

Living *through* Nature

Capturing Interdependence and Impermanence in the Life Framework of Values

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Abstract

To collaborate across cultures to efficiently tackle global environmental problems, we need to understand better the various ways in which individuals and groups value nature through their own situated worldviews. The Life Framework of Values aims at mapping the global diversity of values under the four dimensions of living *from*, *with*, *in* and *as* nature. Yet, it still faces difficulties to capture the interdependent and ever-changing aspects of the relation of human life to nature. This paper proposes a fifth dimension: living *through* nature. We are living *through* the world, continuously interacting with our milieu, shaping it and being shaped by it. Flows keep crossing the porous and dynamic borders of our bodies and communities. Finally, the example of Dōgen's philosophy of mutual interdependence and impermanence is presented to illustrate the dimension of *living through* the world.

Keywords: *Milieu; Environmental Ethics; Dōgen; Impermanence; Japanese Philosophy; Buddhism; flow; ecosystem services.*

1. Introduction

The reality of environmental changes and the threat that these changes pose to human ways of life cannot be denied.¹ In particular, climate change, desertification and biodiversity loss are “scientific facts” that enjoy wide consensus among the world scientific community. As environmental issues are global, questions such as “what meanings we give to life”, “what we want to sustain” and “what matters to us in nature” must be asked at the global level if we want to build solutions together. These questions of meaning in life lie at the crossroad of disciplines as diverse as philosophy of meaning in life,

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environmental ethics, ecology and natural sciences. Crucially, they are also tied to norms and values and face a high diversity of worldviews. In this diverse global context, the distinction between scientific facts and situated value judgments is the key to prevent the imposition of one dominant worldview on others.

Umbrella terms such as “the world” and “nature” attempt to cover the bundle of facts, phenomena and states of affairs that *are* and that surround us. Yet, there is an irreducible gap between this neutral objective reality and what we can perceive and access from our limited standpoint. To the best of our capacity and knowledge, we translate what we perceive into scientific facts using conventions that can be scientific, logic, linguistic, or else. These facts are the theories that can approximate the best what we can access of the reality according to the current scientific consensus. Filtered by authors and editors’ decision-making, they can be recorded in reports and journals. This filter makes the difference between what we *can* say and express, and what we actually say and. Far from being neutral, actions and speech –scientific or not– are strongly influenced by norms, values and meanings, and they are determined by the decision-making processes of individual phenomenological agents.

Two remarks must be made. First, values require valuers. Meanings require thinkers. They are not facts existing outside of our thoughts, but beliefs that depend on our experience. Second, perceivers, thinkers and believers are *always* individuals. Yet meanings and beliefs are built through interactions with other people. We understand things in the world and value them within the frame of a particular worldview that we learn and appropriate in the process of growing up and living together with others in a specific sociocultural context. Worldviews are not neutral scientific facts; they are the frame and lenses through which one perceives and acts. They are sets of meanings, values, beliefs and habits that are partially invisible to their beholders, but crucially influence their decision-making and ways of life. Particular worldviews are held by individuals, often shared within groups and dominate in particular milieus, shaping how people live, think and act. Ultimately, we are always irreducibly trapped in our specific standpoint and we frame our perception and reality in a particular sociocultural worldview. Of course, we can minimize the weight of the subjective and cultural lenses by using tools and seeking towards objectivity; that is the core of the scientific enterprise. But when we understand, express and do something, we can never totally erase our standpoint, as it is inseparable from the fact of consciousness and thinking. Specifically, *we cannot* perceive, understand and act in the world

without being human.

This paper explores some attempts to grasp the diversity of ways life and nature are valued, inscribed in different worldviews. First, the Life Framework of Values is presented. This framework recently gains traction among researchers and policy-makers aiming at capturing the various ways in which nature matters to human beings. Second, I suggest that the four axes of the framework (*living from, with, in, as* nature) do not encapsulate the dynamicity and temporality of the relation itself, and propose to add a fifth dimension, namely, *living through* nature. Finally, I illustrate the dimension of *living through* nature by shortly describing Dōgen's philosophy of impermanence and interdependence of things.

2. Life Framework of Values

International environmental law-makers, environmental non-governmental organizations and the scientific community have attempted to capture the diversity of ways in which nature matters to different human societies (e.g. IPBES 2016, IPBES 2019, Jamieson 2008, James 2019). The need for international collaboration at the global level to efficiently address global environmental issues confronts us with the challenge exposed previously, namely, that how individuals and groups value the world largely depends on their worldviews, these lenses that are most of the time invisible to their beholders. The idea of ecosystem services was arguably the most successful attempts to classify and to shed light on the various ways in which human beings benefits from the environment (Jax et al., 2013). Yet, the idea of ecosystem services has suffered from its popularity among economists and is criticized for pushing forward a monetary valuation of the environment at the expense of other forms of valuation, thus supporting the commodification of nature. As a result of these criticisms, the idea of “nature's contributions to people” was introduced, particularly popular among social sciences and humanities, because it was seen as encompassing non-monetary ways of valuing nature, including indigenous perspectives on the relation between human beings and their environment. Notably, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) used the concept of nature's contributions to people in its Global Assessment of Biodiversity.

Recently, building on this conceptual tendency to include more diverse perspectives in the assessment of nature's values, some researchers suggested the

Life Framework of Values to capture the global multiple ways in which people value nature. This framework aims at facilitating the expression of values that tend to be concealed in the usage of the concept of ecosystem services, because “if these ethical values are not elicited, they may not be considered in subsequent decision-making” (O’Connor and Kenter, 2019; Kenter et al. 2019; Meinard et al. 2016).

The Life Framework of Values provides a taxonomy to articulate different ways of valuing nature and the world. O’Neill et al. (2008) distinguished three ways in which the world matters to human beings. We first *live from* the world, as we fundamentally depend on the environment, for the fulfilment of our bodily needs (food, water, air, shelter, etc.), and for learning, inspiration and other various experiences. This first dimension is captured in the concept of ecosystem services that shows the different ways in which the environment matters to humans as a resource and provides us with a series of essential services. Second, we also *live with* nature and other species perceived as important others with whom we share the world. This view values nonhuman elements of the world as *others* who matter precisely because they are different from us. Human-nature dualism underpins this way of valuing the environment because we live *with* it. Third, we *live in* the world as a place that is the stage and matrix for our lives. *Living in* the world encompasses aspects of attachment to the land dear to many indigenous and local communities (e.g. Himes and Muraca 2018).

Kenter and O’Connor added the fourth dimension of *living as* the world. *Living as* the world “points out to the more-than-human as *self*, individually and collectively” (2019, emphasis in the original). They illustrate this fourth dimension with aspects as various as “indigenous notions of oneness and kinship” (Gould et al. 2019), embodied and relation perspectives on life (Raymond et al. 2017), Deep Ecology (Naess 1988) and “non-dual spiritual experience” (Wilber 2001). Putting together so diverse aspects rooted in radically different traditions and worldviews not only makes the category of *living as* unclear and ambiguous, but it also presents important difficulties. To illustrate these difficulties, let us briefly sketch the debates between Deep Ecology, ecofeminism and accounts of “non-dual” “Asian” traditions.

Deep Ecology claims that living beings have inherent worth regardless of their instrumental value compared to human needs (Drengson and Inoue 1995). Various formulations of this claim became the central demand of ecocentrism, which built itself in opposition to anthropocentrism. In particular, the “intrinsic

value of nature” has been argued to be anthropogenic (Callicott 1986, 142-143), or “discovered, not generated, by the valuer” (Rolston III 1988, 116). Yet, crucially, as values and meanings require thinking agents, this claim is deemed to be nothing but a normative assumption depending exclusively on the beliefs of the individual human beings defending this claim. In other words, natural elements can have “intrinsic” values only insofar as some individual human beings believe so. Thus, it *cannot* be argued for exclusively on objective or factual grounds, but must be defended transparently as a normative claim held by human individuals and groups. As a self-designed ecocentric theory, Deep Ecology rejects any claim of superiority of the human species over other species in the natural world (Seed et al. 1988, 36). The realization of our intimate dependency to the environment would lead the individual to adopt a strong ecocentric perspective, and to “expand the self” in an identification process with “others”, including other human beings, other animals, other living beings, ecosystems, and finally, the whole biosphere (Bragg 1996; Naess 1973, 1988).

Ecofeminist thinkers also oppose the conception of the human self rooted in contemporary modern capitalist society and originated in patriarchal religious traditions placing human –especially man– as a ruler and a master above the rest of the living beings (Warren 1990; Plumwood 1993). Yet, many worry that the dissolution of the self in the environment, as implied by Deep Ecology thinking, may lead to a disappearance of agency and a dilution of responsibility. In particular, Val Plumwood argues that while Deep Ecology recognizes rightfully the wrongness of the dualism separating human from nature, its answer is a process of unification; “a metaphysics that insists that everything is really part of and indistinguishable from everything else” (1991, 13). By doing so, Deep Ecology is falling into a kind of atomism ignoring differences which are fundamental parts of everyday life (Grimshaw 1986), and a requirement to identify and address the different needs of other living beings.

Proponents of ecocentrism and biocentrism sometimes suggest that Asian traditions that include meditative practices support the account of non-dual spiritual experiences of dissolution of the self in the world (e.g. Curtin 1994, James 2016, Loy 1999). Yet, utmost care must be taken when addressing the incredible diversity of “Asian traditions” and “mindfulness practices”. Indeed, there is a large scholarship within Asian traditions of thoughts that discusses the relation between humans and their world (e.g. Imanishi 2011, Yuasa 1987, Cheng 2014). For example, in Buddhist studies only, there are multiple records of

traditions presenting “non-dual spiritual experience”, which nevertheless are rooted in radically different worldviews, in particular regarding the relation between human beings (or monks in particular) and the world (or natural elements in particular) (e.g. Dunne 2011). Needless to say, putting in the same box these highly diverse spiritual experiences triggered by meditation practices and other “indigenous notions of oneness and kinship” is not self-evident and requires justifications. Seen through the lenses of the dominant worldview of materialist and instrumental dualism, it is unsurprising that these various traditions appear to present similarities (McCarthy 2010). However, approached from within one of the aforementioned traditions, they might present irreconcilable differences. Moreover, while arguing for non-duality, many of these traditions still attribute a particularly privileged status to human beings compared to other living things. This is unsurprising, as modes of relation to nature depend on human-made social conventions, as suggested by the anthropologist Descola (2011).

3. Living *through* Nature

Setting aside those ambiguities regarding living *as*, living *from*, *with*, *in*, *as* nature does not encapsulate the dynamicity and temporality of the relation itself. In contrast, each of these four axes of the Life Framework of Values seems to presuppose the existence of two separable elements (humans and nature), and describes different ways in which they can relate. *Living from* captures an instrumental relation in which we, as agents, take what we want from the objectified nature. *Living in* partially includes relational values the importance that some elements of our surroundings, including the land itself, can have for us on a symbolic and identity- level. *Living with* reflects a dualist –but not necessarily hierarchical– relation in which human beings are cohabiting with sublime, dangerous and wild otherness, to which are attributed intrinsic values. Finally, *living as* tends to overlap the “human” element on the “natural” element and seeks correspondences, or even oneness, possibly at the expense of the concrete differences. Notably, *living as* might tend to erase the fundamentally human standpoint of our experiences and understanding. This obliteration risks concealing differences in needs, and thus faces the risk of judging other species’ needs and existence relatively to human needs, values and limited perceptions, as it is pointed out by the ecofeminist critique of Deep Ecology.

Previously, we established that we never access the environment *as it is*, and

that there are no values, norms and meaning to be found *in* the environment itself. Both our relation to the environment and our decision-making processes regarding what we do and what matters to us are mediated by webs of meanings and norms that cover our surroundings. These can be referred to as the “milieu”, a term coined by Augustin Berque (1996) and inspired by Watsuji Tetsurō’s (1889-1960) concept of *fūdo* 風土 (2004). The milieu, that is the environment as lived and perceived by subjective human beings, articulates immaterial worldviews, material usages of the space and attachment to the land (Droz 2018). Indeed, worldviews, ideas and values are not floating in an immaterial vacuum from which individuals freely pick up what they prefer and build their own lenses and opinions. Instead, we grow up in a particular sociocultural context, within a political and social structure, and we learn to express ourselves and think in a specific language. This is how the milieu as a matrix shapes who we are and what we can do. We make sense of the world through our interactions with others, and our behaviours are guided by the practices that are common and accepted in the place where we live. Even what we can imagine is largely limited by our cultural imaginary.

The relation between human beings and their surrounding environment is dynamic and historical. On the one hand, there are no fixed borders between individuals and their surroundings. Instead, we are in a state of constant change, at the nexus of various flows. On the other hand, these changes unfold through time. As individuals, we live and die. We are growing old, getting sick, changing of social positions and worldviews. It is difficult to put limits and to draw borders between the elements of the webs of relations that constitute the milieu. *Living through* the world and nature might capture better the dynamicity and temporality of the relation.

There are two facets to *living through*: the porosity of borders and the temporal impermanence of things. First, borders are blurred, porous and flexible. As individuals, we are clearly *living through* the world. Identity, self-image and social status are dialectically built and changing through interactions with others (Hermans 2011). The fact that ideas, meaning and values are built and changed through participatory sense-making implies that they do not belong to or are made up by particular individuals alone (De Jaegher et al. 2016). Instead, they appear as the only partially intentional result of countless more or less deliberate interactions with others and the world. The borders of the body are also porous (Yuasa 1987). Our body is continuously breathing and exchanging elements with

its immediate surroundings. Recent studies in biology and medicine show the surprising reach of the effects of changes in the bacteria of our microbiomes on our health, including on our mood and levels of anxiety (O’Doherty et al. 2016, Rees et al. 2018). They show that our microbiomes are interacting with the biomes surrounding us. Our microbiome, which is closely linked to many bodily functionalities and moods, is constantly influenced not only by what we eat and absorb, but by what we breathe and touch, as well as by the microbiomes of the people surrounding us. Our agency too is constrained by the design of our surroundings. The idea of affordances coined by Gibson (1979) shows how our perceptions of our environment are determined by what we could and want to do. Unsurprisingly, there are a high variety of theories of the self that attempt to account for experiences of oneness (as mentioned in *living as*), for questions of body ownership expanded to prosthesis, for the inclusion of intimate family members in one’s own conception of the self, and for no-self arguments widespread in Buddhist and Taoist traditions.

Milieus themselves do not have clear and fixed borders. As they depend on the experience and practices of their subjective inhabitants, they are changing to the discretion of their habits. In particular, today’s high individual mobility for work or private purposes modifies the shapes and sizes of milieus and increases their porosity and mutual influences. Similarly, the drawing of borders of groups, be it nations, ethnicity or culture, is highly complex, multi-layered and political.

In place of borders and clearly delimited things, thinking in terms of flows might be more accurate and efficient. Flows are constantly moving *through* things in the world. We already mentioned flows of nourishment, nutrients, bacteria (air, food, etc.) at the micro scale of bodies. Ideas and values, mediated through communication technologies and global networks, are also flowing through geographical, linguistic and cultural borders. Studies of globalization made clear that flows of goods and information are today covering the whole globe. Admittedly, the porosity of borders and the ubiquity of flows does not *erase* borders. Our body is still delimited by our skin, and we still perceive the world from our specific standpoint. Similarly, nation states still have geographical borders, and flows of information on the Internet are largely guided by sociocultural affinities, linguistic limitations and political censorship. Nevertheless, the porosity of borders is challenging the belief that there *are* clearly delimited things that can be fully separated from each other. The relation between things in the world (whatever scale or criteria we use to define “things”) does not

appear to be optional or secondary to the existence of these things. Instead, things –including human beings and natural elements– are interdependent, mutually determined and inseparable.

Yet, if ideas and values can flow between milieus and if various worldviews can coexist in the same shared milieu, they are still anchored in particular milieus, embodied in the practices and behaviours of their beholders. Because, again, they do not exist independently of individual phenomenological agents, and the latter are always embodied and situated at a particular historical and geographical point. Which means that we can partially situate particular worldviews, the practices they support and their concrete impacts on the world in specific milieus. This gives us leverage points to identify what bundle of values and meanings are at the root of some practices and projects that lead to harmful environmental consequences. Besides, thanks to its concrete local anchorage, the milieu allows us to approach the diversity of practices and worldviews without resting on assumption of national or ethnic homogeneity. Indeed, any local milieu is irreducibly particular if only by virtue of the specific historical and geographical features of the place. So the experiences and ways of life of its inhabitants will inevitably be particular, regardless of the political attempts to conceal its particularity under a cover of sociocultural unity.

The second facet of *living through* the world or nature is temporal impermanence. Birth, growth, aging, reproduction and death are central characteristics of human life, and even of life in general. While the definition of life in sciences is still widely debated, it is largely consensual that living things “take in energy from the environment and transform it for growth and reproduction” and that they “respond, and their stimulation fosters a reaction-like motion, recoil, and in advanced forms, learning.”² Abstractly said, transmission and adaptation of information appear to be a key aspect of life. Human birth, death and reproduction are associated with various rituals, meanings and symbols in different sociocultural milieus. They give rhythm to the life of the individual, and the “life” of the community. But temporal impermanence is not limited to our bodies and physical things. Individuals learn and change of beliefs and habits. Ideas, beliefs, values and worldviews are also changing, gaining popularity or sinking into oblivion. Still, in comparison with the individual life span, worldviews and ideas appear to have some inertia.

² https://www.nasa.gov/vision/universe/starsgalaxies/life%27s_working_definition.html. Consulted on October 2nd 2019.

The bundle of meanings, practices, values and beliefs anchored in particular local environments that constitute milieus is continued, changed and transmitted throughout generations. As we have seen, the individual is shaped and guided by the milieu as a matrix and shapes the milieu through the imprints left by her actions (Berque, 1996). The individual lives, influences and is influenced by different milieus, and dies. Yet, *through* her way of life, the individual embodies and transmits meanings and values. The traces that the individual left in the milieu(s) continue to exist beyond her death (Droz, 2019). These traces can be material in the form of buildings or books, or they might be projects and ideas that survive the individual. The individual legacy, her posthumous reputation, her ideals and projects, but also her family and children continue to exist in her milieu after her death, at least for a while. In short, the milieu carries the signifying traces of the past, co-creates significance with the living human beings and transmits it to the future.

This historical process of transmission of values and meaning is not ineluctable and neutral. It is mediated by our individual decision-making and by common policies, educational programs and large-scale projects. Notably, because we have some choice to do otherwise, we are also ethically responsible for the consequences of our way of life. By acting and thinking in a particular way, we support its existence and transmission, including beyond our death. These considerations reflect the highly political and ethical nature of questions of cultural survival and endangered languages and knowledge. Crucially, the continuation of particular worldviews is not uniquely immaterial, but also has concrete physical impacts. Indeed, the continuation of particular ways of life in a milieu is maintaining specific landscapes, and supporting particular ecosystems that depend on human activities (Flint et al. 2013).

To summarize, the impermanence and the close intertwining of the sociocultural and environmental aspects of human life indicate how we are *living through* the world. We are constantly mutually influencing each other's worldviews and values, and changing as a result. Moreover, these worldviews and values encourage ways of life that supports different types of ecosystems and species. *Living through* milieus captures the impermanent dynamicity of the relation between humans and their environment, and the porosity of their borders. It sketches worldviews based on processes and flows that are continuously in movements, in the line of recent developments in "process philosophy" (Winters 2017; Seibt 2018).

4. Example: Dōgen's Impermanence

Living through was characterized by the temporal impermanence of things and their interdependence, as their porous borders are constantly permeated by various flows. *Living through* insists on the difficulty to draw fixed lines between two separate objects (such as humans and nature). It does not reject the other types of relations captured by the other prepositions, but adds another dimension. The relation between humans and nature can be seen as an instrumental relation between subjects and objects (*from*), as side-by-side coexistence (*with*), as nature providing a passive contextual receptacle (*in*), and as filled with correspondences and overlaps (*as*). In addition, the relation between humans and nature can be understood as interdependent, constantly changing and mutual interpenetrating (*through*). Echoes of each of these types of valuation can be found within most the worldviews and sociocultural contexts, with varying emphasis given to each. The emphasis on instrumental aspects of *living from* nature is well-known and largely dominating political and economic discourses nowadays. In contrast, let us briefly explore a radically different worldview that gave centrality to the aspect of *living through* nature.

The impermanence of things is one of the foundational claims of Buddhism. About 800 years ago, the Japanese Buddhist monk Dōgen (1200-1253) left his original affiliation with the Tendai School and founded a rival school of Zen Buddhism (Sōtō) after returning from his trip in China (Yokoi 1976). He left an extensive collection of texts that are still studied nowadays and remains a central figure of Zen Buddhism (Nishiyama and Stevens 1977, Takahashi 1983). The interpretation of Dōgen's work is recognized to be hard, and attempting to draw different types of valuation of nature from his texts might appear to be anachronistic. An important first obstacle in treating the valuation of "nature" in Dōgen's work is the very fact that the concept of was nonexistent in his historical and geographical context. The concept of "nature" as construed contemporary sciences was introduced in Japan in 1796 as a translation from Dutch into "jizen" (自然, pronounced today as *shizen*) (Iwanami Buddhism Dictionary 1989; Iwanami Encyclopedia of Philosophy 1998; Janel 2015). Before this translation, the word *shizen* had a different meaning rooted in Ancient Chinese. In particular, *ziran* (its Chinese pronunciation) was used by Laozi in relation with a way of being characterized by non-doing (*wuwei*) that humans can or should practice, and

with the co-determined emergence of things (*Yinyuan*), a fundamental premise in both Buddhist and Taoist cosmologies. *Ziran* as a translation for the Western "Nature" is likely to have been taken back into Chinese from the Japanese translation. Both meanings (Way of being existing by itself, and Western-style nature) coexist nowadays in the Chinese word *Ziran* and the modern Japanese word *shizen* (written with the same Chinese characters). There are other words that might get close to the idea of nature within these traditions, such as the equivalents for "world", of "under heaven", but they tend to include human beings in opposition to other godly realms and carry strong connotations intertwined in Buddhist and Taoist cosmologies. Still today, this historical background raises important difficulties in the approach and the discourses of "values of nature" in East Asia.

Nevertheless, these difficulties perfectly illustrate the role of worldviews as the lenses that limit and shape how we see and make sense of the world. Dōgen himself warned us that we "should not be limited to human views" and "naïvely think that what one views as water is "what dragons and fish see as water and use as water." (Dōgen 1990: 2:198). While there was no clear opposition between "humans" and nature, because there was nothing such as the contemporary concept of nature, Dōgen still recognized the particularity of our human lenses. In other words, he noted that we are *living with* other living beings who perceive the world differently than us. He further acknowledged, in another text, that the living beings are living *from* and *in* their own environment:

Fish swim through water, and swim as they may there is no limit to the water. Birds fly through the sky, and fly as they may there is no limit to the sky. And yet, fish and birds have never once left the water or sky. It is just that when the required activity is great the use is great, and when the need is small the use is small. In this manner, although they never fail to exhaust the borders of each and every point, turning about [freely] here and there, if a bird were to leave the sky, or if a fish were to leave the water, they would die instantly. One should know that [for a fish] life *is* by means of water, and [for a bird] life *is* by means of the sky. It is [also] the case that life *is* by means of birds and fish. And by means of life birds and fish are able to be. Moreover, we should proceed a step further. That there is the verification-in-practice of [human] lives is also just like this (Genjokoan, translation by Davis, 2009, 258).

Dōgen highlighted here the instrumental dependence of fishes, birds and humans on our direct environment, as each lives “by means of”, that is, *from* it. In addition, he pointed out that living things never leave their particular milieu, because if they did, they would “die instantly”. In other words, we are always *living in* a specific world or milieu on which we existentially depend. He adds that even if the fish were to leave water and aim at the sky, it “could not find its way or attain its place in” it. That is because this way of life, “this place, is neither great nor small, neither self nor other, neither already in existence nor [first] manifesting now, it is just as it is”. We belong to a place, to our milieu, in a way that there is no clear border separating it from us, and in a way that we could not exist “truly” out of it.

In his historical, geographical and religious context, Dōgen’s revolutionary philosophical stance was to claim that all things have Buddha nature. He writes that “the grasses, trees and lands”, like “the sun, moon, and stars are mind; because they are mind, they are living beings; because they are living beings, they “have the Buddha nature.””(Busshō, translation by Bielefeldt, 2010, 21). Here is not the place to dive in the depths of his mysticism. Still, this description hinges at valuing living things in the world because of they share the same nature as human beings do, and thus *living as* living things, each *in* our specific place in the world. This perspective finds echoes in recent multispecies research that places human beings as members of a community of diverse species (e.g. Ogden et al. 2013; Locke and Muenster 2015; Kirskey and Helmreich 2010).

Echoes of *living as* the world are also found in Dōgen’s most famous quote that points at the spiritual experience of oneness towards which practitioners must aim: “To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be verified by the myriad things [of the world]. To be verified by the myriad things is to let drop off the body-mind of the self and the body-mind of others.” (Genjokoan, translation by Davis, 2009, 256). By carefully studying ourselves, we would notice the porous and artificial nature of the separation between us and the world. Izutsu explains:

One cannot *become* water because one is observing it from outside, that is to say, because the ego is, as an outsider, looking at water as an “object”. Instead of doing so, Zen continues to argue, one must first learn to “forget one’s ego-subject” and let oneself be completely absorbed into the water. One would then be flowing *as* the flowing river. No more would there be

any consciousness or ego. Nor would there be any “consciousness of” the water. Strictly speaking, it is not even the case that one *becomes* the water and flows on as the water. [...] Simply: The water flows on. No more, no less” (Izutsu 1982: 81).

Interestingly, the tensions found in expressions such as “flowing *as* the river”, widely discussed in Buddhist studies, echo the debates between Deep Ecology and ecofeminism regarding the dangerous dissolution of the self that could lead to a disappearance of agency and responsibility.

Crucially, the experience of *living as* is for most practitioners a temporary exercise and not a constant state of being, namely, that we are *living through* the world. The experience of weakening the borders between the self and the world teaches us that the borders separating things in the world are porous and sheds light on the fundamental interdependence of all things. Dynamic interdependence is one facet of *living through* the world. The second facet, impermanence, is recurrent in Dōgen’s discussion of time (Moriyama and Sakon, 2018), and clearly transpires from this last quote: “In a like manner, if one tries to discern the myriad things with confused assumptions about the body-mind, it can mistakenly seem as though one’s own mind and nature are permanent.” (Genjokoan, translation by Davis, 2009, 257).

In sum, the aspects of living *from*, *in*, *with*, *as* and *through* the world can be found together in Dōgen’s work. As it appears from this short depiction of his worldview, he does not emphasize aspects of living *from* the world as do current dominant worldviews. Instead, he stresses the interdependence and impermanence of the “myriad things” and warns us against the common mistaken assumptions of fixed and permanent independent beings, starting with ourselves. The spotlight is shed on how we are *living through* the world, as impermanent and interdependent living beings.

5. Conclusion

Global environmental issues present us with the need to understand how individuals and groups value nature and the world through their own situated worldviews. We need to understand what meanings different people give to life and nature in order to find some common grounds and tackle together global environmental problems. Yet, we always access ourselves and the world through

the lenses of our situated sociocultural worldview, tainted with normative values and judgements. Such questions regarding meaning of life and nature require an interdisciplinary dialogue, especially in a global and diverse context. Accordingly, this paper bridged inputs from ecology, anthropology, environmental ethics, Japanese philosophy and philosophy of meaning in life.

One of the current interdisciplinary framework to map the different ways in which nature matters to humans is the Life Framework of Values. It is composed of four axes; living *from*, *with*, *in* and *as* nature or the world. Yet, these four axes fail to capture the dynamicity and temporality of the relation between humans and their surrounding reality. This paper highlighted a possible fifth dimension: living *through* nature. We are continuously in changing and interdependent interactions with our milieu, shaping it and being shaped by it. Flows keep crossing the porous and dynamic borders of our body and communities. This dimension of *living through* was briefly illustrated by the example of Dōgen's philosophy of interdependence and impermanence.

As individual, sociocultural groups and humanity, we are *living through* the world. We exist as a nexus of flows. We have the possibility to influence the orientation of these flows; that is ethical decision-making. We exist *in* the midst of these flows, but we cannot separate ourselves *from* them, or fully objectify them into something we are living *with*, or completely erase differences and equalize us *as* the world. Nowadays, communication media and the internet confront us with flows of diverse meanings and values that are often taken out of their contextual worldview, increasing the risks of misunderstandings and conflicts. It is thus crucial to remind us that besides some general considerations that human life requires some basic environmental and social conditions, questions regarding meaning and value remain normative. Meanings and values are not to be found in reality, but they are to be assigned from within a particular worldview, and embodied and lived by subjective human individuals. Importantly, any single permanent global answer to these normative questions would risk imposing the subjective perspective of a dominant group at the expenses of other worldviews.

To foster intercultural collaboration and minimize conflicts and misunderstanding, we need to understand better the various ways in which we value and make sense of nature. In this quest, the Life Framework of Values provides a precious starting point. The recent addition of the fourth dimension of *living as* is a particularly encouraging step towards including worldviews that are usually marginalized in global political and scientific discourses. Yet, as shown in

this paper, some perspectives on the temporality and dynamicity of human life still seem difficult to account for with the four dimensions *living from, with, in* and *as*, and would be better captured by *living through*.

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