

Continuous Decentering— Sextus and Dōgen

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE “THIRD” ATTITUDE BESIDES DOGMATISM AND RELATIVISM

Some people might believe that the “truth” is available to them.¹ They might take a set of moral laws, scientific facts, or fundamental constituents of reality as true. They might rely, for instance, on the interpretation of a scripture by a religious community or on the latest statements of a scientific community. Other people might believe that there is no universal truth and that everyone has the right to take what appears to them as the truth; they might not feel the need to research how things appear to others and what arguments they have for it. However, these attitudes are not exhaustive. There is at least a “third” attitude available to people: those who do not want to ask science, religion, or any other institution or individual to deliver the truth nor do they want to give up researching alternative takes on how things appear. Today, I will analyze a set of related concepts that yields this “third” attitude.

The readers who are familiar with the ancient (second to third century CE) Greek philosopher and physician Sextus Empiricus might have recognized the above as a “rearrangement” of the beginning of Sextus’s *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (PH: *Pyrrōneioi Hypotypōseis*). It goes as follows:

In the case of philosophical investigations . . . some have said that they have discovered the truth (to alēthes), some have asserted that

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1 it cannot be apprehended, and others are still investigating.² (PH
2 I.2)

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4 Sextus explains that both those who believe to have found the truth and
5 those who are certain that it cannot be found have something in common:
6 they both stop searching. On the contrary, the “third group,” the Pyrrho-
7 nian Skeptics, to whom Sextus belongs, keep on searching, questioning,
8 investigating: (“zētousi hoi skeptikoi,” PH I.3)—*skepsis* means “inquiry,”
9 “investigation,” “research” in ancient Greek. As we will see, what he enjoins
10 his readers to investigate are assumptions and biases underlying opposed
11 or conflicting judgments (*antikeimenoī logoi*, or *makhomenoī logoi*, PH I.10)
12 about the nature of reality. When realizing that an opposed judgment can
13 be found to any ontological statement, we are not tempted to take any of
14 them as describing reality as it really is. A state of *ataraxia*—tranquility or
15 undisturbedness—might well accompany the continuous search for what
16 each view depends on. Such a search will engender a “decentering”—neither
17 our view nor any new view will be seen as “central” and absolutely true.
18 Decentering must be continuously performed. It is the remedy we have
19 for our innate tendency toward dogmatism (i.e., for putting ourselves in
20 the center of the picture and for believing that how we see things grants
21 us access to how things are for everyone).

22 In medieval Japan, the Zen Buddhist Dōgen (1200–1253) was also
23 convinced that one should make a continuous effort to becoming aware
24 of—and shedding—the fundamental hidden assumptions that color the
25 way we look at reality. This can be done by continuously contrasting our
26 assumptions with those human and nonhuman others who are different
27 from us. The enlightenment or awakening that might accompany this
28 continuous practice can be described as a temporary success in shedding
29 one’s prejudices. However, enlightenment is not the promise of a view
30 from nowhere nor a complete access to the nature of reality. In fact, as
31 he says in the *Genjōkōan*, “When one side is illuminated, the other side
32 is dark” (Tanahashi 1985, 70).³ When we shed light on something, we
33 inevitably leave something else in the dark: nobody can occupy the “cen-
34 ter” of the picture from where everything is clear. Dōgen adds a layer to
35 the practice of continuous decentering that is not present in Sextus. We
36 should not only aim to refrain from dogmatism while being undisturbed
37 by polarized disputes. We should also try to act responsibly while living
38 our positioned existence among many positioned others. By continuously
39 decentering our own position, we try to respond in a way attuned to the
40 human and nonhuman others with whom we are intertwined.

41 I will conduct an “intercultural dialogue” (Chakrabarti and Weber
42 2016, 5) with different texts and engage in the “constructive dimension”

of comparative philosophy (Connolly 2015, 40–44). More specifically, my method consists in appropriating conceptual tools offered by philosophers of different times and places and using them to formulate a concept—“continuous decentering”—which I recommend as a practice to my contemporaries in the twenty-first century. My tools come mainly from the Greek Skeptic Sextus and the Japanese Buddhist Dōgen. I will also refer to a few contemporary thinkers, such as the contemporary historian of science and philosopher Donna Haraway. Despite the comparative genesis of this concept, one might well say that it has a clear Buddhist ring to it. Decentering is an attitude that fits the core Buddhist concepts of *pratīyasamutpāda* (“co-dependent origination”), *śūnyatā* (“emptiness”) and *anātman* (“no-self”): nothing can have a “self” or hold a permanent, independent, and central place in a reality in which everything is the result of a continuous interplay of causes and conditions, each of them dependent on others for being temporally what it is. Moreover, every Buddhist school stresses the need for continuous practice in order to allow one to respond to the impermanent and codependent status of oneself and others.

“Continuous decentering” is the foundation of the “third” attitude—which does not accept any truth as absolute and does not give up on finding truth either. “Continuous decentering” involves the following aspects: situatedness, decentering, and continuous practice. I will concentrate on these three aspects and will only signal that continuous decentering provides the basis not only for a responsible search for shared truths and a greater understanding of complex topics but also for any interaction across differences, such as dialogues and other ways of relating to other beings with whom we share our world.

(1) The first of the three aspects that we will deal with is situatedness. The practice of continuous decentering starts, in fact, with developing the awareness of one’s own situatedness, which entails that everybody always looks at and experiences things from a certain position. This position depends on many factors among which perceptual apparatus, ways of life, values, social class, embodiment (gender, size, age, able-bodied or not), place, time (a certain century with its paradigms; a specific time with wars, or pandemics, economic growths, or political unrests), the aim of one’s research (e.g., prediction or social justice, conflict resolution or technological precision), the methodology of a certain discipline, including its assumptions, the arguments that are regarded as valid, and other factors.

(2) Next to our own situatedness, there is the situatedness of the object of our inquiry, or of another inquirer who studies our object (or us) from a different position. The recognition of everybody’s situatedness

1 and of the existence of different points of view leads to the second aspect:
2 decentering. It is the realization that we are not “at the center of the
3 universe”: we do not occupy a neutral position, do not possess a view
4 from nowhere or god’s-eye view. Once the other—be it a person, a text,
5 or a nonhuman being—is seen as a holder of a distinct situatedness with
6 the possibility of a different point of view, we might open ourselves to
7 them and possibly value the diversity of the other that can help us shed
8 light on spots that were previously in the dark for us.

9 (3) Recognition of situatedness and decentering are steps that need
10 to be continuously practiced. Continuous decentering consists in realiz-
11 ing both our situatedness and that of the other time and again: in each
12 situation we find ourselves—be it scientific research, a political decision,
13 or a dialogue across differences. Practicing this type of dynamic decen-
14 tering might be the only way to open a shared space in which we can
15 responsibly collaborate, research, cocreate a shared truth for the time
16 being, and live together.

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19 2. SITUATEDNESS

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21 As anticipated, Sextus introduces himself as part of a tradition—Pyrrhonian
22 Skeptics—that keeps investigating rather than accepting some truths (or
23 rejecting them all). What do they keep investigating? Their objects are
24 those truths that some people take as absolute and what those truths
25 depend on—concepts such as god, change, or cause (see PH, bk. 2 and
26 3). Sextus’s inquiry is a second-order inquiry (Palmer 2000, 366–368)
27 on different views of reality. It inquires about what situatedness—what
28 perceptual apparatus, way of life, circumstances, assumptions—such views
29 depend on. How are they investigating appearances? Theories and judg-
30 ments are not studied on their own but always contrasted with opposing
31 or conflicting judgments (*antikeimenoī logoi*, or *makhomenoī logoi*, I.10).
32 By setting things in opposition, (I.31–35), the situatedness of various
33 contenders to the truth is revealed, which prevents the researchers from
34 becoming dogmatic: they will not risk taking any view as the objective,
35 absolute, or neutral one.

36 In the course of the twentieth century and also in the twenty-first, the
37 realization of one’s situatedness has received more and more attention. We
38 acknowledge that our embodied interaction with our environment does
39 not only influence our concepts and our language (see Varela, Thompson,
40 and Rosch 1991; Varela 1999; Lakoff and Johnson 2008; Gallagher and
41 Bower 2014) but also our history, gender, class, discipline, and way of
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life have been shown to involve assumptions, selections, and reductions 1
that inform what we see and what we regard as true. In the second and 2
third centuries CE, Sextus discusses, among the various “tools” or argu- 3
ments that can help us refute dogmatism, the “Ten Modes” (*tropoi*) at 4
length. Each mode makes us aware of one of ten factors on which what 5
appears to us is dependent. I will here mention two of them. Mode 1: 6
the dependence of what appears to one on what kind of animal one is, 7
and mode 4: the specific circumstances one is in. 8

Mode 1 (PH. 1.40–78; chap. 14) shows that the sense impression 9
one has depends on what kind of animal one is. Some of the arguments 10
given focus on differences across the perceptual apparati. For instance, 11
if concave and convex mirrors alter the image they form, thus animals 12
with different shapes of eyes will see different things. Similar arguments 13
are given for the other senses (PH. 1.40–52; chap. 14) and thus “it is 14
probable that the external objects appear different owing to differences in 15
the structure of the animals which experience the sense-impression” (PH. 16
1.54). After this, Sextus illustrates different preferences and aversions of 17
different animals (PH. 1.55–78). He zooms in on the dog who seems to 18
have sharper perceptions than ours and displays virtues such as justice 19
and intelligence; which he analyses in internal, or private, reason (PH. 20
1.63–72) and external reason, or speech. If people think that animals 21
lack speech, it is because they do not understand what animals say (PH. 22
1.73–75). Thus, we have no reason to regard how things appear to us as 23
closer to the truth than how things appear to other animals (PH. 1.76–78). 24

Mode 4 (PH. 1.100–117) focuses on the “on the circumstantial condi- 25
tions” [*ho para tas peristaseis*], that is, our mental state, waking or 26
sleeping, age, motion or rest, but also “hatred or love . . . confidence 27
or fear, grief or joy” (PH. 1.100). Sextus argues (PH. 1.100–117) that 28
only if a judge would be in no condition whatsoever, they could decide 29
who, between two contestants, perceives the things as they are: “[B]ut 30
to say that he is in no condition whatsoever (i.e., neither healthy nor 31
sick, neither moving nor at rest, of no particular age, and free from the 32
other conditions) is perfectly incongruous” (PH. 1.112). There is no person 33
who is not in any condition whatsoever. And situatedness is not a flaw 34
that can be overcome; it is the inevitable starting point of any—human 35
or nonhuman—attempt to know one’s world. 36

Dōgen agrees with Sextus—different beings perceive differently and so 37
do humans in different kinds of situations. He explains that 38

[w]hen you sail out in a boat to the middle of an ocean where 40
no land is in sight, and view the four directions, the ocean looks 41

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1 circular, and does not look any other way. But the ocean is neither
2 round nor square, its features are an infinite variety. It is like a
3 palace, it is like a jewel.” (Tanahashi 1985, 71)

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5 Dōgen enjoins his audience to realize their positionality again and again.
6 Humans might see water as flowing (when looking at a river), or as a
7 circle (when sailing in the ocean), depending on circumstances. Appear-
8 ances are what we need to investigate. What appears to us as flowing
9 and clear, or as vast and circular, might be different from the perspective
10 of other beings: for example, for gods who see water from the sky, water
11 is glittering jewels; for beings who live in the water, it is a palace.

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13 All beings do not see mountains and waters in the same way.
14 Some beings see water as a jewelled ornament, but they do not
15 regard jewelled ornaments as water. What in the human realm
16 corresponds to their water? We only see their jewelled ornaments
17 as water. . . . Hungry ghosts see water as raging fire or pus and
18 blood. Dragons see water as a palace or as a pavilion. . . . Some
19 beings see water as a forest or as a wall . . . Thus the views of all
20 beings are not the same. You should question this matter now. Are
21 there many ways to see one thing, or is it a mistake to see many
22 forms as one thing? . . . it seems that there is water for various
23 beings but there is no original water—there is no water common
24 to all types of beings.” (Tanahashi 1985, 101–102)

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26 The *Mountains and Waters Sūtra* mentions new perspectives on water: for
27 hungry ghosts, who are traditionally punished in the Buddhist underworld,
28 water is disgusting blood and pus; for beings that cannot penetrate through
29 water, it is a wall. By studying other perspectives, we realize that water
30 is not simply flowing and that mountains might be walking. However,
31 we should never brag about our knowledge of various perspectives. In
32 fact, we also need to realize that we will never completely know water
33 or mountains and that we should continue searching. For instance, even
34 after realizing that certain beings might see water as a palace, we still
35 are in no position to say whether anything in their world corresponds
36 to our water—but perhaps a study of water should include the answer
37 to this question as well. No study of water could ever be definitive and
38 complete.

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40 Even if you see mountains as grass, trees, earth, rocks, or walls,
41 do not take this seriously or worry about it; it is not complete
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realization. Even if there is a moment when you view mountains as the seven treasures shining, this is not returning to the source. Even if you understand mountains as the realm where all buddhas practice, this understanding is not something to be attached to. Even if you have the highest understanding of mountains as all buddhas' inconceivable qualities, the truth is not only this. These are conditioned views. This is not the understanding of buddha ancestors, but just looking through a bamboo tube at a corner of the sky." (Tanahashi 1985, 99)

Our view—even if it is more sophisticated than the views of those who assume theirs is the universal one—is still the view of someone looking at the sky through a tube. Dōgen encourages us not to mistake what we see for the truth about the sky. Our situatedness is the starting point of our research and the place from which we need to open up.

The next step after recognizing our situatedness and the one of our interlocutor, or object of study, is “decentering”: an essential factor toward Sextus’s *ataraxia*, and Dōgen’s enlightenment or awakening.

3. DECENTERING

What does situatedness lead to? Donna Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledges” (“partial, locatable, critical knowledges” Haraway 1988, 584) might be seen as helpful to translate in contemporary terms both of Sextus’s modes, which highlight how different aspects of our situatedness influence what appear to us and Dōgen’s exploration of the situated views of ourselves and of other beings, as well as his call to continuously open up to new perspectives.

As Sextus did before her, Haraway does not think that relativism, total skepticism, or epistemological nihilism is the only alternative to dogmatism. There is a third way that takes the situatedness of every knowledge into account and forms a valid alternative to relativism, for those who do not accept “totalization in the ideologies of objectivity” or any kind of “god-tricks”:

The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology. Relativism is a way of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally. The ‘equality’ of positioning is a denial of responsibility and critical

1 enquiry. Relativism is the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the
2 ideologies of objectivity; both deny the stakes in location, embodi-
3 ment, and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well.
4 Relativism and totalization are both ‘god-tricks’ promising vision
5 from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully, common myths in
6 rhetorics surrounding science. But it is precisely in the politics and
7 epistemology of partial perspectives that the possibility of sustained,
8 rational, objective enquiry rests. (Haraway 1988, 584)

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10 The third way she sketches is a new objectivity that is different from
11 the modern one—that was what a dominant “dogmatic” group imposed
12 on others, after deciding that what they saw and selected was what
13 everybody else saw, should have seen or should have regarded as abso-
14 lutely true. Whereas relativism, just like “dogmatism,” is also founded on
15 nonpositioned claims, Haraway’s new objectivity is continuously created
16 in conversation with others.

17 Sextus’s inquiry into situatedness can cure the inquirer from dogmati-
18 cally accepting any truth. Garfield (1990, 295) describes Sextus’s project
19 as therapeutic and compares it to the projects of the Buddha, Nāgārjuna,
20 and Wittgenstein, who attempt to “to cure the philosopher” from the
21 misconception that “underlying any reasonable practice must be some
22 set of certain propositions, and that underlying those propositions must
23 be some convention-independent, ontologically given reality.”

24 When opposing claims result grounded in different starting points,
25 what follows is not despair and acceptance of relativism or epistemo-
26 logical nihilism but *ataraxia*: “tranquillity” (Annas and Barnes 2000) or
27 “undisturbedness” (Woodruff 2010, 212). If the therapy is successful, the
28 philosopher will look calmly at colleagues involved in heated discussions
29 geared to convince others of the truths of one’s claim, undisturbed by
30 the wish to promote any view as the absolute truth. Tranquilly results
31 from the acceptance that nobody is in the center and that the view from
32 nowhere is not available, thus nobody should exhaust themselves by
33 looking for it. And yet, inquiry is meaningful and needed every time we
34 are confronted with a new claim and needs to find out how that claim
35 was reached. *Ataraxia* would not emerge if the impossibility to find abso-
36 lute truth entailed the acceptance of relativism. Sextus, before Haraway,
37 refused to translate awareness of situatedness into relativism. Relativism
38 just levels all claims to truth and is not interested in researching any
39 claim. Whether a claim is published in a peer-reviewed journal or on
40 someone’s blog, it does not matter. Such an approach gives up hope for
41 critical inquiry and for conversations and collaborations across differences.
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On the contrary, looking for situatedness enjoins one to delve deeply 1
into what any claim rests upon, how the conclusion is reached, and what 2
are the arguments, the disciplinary methodology, the assumptions, the 3
assessment criteria, etc. Ideally, a conversation across differences—say, an 4
interdisciplinary collaboration—is preceded by this kind of inquiry done by 5
both conversation partners. This inquiry allows both to “decenter,” having 6
realized how they both are situated. Decentering makes them ready to 7
listen to one another and to look for common ground, common values, 8
a new solution to a problem, or a deeper understanding of a complex 9
matter. Decentering allows different parties to create a space for shared 10
conversations and cocreation. Haraway 2016 calls this “staying with the 11
trouble”—the trouble is to be found time and again in the complex and 12
unrepeatable situation one finds oneself in at any given moment. Sextus 13
enjoins us to continuously stay with the appearances as they are at each 14
moment as we will see when tackling the third factor: continuous practice. 15

But first we need to delve into the relation, in Dōgen’s thought, between 16
situatedness and decentering. As we have seen, Dōgen’s invitation to 17
become aware of our situatedness involves the study of other perspectives. 18
Water might appear to be flowing if we watch from the shore, or like a 19
circle if we are in the middle of the sea—and yet it looks very different 20
to fish and gods. The realization of our partial view belongs, for Dōgen, 21
to a constant effort in decentering. Decentering happens when we “let go” 22
of the habit of putting our “self” and our views at the center of reality, 23
believing that our views are true. Decentering also involves letting go of 24
the habit of imposing our views on others. In other words, decentering 25
happens when we let go of our “I”: whatever we identify with and see 26
as occupying the center of our world. 27

To study the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is 29
to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad 30
things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as 31
well as the body and mind of others drop away. No trace of real- 32
ization remains, and this no trace continues endlessly. (Tanahashi 33
1985, 70) 34

The self that Buddhism rejects is the “I,” the subject that believes to 36
be at the “center” of reality. Independent from it, permanent, and well 37
equipped to understand and study or utilize everything else, which is 38
seen as a mere object, with no perspective of its own. The self is one’s 39
egocentric intentionality, the intentional arc (Merleau-Ponty 1958, 157) or 40
the karmatic charge of one’s volitions and ignorance that we constantly 41
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1 project onto the world around us, which we cocreate in doing so (see
2 Mackenzie 2013). Forgetting the self, and dropping the mind and body
3 distinction—as well as the “I” and other distinctions—is the only way to
4 open up to reality rather than imposing our structure on it. Davis inter-
5 prets this passage and Dōgen’s call to learn to forget the self as follows:
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7 The self is a participant in the dynamically interconnected matrix of
8 the world. Delusion occurs when the self egoistically posits itself as
9 the single fixed center—rather than existing as one among infinitely
10 many mutually reflective and expressive focal points—of the whole.
11 (2001, 354)
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13 The exploration of other ways of being positioned and other takes on
14 reality helps this “letting go”—in the knowledge that we will never be
15 able to become aware of all possible points of view and yet that we can
16 stay open to new ways of perceiving and being.

17 Dōgen’s project of studying and forgetting the self, so as to be able to
18 encounter the other as much as possible on their own terms, can also be
19 described as the nonduality of practice and enlightenment. The point is
20 not to falsify any perspective but to reveal the context that validates them
21 while at the same time limiting its validity. Realization of situatedness
22 and partial view—sometimes called “delusion” in Buddhist terms—is a
23 sign of enlightenment. Kim quotes the *Genjōkōan*:
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25 When the Dharma [Buddhist teaching] does not yet completely fill
26 your body-mind, you think that it is already sufficient. When the
27 Dharma fills your body-mind, you think that something is miss-
28 ing” and comments “Paradoxically, the more deeply one grows in
29 enlightenment, the more clearly one discerns one’s own frailties and
30 limitations. Expand your horizon from the personal to the social to
31 the cosmic, and you will find yourself inextricably intertwined with
32 all beings—all propelled by “the vast and giddy karmic conscious-
33 ness” (gosshiki bōbō, bōbō gosshiki). (2007, 5)
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35 Another way of putting it is that enlightenment is “ever intimate” (Jpn.
36 *shinzō*) with delusion: negotiating delusion and constantly illuminating
37 it (Kim 2007, 3–4). Enlightenment sheds light on delusion or situated
38 knowledge rather than destroying it. The real game changer, according
39 to Dōgen, is being able to recognize one’s own world-making perspective
40 and being able to shed it when responding to a certain situation.

41 Another way to approach delusion or situated knowledge is to regard
42 it as our characteristic dim-sightedness that should *not* be seen as a sick-

ness, which, if cured, allows one to access absolute truth: absolute truth is inaccessible. And yet “relativism” or “anything goes” is not the result. In fact, the difference between truth and falsehood should not be erased, and the fact that an enlightened person is nevertheless deluded does not mean that it is okay to mistake one’s son for a thief: “‘nevertheless deluded’ is not the same as mistaking a thief for one’s son or one’s son for a thief” (Dōgen quoted in Kim 2007, 5). The difference in perspectives should always be looked into, and the different claims should be put in conversation with each other. Dim-sightedness is not sickness or falsehood, it is our “situated knowledge” and our entrance to the project of decentering and enlightenment. Kim quotes Dōgen’s fascicle *Kūge*:

Never foolishly misconstrue dim-sightedness as falsehood and thereby look for truth outside of it. . . . Because enlightenment is rooted in dim-sightedness, all things that constitute enlightenment are invariably adorned with dim-sightedness. (2007, 17–18)

Kim interprets it as a refutation of the representational view of knowledge, which presupposes reality as independent from knowledge and presupposes the possibility for knowledge to capture it completely from the outside. Our original dim-sightedness is our methodological and hermeneutic base of operation. Seeing flowers in the sky or “illusory flowers” (Jap. *kūge*) is not caused by sickness; on the contrary, thanks to our dim-sightedness we can realize the “flower of emptiness” (Jap. *kūge*). Dim-sightedness can be lived inauthentically (Kim 2007, 17–18) by those who try to occupy the view from nowhere or authentically by those who understand it as part and parcel of being interwoven in a network of “emptiness”: one where nothing occupies a central or independent place. If dim-sightedness results in decentering, then it is the key to enlightenment.

Noé (1995), in his attempt to sketch a “third way” between universalism and relativism, suggests taking ethnocentrism—which can be seen as a version of Dōgen’s and Kim’s dim-sightedness—as a starting point toward a cross-cultural dialogue in that it implies the search for common ground—which he sees as an endless task. Once one is aware of their position, one can open up to different cultures (Noé 1995, 49) and look for “meeting points” rather than for absolute truths, or for what I call “universals for the time being.” Decentering is key to this project, which Noé describes as the continuous search for “cultural universals” and the “endless tasks imposed on us as historical beings” (1995, 50).

In the same vein, Dōgen’s enlightenment does not manifest itself as a static awareness of or tolerance for other views: the decentering that the recognition of other views brings about translates itself in action. This

1 action is a response that is attuned to a specific situation and that is
2 founded on having found our situatedness and the situatedness of other
3 beings, including what factors they depend on. We “should study the
4 green mountains, using numerous worlds as your standards” (Tanahashi
5 1985, 98). Each of the beings we encounter and each of their worlds
6 and their inherent standards do not disqualify the beings who inhabit
7 these worlds. Using numerous worlds as our standards we can engage
8 with them as much as possible on their terms.

9 Enlightenment consists in letting things manifest themselves in their
10 own way and responding to them in an attuned, noninstrumental, non-
11 objectifying way. In this, Dōgen’s “enlightenment” or “awakening” differs
12 from Sextus’s *ataraxia*: a peace of mind that seems to be relevant only
13 to the subject who attains it. Dōgen’s “enlightenment” does also involve
14 one being able to respond to the world around them in a nonegocentric
15 or biased way.

16 Dōgen, in his *Instruction for the Tenzo* (the head cook) calls this “turning
17 things while being turned by things.” Situatedness and decentering yield
18 the possibility of cocreating reality rather than having one imposing their
19 own reality on the other. Parkes explains this logic, according to which,
20 even when cooking, we need to decenter and “listen” to the points of
21 view of utensils and ingredients:

22
23 Put what is suited to a high place in a high place, and what belongs
24 in a low place in a low place. Those things in a high place will be
25 settled there; those suited to a low place will be settled there.’ This
26 is the key point: in a well-ordered kitchen the order doesn’t derive
27 from a plan in the head of the cook, but rather from our paying
28 attention to suitabilities suggested by the things themselves. This
29 allows us to situate the utensils so they’re ‘settled’ there, and thus
30 less likely to fall down or get damaged. When it comes to cooking,
31 Dōgen calls the creative handling of utensils and ingredients ‘turning
32 things while being turned by things.’ We need a sense both for how
33 things are turning so that we can align ourselves aright, and for how
34 our turning is in turn affecting what is going on. Optimally, through
35 it all, there’s an unforced interplay among hands, implements and
36 ingredients. (Parkes 2020, 175)

37
38 Partners in an encounter cocreate reality when they respond to any
39 situation in which any kind of “other” sends off a “call” and the one
40 responds and vice versa (Kopf 2015). There is a deep analogy between
41 responding to a situation rather than imposing one’s intentionality while
42 treating everything as one’s object and entering into a dialogue with



the other seen as another subject. The other is not necessarily a human being—it can be the fish of the *Mountain and Water Sūtra* that sees water differently. Or it can be an ingredient or a utensil in our kitchen that needs to be responded to without superimposing our wishes on it. Decentering involves the training in taking any other perspective seriously, not by regarding it as equal to any other but by investigating how things look from that perspective and how that perspective came about. This research, which involves “granting the status of agent/actor to the ‘objects’ of the world” (Haraway 1987, 593) turns out fundamental when responding to others, including what we might want to regard as mere “objects” of the world, rather than agents or actors, such as animals, mountains, waters, and cooking ingredients.

Haraway (2016, 9–29), by describing the formation of a community of diverse humans and pigeons, gives us an example of the need for situating oneself and decentering when preparing for interaction across different species. After mentioning very different ways pigeons are not only devalued, but also valued (e.g., for their navigation and face-recognition capacities),⁴ Haraway focuses on the multispecies interactions⁵ that occurred in a project designed to map out levels of pollution⁶ in a certain area. The project, which involved very extensive dialogues and collaborations across disciplines, ways of life, and species could not even start without recognition of situatedness and decentering by everyone involved.

The artist-researchers and the pigeon fanciers had to render each other capable of mutual trust so that they could ask the birds for their confidence and skill. That meant lots of fitting sessions and pigeon balance training in lofts and lots of learning to learn with a generous and knowledgeable pigeon fancier, Bob Matsuyama, who was also a middle school shop and science teacher, and his talented and educated fliers. The pigeons were not sim cards; they were living coproducers, and the artist-researchers and pigeons had to learn to interact and to train together with the mentoring of the men of the pigeon fancy. All the players rendered each other capable; they “became-with” each other in speculative fabulation. Many trials and test flights later, the multispecies team was ready to trace the air in string figure patterns of electronic tracks. (22)

Recognizing different points of view—in this case, on pigeons—decenters us and shows us that what a pigeon looks like to us is only what our situatedness has allowed us to see until now. This decentering can lead to a next step in which a “dialogue” can start, not only between



1 humans and pigeons, but between activists, computer scientists, pigeon
2 fanciers, artists, and so on. Training and practicing interactions across
3 diversity cannot be done without continuing to recognize situatedness
4 and training decentering.

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7 4. CONTINUOUS PRACTICE

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9 Obviously, the experience of seeing water or mountains differently and of
10 getting involved in multispecies interaction will not be the end of one's
11 journey of decentering. In fact, the practice of decentering and respond-
12 ing needs to be continuous. Pyrrhonian Skepticism is an *agōgē*: a way
13 of doing research and of living. "This Greek word signifies 'conduct' in
14 every sense of the term: the directing of an army, the conduct of political
15 affairs, the manner of conducting one's life, the manner of conducting a
16 piece of reasoning or intellectual research" (Pellegrin 2010, 124). Whereas
17 accepting a doctrine as true can be done once and for all, skepticism as
18 a way of life involves practices that must continually be reenacted to try
19 to understand things on their own terms and by being open to them as
20 opposed to encountering them through the lenses of our interests, way
21 of life, embodiment, etc.

22 As Woodruff (2010, 210) suggests, Pyrrhonian Sceptics do not only
23 apply their method to others in order to expose their situatedness, but
24 they might apply one of the therapeutic modes (e.g., of the ten modes,
25 see above) to themselves in order to "resist . . . felt temptations to dog-
26 matize" (2010, 212). His philosophy is to be understood as a medicine.
27 Sextus compares his tools to "purgative drugs" that "do not merely drain
28 the humours from the body but drive themselves out too along with
29 the humours" (PH I.206). If someone suffers from getting so attached
30 to a view as to take it as truth, Sextus's tools help them get rid of the
31 attachment. However, just as the medicine is not supposed to get stuck
32 in one's digestive system forever so the tools are not there to be taken
33 for the absolute truth. Rather, any tool or strategy toward decentering
34 is taken up if it can provide a cure from dogmatizing *in a specific situa-*
35 *tion*—without commitment to any underlying reality or universal method.
36 In the same way the skeptic might well infer fire from smoke, their reason-
37 ing being the following: "Relying on my past experience, it seems to
38 me that what has struck me as smoke is a sign of what has struck me as
39 fire" (PH II.102). The tool and the act of decentering are always related
40 to a specific situation. Whereas the specific situation can be similar to
41 past ones that inform our behavior as in the case of seeing smoke, each
42 situation is still unique. The skeptic needs to look at each situation "in

the now” on its own terms, refraining as much as possible from getting 1
stuck in universal rules or stereotypes. Sextus makes it clear that the 2
inquiry never stops: by stressing that the skeptics “report descriptively on 3
each item according to how it appears to us at the time” (PH I.4; “at the 4
time” translates “*kata to nun*”: lit. “in the now”), Sextus encourages us to 5
conduct our inquiry, again and again, in every new situation. He justifies 6
this continuous effort we must make by stressing that our situation and 7
the appearances that we might be inclined to take as the truth change 8
continuously. If we stop inquiring we will start dogmatizing. 9

Dōgen insists particularly on the need for “continuous practice” (Jpn. 10
gyōji) (Davis 2011, 358). Continuous practice means continuously shed- 11
ding our perspective and “studying the moment when water sees water” 12
(Tanahashi 1985, 101)—which, as we know, does not mean acquiring a 13
definitive understanding of water, since “when one side is illuminated, 14
the other side is dark” (Tanahashi 1985, 70). The continuous practice of 15
decentering is a continuous practice of humility. Humbly aware of our 16
positioned and limited view, we know, on the one hand, that it can never 17
be totally transcended and, on the other, that it is the only place we have 18
to open ourselves to others, to enter into dialogue, and to respond to them. 19

Dōgen’s nonduality of practice and enlightenment means that enlighten- 20
ment can be seen as an endless process of attuning oneself to the world 21
(e.g., Kopf 2001, 64: “dissolving the subject on favour of Merleau-Ponty’s 22
co-existence, Nagatomo’s *co-habitation*, the traditional Buddhist conception 23
of *co-dependent origination*”; Nagatomo 1992, 153: attunement as felt 24
interresonance). Dōgen is fully aware that there is no end to this process: 25
“When dharma does not fill your whole body and mind, you think it is 26
already sufficient. When dharma fills your body and mind, you understand 27
that something is missing” (Tanahashi 1985, 71). “Enlightenment is not 28
a static and omniscient view from nowhere but rather an endless path 29
of illuminating the innumerable aspects of reality, an ongoing journey 30
of appreciating the inexhaustible virtues of things” (Davis 2011, 253). 31
Enlightenment manifests itself as ceaseless questioning: it is a continuous 32
striving to “see things as they are,” knowing that seeing things as they 33
are is never entirely realizable. In fact, “those who have great realization 34
of delusion are buddhas; those who are greatly deluded about realization 35
are sentient beings” (Tanahashi 1985, 69). 36

5. CONCLUSION—CONTINUOUS DECENTERING 39

Both Dōgen and Sextus send us a wake-up call. We are embodied, tied 41
to a certain perspective and to certain sizes and times that we can grasp 42

1 and make sense of and others that we are blind to. How to respond
2 to our situatedness and epistemological limitations? Their call is to a
3 continuous practice of situatedness—both of our claims and beliefs and
4 those of others. Realizing our situatedness and that of others leads to a
5 decentering that is never definitive. It is a realization that needs to be
6 continuously reenacted. In each situation, we are encouraged to continue
7 on with the inquiry and to never be swayed by conflicting claims and to
8 never stop searching for shared truths. The significance of the practice of
9 continuous decentering is rooted in our natural tendency to “to dogmatize
10 like infallible popes” (James 1896): to believe what appears to us and
11 mistake it for the truth. Continuous decentering is the ongoing attempt
12 to examine and reassess personal beliefs, societal customs, disciplinary
13 assumptions, provisional truths, and anything else that we tend to take
14 as the truth. By continuous decentering and inquiry into other situated-
15 ness and noting the resulting views, we will pave the way for dialogue
16 across differences, with responses attuned to the beings around us, and
17 thus cocreation of our world.

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20 NOTES

21

- 22 1. I would like to thank all students of my course “Senior Philosophy Seminar:
23 Dōgen in Dialogue with Contemporary Theorists, against Arrogance of Common
24 Sense,” held at University College Utrecht in the Spring 2021 semester, for
25 bringing their unique questions and sharing their insights on our readings
26 about decentering; Or Shahaf for our discussions on this topic, prompted by
27 his reflections on decentering reflected in his excellent BA thesis “Ecoalienation.
28 Practicing Ecology in Zen, the Andes, and your House”; Gereon Kopf, who
29 on a train in the mountains of Tōhoku, made me realize the importance—to
30 Dōgen’s project—of removing oneself from the center. A lecture based on
31 this article can be found here: <https://youtu.be/jNupHhxcVM>.
- 32 2. All translations from PH are Annas and Barnes (Sextus 2000).
- 33 3. All translations of Dōgen are by Tanahashi (1985).
- 34 4. “Called ‘rats with wings,’ feral pigeons are subjects of vituperation and
35 extermination, but they also become cherished opportunistic companions who
36 are fed and watched avidly all over the world. Domestic rock doves have
37 worked as spies carrying messages, racing birds, fancy pigeons at fairs and
38 bird markets, food for working families, psychological test subjects, Darwin’s
39 interlocutors on the power of artificial selection, and more” (Haraway 2016,
40 15–16). “Pigeons pick out different people in photographs very well too,
41 and in Professor Shigeru Watanabe’s Laboratory of Comparative Cognitive
42 Neuroscience at Keio University, pigeons could tell the difference between



- paintings by Monet or Picasso, and even generalize to discriminate unfamiliar paintings from different styles and schools by various painters” (Haraway 2016, 19).
5. “PigeonBlog required extensive collaboration between ‘homing pigeons, artists, engineers, and pigeon fanciers engaged in a grass-roots scientific data gathering initiative designed to collect and distribute information about air quality conditions to the general public’” (Haraway 2016, 21).
 6. “Air pollution is legendary in Southern California, especially Los Angeles County, and it impacts the health of people and other critters especially fiercely near highways, power plants, and refineries. These sites often cluster in and near the neighborhoods of working-class people, people of color, and immigrants—hardly mutually exclusive categories. . . . Properly equipped racing pigeons can gather continuous real-time air pollution data while moving through the air at key heights not accessible to the official instruments, as well as from the ground where they are released for their homing flights. These data could also be streamed in real time to the public via the Internet” (Haraway 2016, 21).

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