

Tetsuro Watsuji's Milieu and Intergenerational Environmental Ethics

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The concept of humans as relational individuals living in a milieu can provide some solutions to various obstacles of theorization that are standing in the way of an ethics of sustainability. The idea of a milieu was developed by Tetsuro Watsuji as a web of signification and symbols. It refers to the environment as lived by a subjective relational human being and not as artificially objectified. The milieu can neither be separated from its temporal—or historical—dimension as it is directly related to the “now” of perceptions and actions in the world. In other words, elements of the natural milieu can be said to have a constitutive value as they contribute to our well-being by helping us make sense of our life and our world. In their temporal and relational dimensions, Watsuji's notions of the milieu and human being are thus directly related to the notion of sustainability. This concept offers some convincing solutions to overcoming the problem of temporal distance, by shifting the center of argumentation from unknown, passive, and biologically dependent not-yet-born people to the transmission of a meaningful historical milieu. The turning point here is that if what matters is the survival of ideal and material projects that people live (and sometimes die) for, then future generations have tremendous power over them, as the actions of those future people will determine the success or failure of the projects started by present generations.

I. INTRODUCTION

One essential challenge for the theorization of an ethics of sustainability concerns the future and future generations. I suggest that some of the obstacles encountered in the theorization of future generations in environmental ethics can be overcome by adopting a different framework of what human beings and nature are. I first present three obstacles to the theorization of future generations. Then, inspired by the work of Tetsuro Watsuji, I develop a concept of the environment as a meaningful dynamic co-determining milieu. The semiotic-constitutive model of nature's value proposed by Simon James completes this approach. The temporal dimension of the concept of the milieu will also be presented. Finally, I explore how the concept of *human* as a relational individual living in a milieu can provide solutions to several obstacles facing the theorization of an ethics of sustainability. I argue that this concept offers some convincing solutions to overcoming the problem of temporal distance, by shifting the center of the argumentation from unknown, passive, and biologically dependent not-yet-born people to the transmission of a signifying historical milieu. The turning point is that if what matters is the survival of ideal and material projects people live (and sometimes die) for, then future generations

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have tremendous power over them, as the actions of future people will determine the success or failure of the projects started by present generations. Finally, I discuss the implications that such a perspective has for environmental ethics.

II. THREE OBSTACLES TO THE THEORIZING OF SUSTAINABILITY

The question of the theorization of future generations is a key problem in environmental ethics, as it arises when asking questions such as “Why should we preserve the environment for the ‘future’?” “Why can’t we use up the natural resources now for ourselves?” “Why should we care about the welfare of others in a distant future?” In contemporary environmental ethics, three obstacles to the theorization of future generations have been distinguished: contingency of existence, indeterminacy of needs and asymmetry of power.¹ These obstacles are also sometimes referred to as characteristics of not-yet-born people: biological dependency, unknowability and passivity.² I first describe in more detail these three obstacles, and then show how the concept of a relational historical milieu might offer some alternative solutions.

The first issue is the *biological dependency* of these future generations, and the consequent contingency of their existence. This obstacle has been famously described by Derek Parfit as the non-identity problem.³ He argues that personal identity depends on the context of existence and on the concept of the individual.⁴ The work of Parfit is especially interesting in that he is concerned with the implications of the concept of personal identity on responsibility and ethical issues. He discusses the problem of theorizing future generations as possible victims of current policies. He notes that as personal identity depends on when we are conceived, who will exist in the future depends on *every one* of our actions. Indeed, *every* action might change by a second at the time of mating, thus altering which individual will be born (and this phenomenon is duplicated with time). Therefore, if an action requires victims to be judged as wrong, then environmental policy planning becomes impossible (or very difficult?) to justify. From this perspective, our choice of environmental policy cannot be deemed to be wrong once we know that it will not adversely affect anyone in the future; that is, any particular distant future person cannot claim to have been harmed by the actions of prior generations, for their very existence is

¹ Brian Barry, “Justice between Generations,” in *Law, Morality and Society: Essays in Honour of H.L.A. Hart*, ed. P. M. S. Hacker and J. Raz (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997); Edward Page, “Global Warning and the Non-Identity Problem,” in *Self and Future Generations: An Intercultural Conversation*, ed. Tae-Chang Kim and Ross Harrison (The White Horse Press, Cambridge, 1999).

² Makoto Usami, “Intergenerational Justice: Rights versus Fairness,” *Philosophy Study* 1, no. 4 (2011): 237–46.

³ Derek Parfit, “Energy Policy and the Further Future Problem: The Identity Problem,” in *Energy and the Future*, ed. Douglas MacLean and Peter G. Brown (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1983): pp. 166–79.

⁴ Derek Parfit, “The Unimportance of Identity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Self*, ed. Shaun Gallagher (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 420.

contingent on those actions. Parfit concludes that morality concerned with human welfare cannot anymore be explained in person-affecting terms.⁵ Indeed, Makoto Usami refers to this feature as the “biological dependency” of future generations to the present generations’ actions.⁶ Thus, nobody can be worse off as a result of either of our decisions, as in the case we had taken another decision, the potentially worse-off individuals would not have existed.

The second obstacle is *indeterminacy*, as we are in a state of fundamental uncertainty and ignorance about future generations. Indeed, future generations will live in a different historical milieu with different cultural imaginaries, and thus might want, desire, or even need different things than we do. Not-yet-born people are fundamentally unknowable. This is the main obstacle for a utilitarian theory seeking to maximize the happiness of future individuals, as we are in a state of ignorance of what factors will impact their happiness. Indeed, a utilitarian theory needs to know the utility of an action on affected individuals.⁷ As future people are undetermined, a utilitarian theory encounters a difficult obstacle. Focusing on basic needs and defining a minimal amount of resources to be preserved for the sake of future generations might be stronger, because we can assume that the basic survival needs of future human beings are likely to be similar to our own. However, if we would wish future generations not solely physical survival, but also cultural flourishing, then the necessary resources are much harder to predict, which is even truer when accounting the indeterminacy of the future population size.

Together, these two obstacles—contingency of existence and indeterminacy of needs—are also very problematic for any contract theory approach of an ethics of sustainability.⁸ Indeed, contractualism necessitates a reciprocal interaction among agents, and this reciprocity is difficult for non-overlapping generations. The problem appears clearly with individualistic moral theories attaching ethical value not to the *way of life*, but to specific actions affecting distinct separated individuals. If we need to have a worse-off victim in order to have a wrong action, then non-existence and indeterminacy are deadly obstacles.

Third, the obstacle of *asymmetry* states that there is an inequality of power and resources between present, living generations and future generations.⁹ Indeed, however much we deplete our environmental resources, the actions of future generations can never have an impact on us, and thus they are the perfect silent victims of our omnipotent abuses. In other words, the dead have “a kind of external power over us through the world which they have left us; and at least some older human beings (living or dead) have a kind of internal power over us, embodied in

⁵ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 351–77.

⁶ Usami, “Intergenerational Justice: Rights versus Fairness,” p. 239.

⁷ Makoto Usami, “Justice after Catastrophe: Responsibility and Security,” *Ritsumeikan Studies in Language and Culture* 26, no. 4 (2015): 225.

⁸ Masaya Kobayashi, “Atomistic Self and Future Generations,” in Kim and Harrison, *Self and Future Generations*, p. 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

what we are (in the persons we have become).”¹⁰ Thus, the present generation has an “external” power over future generations through the historical milieu created, and the resources and the viability of the ecosystems they leave. In addition, the present generation also has an “internal” power through the cultural imaginary influencing the construal of future selves. I now show how a concept of relational historical milieu may offer some tentative solutions to these three obstacles.

III. MILIEU

(3.1) TETSURO WATSUJI’S ETHICS

Before the emergence of the environmental crisis and the field of environmental ethics, the Japanese philosopher Tetsuro Watsuji (1889–1960) developed the concept of the historical milieu (歴史的風土 *rekishiteki fuudo*) as a web of signification and symbols. The milieu refers to the environment as being lived by a subjective relational human being and not artificially objectified. I use here the translation of *fuudo* as “milieu,” proposed by Augustin Berque.¹¹ The milieu is not a passive chemico-physical receptacle “around” the subject, a “wild nature” to be controlled and tamed, but a co-determined web of meanings. Watsuji refers to it as the “structural moment of human existence.” He writes in the first lines of *Fuudo*:

The question here is not about the natural environment determining human life. What we usually think as natural environment is a thing that has been taken out from its concrete ground, the human mediance [or milieu], to be objectified. When we think of 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.¹²

Human beings exist through and by the milieu. The milieu is also a place of shared intersubjectivity, as it is a place where people meet each other, and on which people project representations, meanings, and symbols through their common imaginary. In the first pages of *Ethics*,¹³ Watsuji proceeds with an etymological analysis of

¹⁰ John Dunn, “Politics and the Well-being of Future Generations,” in Kim and Harrison, *Self and Future Generations*, p. 70.

¹¹ Augustin Berque, *Être humains sur la terre, principes d'éthique de l'écoumène* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996). Tetsuro Watsuji, *Fuudo, le milieu humain*, commentary and trans. Augustin Berque (Paris: CNRS, 2011).

¹² Tetsuro Watsuji, *Fuudo, ningengakuteki koosatsu* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2004 [first published in 1935]), p. 1 (author’s translation).

¹³ My view is based mainly on three main works by Tetsuro Watsuji (1889–1960): *Ethics as the Study of Human Beings* (*Ningen no gaku toshite no rinrigaku*) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1971 [first published 1934]), *Fuudo*, and especially on books 1 and 4 of *Ethics* (*Rinrigaku*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2007 [first published between 1937 and 1949]).

the Japanese word for *human* (人間 *ningen*). *Ningen* is composed of two Chinese characters depicting the individual and the interval, or the betweenness. From there, Watsuji argues that human beings are relational living individuals in constant dynamic co-determining cycles with the world.¹⁴ One movement of the cycle is the negation of the Self through recognition of its commonality with the world, or the milieu. A movement of concentration follows this movement of expansion. The movement of concentration negates the negation in coming back to the Self.¹⁵ Only death can interrupt this dynamic cycle.

These cycles are made possible by “betweenness” (間柄 *aidagara*). This betweenness, or this space between human beings, and between human beings and their environment, is the key concept of Watsuji’s ethics. Indeed, betweenness is what makes action on the world possible. Watsuji characterizes this betweenness as the “practical interconnection of acts.”¹⁶ It is also the “locus of meaning creation” in a process of mutual interaction between people and their environment, by the elaboration of their cultural imaginary.¹⁷ Therefore, this space in-between the self and the milieu is where ethics emerges.

Like several other Japanese philosophers of the interwar period, Watsuji’s writings have been criticized for encouraging nationalism through fostering the total submission of the Self to the nation, which he tends to consider as the highest “totality.” This issue is not discussed in details here. Yet, to avoid this slippery slope, I must note that difference (among human beings, and between human beings and other elements of the world) must be respected and not homogenized by a process of unification or of dissolution in a higher “totality.” In a different context, ecofeminists such as Val Plumwood fiercely criticized a similar tendency to erase difference in Deep Ecology.¹⁸ To avoid abusive uniformization from either side of the relationship between the Self and the Other (human or natural), they argued that the relationship needs to be reciprocal (and not hierarchical or dominating), and that the interdependence and sameness at the ground of the difference has to be recognized and acknowledged. Now, applying the ecofeminist argument to the self-milieu relationship borrowed from Watsuji highlights that the relationality is neither a temporary state nor a secondary aspect of either the self or the milieu. On

¹⁴ Graham Mayeda, *Time, Space and Ethics in the Philosophy of Watsuji Tetsuro, Kuki Shuzo, and Martin Heidegger* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006); Yasuo Yuasa, *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory*, trans. Shigenori Nagatomo and Thomas P. Kasulis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

¹⁵ For a discussion in depth of Watsuji’s conceptions of the Self and milieu and their potential for environmental ethics, see Lařna Droz, “Watsuji’s Conception of the Self and the Environmental Ethics’ Problem of Spatial Distance,” *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* 3 (2018): 145–68.

¹⁶ Watsuji, *Ethics*, p. 35.

¹⁷ Mayeda, *Time, Space and Ethics*, pp. 94–97.

¹⁸ Val Plumwood “Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism,” *Hypatia* 6, no. 1 (1991): 3–27. Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London and New York, Routledge, 1993).

the contrary, it is a central and constitutive part of both the self and the milieu. The importance given to relationality also impacts how values are assigned to elements of the environment.

3.2 CONSTITUTIVE VALUE

According to Watsuji, ethics emerges from the cyclic relationship between the relational individual and the milieu. Both the relational individual and the milieu gain value and meaning by virtue of their relationship with one another. The causal-instrumentalist model of nature's value that environmental ethicists usually use seems ill-equipped to accommodate such relational thinking. While assessing the values of natural elements relatively to the ecosystem services they provide, this model remains grounded on a human-nature dualism and fails to acknowledge the constitutive nature of the relationship.¹⁹ For example, in this model, a specific phreatic table can have instrumental value for the community living nearby, as it provides fresh water. Many environmental ethicists also debate whether or not some natural elements can be attributed with having an intrinsic value. However, these two types of values do not seem to be sufficient to account for our relationship to our milieu. In fact, it is very difficult to discuss the concept of milieu in such a causal-instrumentalist model of nature's value. Indeed, if a natural element has no value "by itself" (intrinsic), and no "useful" value (instrumental) either, then does that mean it has no value at all? A causal-instrumentalist model implies substitutability. For example, if the phreatic table were to run dry, it could be replaced by water tanks coming regularly to deliver fresh water to the community. However, it seems that water tanks and the source springing from the phreatic table have a different type of value. The source may very well be related to historical tales about the origin of the community, or it might be the door to the kingdom of the spirits of the water, whereas water tanks would lack these meanings. From this perspective, the phreatic table and its source may have a *constitutive value* as part of the lifestyle of the community and even as part of the identity of the community (for instance, the name of the village might derive from the presence of the source).

To address these limitations, Simon James proposes adding a semiotic-constitutive model of nature's value to the causal-instrumentalist one. He coined the term *constitutive value* to refer to the fact that "some natural *x* being of value to certain people because it contributes, *by virtue of the meanings it embodies*, to their well-being."²⁰ The people living in the community may value the source on account

¹⁹ For a critical analysis of ecosystem services (the most common central concept of this model), see Kurt Jax, David N. Barton, Kai Ming Adam Chan, and Rudolf de Groot, "Ecosystem Services and Ethics," *Ecological Economics* 93 (2013): 260–68.

²⁰ Simon P. James, "Natural Meanings and Cultural Values," paper presented at the 2017 ISEE Conference in Colorado, USA (unpublished, given by the author), p. 3. An updated version of this paper is the lead article in this issue, pp. 3–16. Quote p. 5.

of the meaning it embodies for them, as a historical landscape item, as a sacred heaven for the gods of the land, or as the concrete origin of the name of their village. Thus, constitutive value is contextual, because it, x (e.g., word, practice), has meaning as *part of certain meaningful wholes*.²¹ Indeed, meaning always depends on context, as the meaning of a word depends on its place in the sentence, and on the situation in which this sentence appears. Yet, James does not claim that every natural entity that has constitutive value for one individual has constitutive value in general or for all people, nor that it has ultimate value when all things are taken into accounts.

This idea of constitutive value is useful in clarifying the status of the milieu for the human beings inhabiting it. The constitutive value that elements of the milieu (and/or the milieu as a whole) have for us contributes to our well-being by helping us make sense of our life and our world. Natural elements, then, not only have an instrumental value for us solely because of their replaceable chemico-physical properties, but some of them (or their whole) might also have constitutive value because of the meaning and symbolism they carry.

IV. TEMPORALITY AND HISTORICITY

If we are to discuss future generations and the temporal problems arising when attempting to theorize sustainability, then it is necessary to see how time is articulated with the idea of a relational individual in constant dynamic cycles of co-determination with the milieu. Intuitively, these cycles are deployed through time. The relational individual is constantly redefining and changing our milieu by thinking about it and acting on it. From this perspective, relational individuals are continually inspiring themselves from the past to act in the present and move toward an ideal future. Watsuji writes that “therefore, it is never inappropriate to grasp *ningen sonzai* [human existence] as the unified structure of past, present and future.”²² He discusses in depth the idea of time in *Ethics*:

Now, *ningen sonzai* is characterised in terms of the incessant movement from an established betweenness to a possible one. An established betweenness is the community from which an individual separates him, and a possible betweenness is the community to be realized. If so, then what was grasped as ‘the movement of negation’ in *ningen sonzai* makes its appearance here in the form of temporal structure.²³

Every moment, relational individuals are contributing to creating the meanings of their milieu. Yet, this creation is not happening in a vacuum, with the individual drawing

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²² Watsuji, *Ethics*, p. 285 (trans. Seisaku Yamamoto), and Robert Carter, *Watsuji Tetsurō's Rinrigaku: Ethics in Japan* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1996), p.190.

²³ Watsuji, *Ethics*, pp. 280–81; Watsuji, *Ethics* (trans. Seisaku Yamamoto), pp. 186–87.

lines of meaning on their world alone. Instead, this process is always dialogical with others and with the communal imaginary. To illustrate this common social dimension of time, Watsuji uses the examples of cultural ways of measuring the time, of ceremonies giving rhythm to a lifespan and of festivals characterizing each season. Our very perception of time is determined by the meanings and symbols we use to interpret the world. Thus, human beings do not “exist ‘in time,’ but, on the contrary, time emerges from *ningen sonzai*.”²⁴ This aspect is easier to understand by comparing it with space. A place is always created from our standpoint and our point of observation. In cities, our whole environment is designed to be used by average human beings, adapted to their size and capacities. In general, as James Gibson has explicitly shown, we do not perceive our environment “neutrally,” but as being covered by *affordances*, or possibilities of action.²⁵ Similarly, we do not perceive time neutrally, but as having different kinds of duration allowing different types of actions to be taken. Our perception of time is also deeply socially influenced by the communal imaginary.

As spatiality is always intrinsically linked with temporality, the spatial milieu is always intertwined with historicity. In philosophy, historicity generally refers to the idea that something (concepts, practices, values) has a historical origin and development. Watsuji expands this idea, saying that our whole milieu is historical, and that we are continuously co-creating historicity through our daily actions. According to him, historicity unfolds itself not only at the level of individual human existence in the interconnection of acts, but also at the level of the group through the medial²⁶ and historical creation and transmission of the communal imaginary. As Watsuji writes, it is through the exposition of the spatio-temporal structure of human existence that we shed light on human solidarity. Diverse forms of human communities have developed as systems of dynamic cyclical movements: the movement of negation of the independence of culture, and the consequent negation of this negation. This is how historicity develops itself:

No social structure is possible if not grounded on the spatial structure of a subjective human being; and temporality, if it is not grounded on social existence, cannot become historicity. . . . The individual dies, the relation between individuals changes, but while dying and changing, individuals live and their betweenness continues. . . . What is “being toward death” from the perspective of the individual is “being toward life” from the perspective of the society.²⁷

²⁴ Watsuji, *Ethics*, p. 286; Watsuji, *Ethics* (trans. Seisaku Yamamoto), p. 190.

²⁵ James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1979).

²⁶ *Medial* is the adjective of the noun *milieu* as defined above (following Augustin Berque’s usage).

²⁷ In Japanese 2004 edition of *Ethics*, pp. 19–20. For all references to *Fudo*, I use my own translation as English translations of *Fudo* are unconvincing (e.g., Bownas Geoffrey translated *fudo* as “climate” in *Climate and Culture: A Philosophical Study* (Tokyo: Yushodo, 1961). For a discussion of this problem of translation, see Augustin Berque’s preface of the French translation of *Fudo* (2011).

Historicity thus refers to the development and transmission of meanings. As the self is a constructive process, so is the worldview of one group, and both aspects (communal and personal) mutually support each other. However, the communal imaginary has a greater temporal dimension than the lifespan of an individual. Projects started by individuals will survive their deaths by being carried on by the cultural imaginary. This communal cultural imaginary projected on the historical milieu is the expression of this dynamic ever-changing betweenness. This betweenness will be ever-lasting, at least as long as human beings continue to maintain it through their existence.

The transmitted historical milieu includes tangible artifacts and intangible attributes, whether personal, or of a group or society. The notion of cultural heritage refers to the material and immaterial objects transmitted to and maintained by present and future generations as the legacy of past generations. Cultural heritage can be tangible such as monuments, books, and works of arts. It can also be intangible, such as folklore and languages. Besides, it is also often—if not always—a co-production between natural elements and human fabrications. Therefore, through the historical milieu, the individual existence is spanning beyond its spatio-temporal point of observation, toward distant places and a distant future. Spatially, this movement can be mediated by the milieus themselves (for example, when travelling abroad), or by other human beings (when meeting and discussing with somebody coming from a different place), and finally by the awareness of the existence of other relational individuals in their respective milieus.

Temporally too, this movement of spanning beyond the individual standpoint can be mediated by the milieus. Indeed, the milieu is not only the nature external to human beings, but it has also been built by human intersubjectivity through history, engraved into the mental structures of a culture, and made apparent through habits and norms.²⁸ Living relational individuals experience their milieu through this common imaginary and contributes to it by acting on it and by thinking about it. From this perspective, the individual carries a “medial past.” If this aspect appears clearly for the past (and the common understanding of “history”), it is also reflected in the future. Indeed, individual actions are decided intrinsically by an individual subjective agent, but they are the reflection of cultural expectations reinterpreted and brought to life. Thus, relational individuals living in co-determining cycles with their milieu are connected to their specific social and environmental milieu—and to future generations of human beings.

V. OVERCOMING THE THREE TEMPORAL OBSTACLES

In contemporary environmental ethics, the “symmetry view” has been proposed as an objection to the obstacle of asymmetry of power. According to this view, if

²⁸ Berque (translation and commentary), *Fuudo*, p. 324.

the present generation has power to influence the future world, milieu and cultural imaginary in which future generations will be born, “future generations when they come into being will be able to affect not only the posthumous reputations of present persons but also the actual success of present persons’ lives’ works, plans, projects, and goals.”²⁹ Ernest Partridge argued first for the importance of “posthumous interests and posthumous respect.”³⁰ Furthermore, it is common to be concerned with what will happen to our own bodies (and our belongings and reputations) after death (e.g., ceremony, burial, heritage, etc.). Thus, “my self-interested concern about the future is not restricted to concern about future mental states of myself,” for instance, future pleasure and pain.³¹ John O’Neill has suggested that the reasons for intrapersonal continuity through time might have some implication for interpersonal continuity through time. He notes that the relation of a person to the future can also be seen as “one of self to others” at the same temporal point.³² Obviously, the continuity in time of the embodiment after death is interrupted as the body perishes. However, some kind of continuity may be preserved through narratives. As I showed with Watsuji’s work, human existence unfolds itself in the interconnection of acts in the betweenness of the historical milieu. Space and time are becoming milieu and history through the meaningful and performative narratives of the society and of its individuals. The problem of conservation of the milieu thus becomes “*how best to continue the narrative.*”³³ Or, as Alan Holland and Kate Rawles write:

... conservation is ... about preserving the future *as a realization of the potential of the past* ... [it] is about negotiating the transition from past to future in such a way as to secure the transfer of maximum significance.³⁴

In short, future generations have power over our posthumous reputation, and over the flourishing or failure of our projects, children, cities ... on what will become the historical milieu we contributed to creating during our whole life. To be clear, I do not argue that when one person is concerned about another and recognizes that that person’s milieu is essential for him or her, one will care for another’s milieu. I do not defend here any direct link between present people and future people of non-overlapping generations. Instead, I argue that a non-personal link is made

²⁹ Unpublished paper, cited in Kobayashi, “Atomistic Self and Future Generations,” p.17.

³⁰ Ernest Partridge, “Posthumous Interests and Posthumous Respect,” *Ethics* 91, no. 2 (1981): 243–64.

³¹ Ross Harrison, “My Interest in Future Generations,” in *Self and Future Generations, an Intercultural Conversation*, ed. Kim Tae-Chang and Ross Harrison (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 1999), p. 87.

³² John O’Neill, “Self, Time and Separability,” in *Self and Future Generations, an intercultural conversation*, ed. Tae-Chang Kim and Harrison Ross (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 1999) p. 97.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

³⁴ Alan Holland and Kates Rawles, *The Ethics of Conservation*, Thingmount Working Paper, British Association of Nature Conservationists, 1994, p. 46, https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/users/philosophy/awaymave/onlineresources/ethics%20of%20conservation%20_holland,%20rawles_.pdf.

through the care for the accomplishment—or the preservation—of the projects one person started while alive. Posthumous reputation is one obvious example, but one does not need to be remembered as an individual person at all to care for the sake of her projects. Indeed, only a few celebrities will be remembered over several future generations; thus, the argument of posthumous individual reputation alone seems too weak confronted with the oblivion of the majority of people. However, if individuals may be easily forgotten, their project might not be. A project can be material, such as a building that they contributed to erecting (e.g., cathedrals in Europe), but it can also be ideas, theories, or worldviews that they embraced during their life and that they wish to see flourish in the future. In my opinion, the latter is the most important part of what is transmitted to future generations through the historical milieu; that is, significance. In sum, the asymmetry of power must be relativized, as most present living people care about the continuation of the meanings and projects they value the most. The absolute power future generations have over the endurance of presently valued projects and ideals balances the seemingly disproportionate power of present generations.

It seems to be possible to overcome this obstacle of asymmetry of power through the perspective of signifying narratives covering the historical milieu. But what about the two obstacles left, the contingency of existence and the indeterminacy of needs? If the key point of sustainability is the conservation of a living, meaningful milieu, then we seem to be able to partly avoid the obstacle of the contingency of existence. Indeed, the ethical value is no longer attached to particular not-yet-existent and potentially suffering individuals, but to the rich living significance of the historical milieu; the dynamic ever-changing betweenness. If the richness of the historical milieu is transmitted, whoever lives in the future may pick up the torch of ideal projects left by past generations. The history of philosophy is full of examples of old ideas taken over and revived by different thinkers hundreds of years later. Amphitheatres built under the Roman Empire and still used (or used again) today for spectacles are another example of transmission of significance of the historical milieu. In other words, from this perspective, the precise size of the future population and the definite identities of future individuals matter less than the transmission of a living and evolving historical milieu. Thus, current generations have an obligation to transmit milieus that are rich in significance to future generations, whoever they might be. So, what counts as an adequate milieu is constrained by the fact that it should be possible to continue transmitting and adapting it throughout generations. I briefly explore this issue after showing a possible way to overcome the indeterminacy of the needs of future generations.

Finally, the obstacle of indeterminacy of needs is undeniable for future generations far in the future, such as those who will live hundreds of thousands of years from now. Looking back, indeed, human beings were once very different from how they are now. Nevertheless, even then, we can suppose that they had the similar basic needs of healthy air, water, and a liveable physico-chemical environment. However, most of the environmental decisions we make today will have a destructive

impact on closer future generations, such as those living a few hundred years from now. Then, it is possible to guess from our historical milieu what these generations might need in order to flourish within the imaginary cultural and historical milieu we will have transmitted to them. James Sterba has already developed this argument in slightly different terms, insisting on the right of future people to receive the goods and resources necessary for their basic needs.³⁵ From our perspective, we can safely assume that future human beings will also need to be able to make sense of the world they live in. To enhance their understanding of the world that contributes to their well-being, they will be likely to assign constitutive value to elements of their milieu. Thus, transmitting to them a healthy and meaningful milieu will contribute not only to their basic survival, but also to their ability to flourish as human beings. In fact, to assign constitutive values to elements of our milieu might very well be part of what makes us human beings.

Furthermore, future people are likely to construct meaning on the foundations we are laying now. However, many of the worldviews and projects we are constructing now are not sustainable in the sense that they undermine the very conditions for their continuation. For instance, an economic project entirely reliant on fossil fuels is doomed to fall flat in a short-term future. Its meanings and symbols will collapse alongside the project and new meanings will need to be created and adopted. Such failure is not irrelevant, as it leaves social and cultural scars and can involve collateral damages such as social unrest and biodiversity loss. Thus, the sustainability of projects and worldviews we are inventing now is a forward-looking requirement.

Obviously, not all worldviews are equally sustainable. Worldviews rooted on abusive mechanisms such as racism and sexism are deemed to stir protests and social instability. Hence, an ethics centred on the transmission of a meaningful historical milieu rules out several types of unsustainable projects. As such, it constrains the actions of today's people in relation to future people. Finally, the high and irreducible complexity of our world's social and natural systems also urges us to follow a precautionary principle and preserve the highest diversity of sustainable elements of the milieu (at all levels, from biological diversity to the diversity of worldviews). Indeed, future people might understand similar elements of the milieu better or in other ways than us, and some of these elements may even become important conditions for their survival and flourishing as human beings (e.g., the potential of genetic diversity for the development of new medicine). Nonetheless, a more detailed discussion of what this ethics rules out and permits goes beyond the scope of this paper and deserves further investigations.

The three obstacles to the theorization of an ethics of sustainability concerning the future seem to be overcome by shifting the center of the argumentation from unknown, passive and biologically dependent not-yet-born people to the transmission of a signifying historical milieu. The turning point here is that if what matters is

³⁵ James Sterba, "The Welfare Rights of Distant People and Future Generations: Moral Side-Constraints on Social Policy," *Social Theory and Practice* 7, no. 1 (1981): 99–119.

the survival of ideal and material projects that present people lived (and sometimes died) for, then future generations have tremendous power over them. Who exactly these future people are matters less than their will to embrace, sustain, and evolve some of the ideals and projects left by past generations. This opens the door to a notion of relational ethics attached no longer to individual people, but to the relation living people maintain with their historical milieu.

VI. TOWARD RELATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Environmental ethics cannot be merely derived from the study of the environment as an entity separated, or at least independent, from us. Such an undertaking would reproduce the same critical mistakes as those made by the dualists when approaching the subject. The environment is not a simple physico-chemical receptacle for human existence and the flourishing of its civilizations, but it is a *lived* and *co-determined* milieu supporting our practices and usages. Yet, mainstream environmental economics and most environmental ethics focus on maintaining this dual structure, while adding the component of the environment as comprising externalities or limited objectified resources. As O'Neill writes, such an approach cannot answer the fundamental question addressed to our very way of life:

In public choices about the environment we express the kinds of relations to past and future we want as a society: the very assumptions of cost benefit analysis rule out proper expression of those values.³⁶

Environmental ethics cannot simply be an addition of ethics to the sciences of the environment, but it must be grounded on the relation itself, with this relation co-creating the milieu and the relational individual.³⁷ We are taking here a non-determinist perspective, a possibilist one, which then gives us the duty to protect the environment in virtue of the fact that we have the possibility (not the right) to destroy it. As we have the possibility, we thus have the choice and the freedom necessary for ethics.³⁸ The milieu itself then is "*not only physical, but moral as well*," as it is impregnated with human values; it has *constitutive* values. As Jean-Pierre Llored and Stéphane Sarrade conclude, "purely *environmental* ethics is therefore a chimera."³⁹

It is not possible to ground a medial ethic, or an ethic of the milieu, exclusively on the place, or on the milieu itself. If a logic of place can explain the processes of identification with a place (and thus regionalism and nationalism), it inherently carries the danger of absorbing the subject by denying its difference and relatively

³⁶ O'Neill, "Self, Time and Separability," p. 103.

³⁷ Berque, *Être humains sur la terre*, p. 79.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³⁹ Jean-Pierre Llored and Stéphane Sarrade, "Connecting the Philosophy of Chemistry, Green Chemistry, and Moral Philosophy," *Foundations of Chemistry* 17, no. 1 (2015): 25.

autonomous identity. Yet, the movement back to one's own self is also necessary, and this movement back to one's own subjectivity is the guarantee of consciousness and freedom. Berque coined the term *trajection*, expressing this movement of emergence, integrating our belongingness to the world with our subjectively conscious free agency.⁴⁰ As an element taking part in these never-ending cycles, the relational individual is entangled with responsibilities toward the milieu. In his book *Being Human on Earth*, Berque writes:

The trajective reason urges us . . . to recognize, consciously, that we have duties toward the places of our subjectivity (the body, society, the human species, the animality, the biosphere, the planet, etc.), these interlocked places from which our life and consciousness emerge; because they are the base and the necessary condition for this emergence.⁴¹

The logic of our medial duty is then to "commit ourselves consciously to respect all the beings of the milieu, as they are the necessary albeit not sufficient condition for the emergence of our own consciousness and freedom."⁴²

From this perspective, human development and environmental conservation do not stand in opposition. On the contrary, what we need to care for and maintain is the very relation that we have with our milieu, a relation we rely on to survive. Only a logic of exclusion destroying this vital link can lead to conclusions advocating the destruction of one of the terms of the equation; human beings *or* the environment.⁴³ The space of the Earth is holding together and linking the different heterogeneous elements sharing it. It is crucial then to recognize the fundamental value and fragility of this relation. Hence, as moral relational individuals we have a duty to acknowledge, maintain, and value this link that we are constantly building with our milieu.

VII. CONCLUSION

A solution to the obstacles related to the issues of temporal distance and future generations can be found in the continuity in time provided by performative narratives projected in the historical milieu. First, the difficulty related to the contingency of existence can be put aside because ethical value is no longer attached to particular not-yet-existent and potentially suffering individuals. Rather the value is attached to the significance of the historical milieu. From this viewpoint, the significance of the milieu has thus a constitutive value for the human beings inhabiting it. Second, the indeterminacy of needs seems to be of less importance in the short term. Indeed, human beings not only need a healthy chemico-physical environment, but

⁴⁰ Berque, *Être humains sur la terre*, pp. 171–73.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 174 (my translation).

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁴³ Couteau Pauline, "Watsuji Tetsuro, *Du milieu à l'éthique du milieu*," *Géographie et cultures*, no. 74 (Géographie et éthique, 2010): 111–23.

also a signifying milieu and a living cultural imaginary. Finally, my argument is in accordance with the symmetry view, according to which future generations have power over posthumous reputation and success or failure of our projects (children, conservation of our historical milieu, city, etc.).

In summary, on top of the preservation of a healthy environment, sustainability depends on the transmission of a living meaningful milieu. The significance of the milieu is relational. A convergence toward a relational ethics can be seen among Watsuji's perspective, ecofeminism, and cross-cultural environmental ethics.⁴⁴ The concepts of milieu, relational individual and constitutive value provide us with tools to continue to develop and reinforce a relational environmental ethics. In short, the focus of environmental ethics shifts toward a more relational framework. It leaves each of us with the essential question of how to act now as relational individuals contributing to co-create and transmit significance through the dynamic cycles of perception-action with the milieu.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Erin McCarthy, *Ethics Embodied, Rethinking Selfhood through Continental, Japanese, and Feminist Philosophies* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2010).