and environmental ethical decision-making.



Watsuji Tetsurō
和辻 哲郎 (1889–1960)

Human 人間 *ningen*

In Japanese, the word for “human” is 人間 *ningen*, composed by the character for the individual 人 *hito* and 間 *aida* “betweenness”. From this epistemological analysis, Watsuji goes further and reject strong mind-body dualism with the concept of permeable body-minds (身心 *shinshin*). *Ki* (気) is constantly flowing inside the body-mind, between body-minds, and between body-minds and their environment.

The essential independence of an individual disappears when considered from either side of body or mind. (...) even though our betweenness-oriented being subsists between one individual and another, we cannot posit this individual as an individualistic being whose existence precedes the already existing betweenness.” (Watsuji, Ethics, 83)



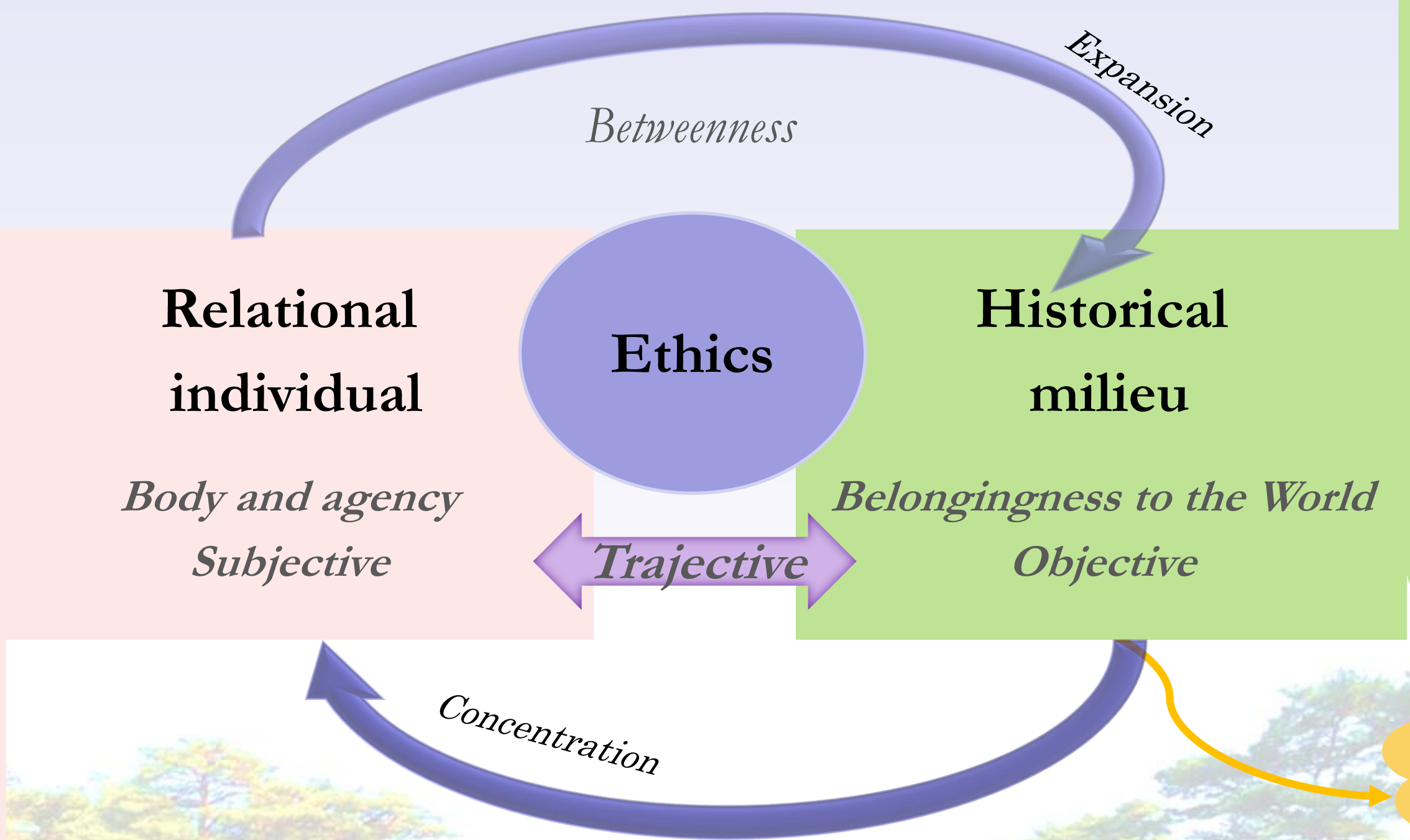
A man singing a traditional song with the gorges echoing. Geibikei, Iwate-ken, Japan, March 2016.

This echoes the research in enactive cognitive sciences and neurosciences in which the **embodiment** brain-body-environment is based on a relation of interdependence of the self with others and its environment mediated by concepts such as **empathy-like intersubjectivity**.

From birth to death, the Self exists in **relation** with others, and the brain itself has a neurosocial organizational structure. Human beings are thus relational individuals.

Intersubjectivity 間柄 *aidagara*

The “betweenness” (間柄 *aidagara*) is the space constituted by the cyclic movements of encounter between the Self and Other. Associated with the Buddhist “emptiness” (空 *kū*, McCarthy, 2010, 15), betweenness is also where ethics emerges. The Self, or the relational individual, is in **constant dynamic co-determining cycles** with the “Other”.



Trajectivity is an intermediary dimension referring to the milieu’s concrete reality that cannot be grasped by the theoretical subject-object dualism (Berque, 1996, 175). The landscape is *trajective*.

Ethics 倫理 *rinri*

The **relation** lies at the centre of ethics. In environmental ethics, many solutions appear by shifting the centre of the argumentation from objects (natural and human victims) to the relation (e.g. Plumwood, 1993). Ethics emerges from the relation living people entertain with others and their historical milieu.

“The individual dies, the relation between individuals changes, but while dying and changing, individuals live and their betweenness continues.” (Watsuji, Ethics, 19-20)

Milieu 風土 *fūdo*

The environment is not simply a chemico-physical receptacle for the existence and flourishing of human beings, but it is also a ***lived and co-determined milieu*** crisscrossed by our practices and usages of the space, that is, a set of eco-techno-symbolic relationships.

“What we usually think as natural environment is a thing that has been taken out from its concrete ground, the human mediance, to be objectified. When we think at the relation between this thing and human life, the relation itself is already objectified. This position leads thus to examine the relation between two objects: it does not concern human existence in its subjectivity. On contrary, this subjectivity is what matters in our opinion.” (Watsuji, Fūdo, 1)

Any community of human beings inhabit a specific milieu, sharing a local environment in the present. This milieu is a **place of shared intersubjectivity**, as it is a place where people meet each other, and on which people project representations, significations and symbols through their common imaginary. The milieu is also historical: it carries the signifying traces of the past, co-creates significance with the living human beings and transmits it to the future.

Adaptability and survival

Conclusion

An Ethics of Sustainability needs to focus on the creation of a **flexible model of moral human development** prompt to help us facing the critical social and environmental challenges, and on the transmission of the significance of the historical milieu to new generations.

Survivability thus implies to keep the Earth livable and habitable for humans as a **relational signifying milieu**. To do so, long-lasting wisdom traditions and self-cultivation practices such as **meditation** can provide us with technologies to improve ourselves as balanced, healthier and happier, flourishing Selves.

To conclude, an **Ethics of Sustainability** asks the question *how to act now* as an agent imbricated in the past and the future and who codetermines its social and natural environment. And the roots of this question go straight to the conception we have of ourselves. The circle is thus complete, as Ethics of Sustainability brings us back to where we started: the embodied Self in interdependence with the milieu, place of shared intersubjectivity.



Zazen Meditation Practice with Kyoto University, Tōufuku-ji, 18th June 2016.

Acknowledgements

My gratitude goes to my academic advisor in Kyoto University Prof. Makoto Usami, to Prof. Marc-Henri Deroche from the Graduate School of Survivability Studies in Kyoto University, to Prof. Deguchi Yasuo from the Department of Philosophy in Kyoto University, to all the commentators and colleagues who greatly contributed by their discussions. I also want to express my deepest gratitude to the Mind and Life Institute for accepting me and rewarding me with a travel scholarship.

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