

# Decentring with Dōgen.

To encounter the Other, across Neurotypes.

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## Abstract

In this paper, I formulate a concept of decentring — as a “universal for this time and place” — in dialogue with the Japanese mediaeval philosopher Dōgen and autism scholars. I argue that decentring is needed when entering in dialogue or collaboration across differences, especially in the context of an encounter between a neurodiverse person on the autistic spectrum (AS) and a so-called neurotypical (NT).

I make suggestions about what may hinder or help both NT and AS towards decentring, through Dōgen’s frameworks of dependent origination and of “being in a place”, together with the “double empathy problem” and the concept of blindness to styles of movement, developed in the context of studies on autism. I first argue (Thesis 1) that NT might resist decentring vis-à-vis AS; and that (Thesis 2) AS might have advantages at decentring, some shared with other minorities and some more specific. NT might resist trying to “see as the other sees”, feel entitled to objectify AS, and attribute stereotypical characteristics to them. AS, because of their weaker filters, or permeable skins, might have epistemological and neurological advantages towards decentring: centring one’s place and opening up to others. However, there are also contexts that trigger AS to close off from their context rather than opening up. From the perspective of dependent origination, when two people interact (or fail to interact), not only their tendencies, but also the whole context needs to be taken into account.

I then argue (Thesis 3) that both AS and NT might profit from bodymind practices that help decentring vis-à-vis each other. This might allow them to develop the capacity for creative response and attunement to reality, which involves taking responsibility for the co-creation of each other and their world. The goal is to flourish together in a community in which diversity is not only accepted, not only valued in theory, but practised every day.

**Keywords:** Decentring, Dependent Origination, Dōgen, Autism, Bodymind practices.

## 1. *Preliminary Considerations, Positioning and Explanation of the Project*

In dialogue with the Japanese mediaeval philosopher Dōgen, autism scholars, and other thinkers, I formulate a conception of *decentring*, preliminarily defined as *continuously practising to leave the centre spot to someone else at the right time, while staying*

*present in the place that one shares with them, listening to them and seeing from their eyes.* I argue that *decentring* is needed when meeting or collaborating across differences, for instance when looking for new ways of living together, in a community that invests in its diversity in order to flourish.

I see it as one of my tasks as a philosopher to devise concepts that can shed light on contemporary predicaments, re-frame our reflections on habits or beliefs, and sometimes recommend practices or changes. In order to develop concepts that can help navigate and flourish a diverse world, I deem it necessary to learn frameworks developed by people with different experiences from what we might regard central, normal or mainstream. Learning new frameworks cultivates our imagination and enlarges our conceptual toolbox so that we can cross the boundaries of our echo chambers and enter in intercultural dialogue and dialogues across differences, to co-create new conceptual tools and frameworks that suit a specific context and facilitate further collaborations. (Robbiano 2023, 6) The new concepts that emerge from such dialogues should be seen as the result of specific co-creations, not as universals that had always been underlying each and every different individual experience, and that only now have been discovered. Such alleged eternal or absolute universals are a kind of universals that I, as other people engaged in intercultural philosophy and dialogues, am very suspicious of. They are usually the kind of universals that philosophers from a dominant tradition claim to have discovered on their own or together with people within the same tradition, and that they present as objective and true or valid for everyone, thus something that they are entitled to impose on others. The same attitude brings people who regard themselves as “normal” to universalize their ways of experiencing or valuing, and to impose them as the norm for everybody else. They assume either that everybody experiences things as they do, or that those who experience things differently are worse than them: wrong, less intelligent, less modernised, or in need to learn how to behave “normally” or to think “rationally,” that is, as the dominant group does.

Two different kinds of universals that I regard as fruitful to engage with are: “cultural universals” (Noe 1995), or “situated universals” (Warren 2000); and what I call “universals for this time and place.”

Situated or cultural universals are part of the frameworks or templates that shape the narratives of people who share a certain culture or belong to a certain community<sup>1</sup> — for instance, as someone whose intersectional identity involves being a citizen of a country, having a certain gender, a certain sexual and ethnic identity, believing in a certain religion, being a scientist or scholar in a certain discipline, and a person somewhere on a neurodiversity or physical ability spectrum. Cultural universals might well be hidden to us, but they shape our identity<sup>2</sup>, our beliefs, values, and experiences. It is fundamental towards decentring to become aware that the universals that shape our experiences, sense of identity, behaviours, and value judgments are a *plurality of cultural or situated* universals, coming from the various communities to which we belong — not absolute universals. This awareness enables us to welcome others whose universals, experiences and values are different. In this paper, I will use the labels “neurodiverse person on the autistic spectrum” or “autistic person”<sup>3</sup>(AS) and “neurotypical”<sup>4</sup> (NT), in full awareness that such labels could be misunderstood as pointers to a universal essence shared by all people labelled AS or NT<sup>5</sup>. Whilst I do *not* believe in the existence of such essences that entail that a person

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<sup>1</sup> “The story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity [...]” (MacIntyre 1981, 205–206)

<sup>2</sup> This is the kind of personal identity that does not remain the same during one’s life, but that can change. It is the “narrative self” or narrative identity (MacIntyre 1981, Ricoeur 1991; Dennett 1992; Schechtman 1996), to be distinguished from the “minimal self” (Zahavi 2014, who refers to Sartre’s “ipseity”), or self-reflexivity, which is the condition for developing a narrative identity. See Ricoeur (1991, 80) for the importance of distinguishing two senses of identity — ipseity and sameness. He argues that when we realize that we are not what we believed to be, we lose our identity as sameness; however, our ipseity, what can ask the question “Who am I?,” is still intact. By being endowed with ipseity, we can change our narrative identity.

<sup>3</sup> In using the terms ‘autistic’ or ‘autistic person,’ I follow Milton (2012b, 2): “The descriptors of ‘autistic person/people’ and ‘autistic spectrum’ will be used, and the use of the terms Autistic Spectrum Disorder/Condition (ASD/ASC) avoided due to the ‘medical model’ connotations[...] associated with these phrases and the offense that they may cause.” Some of the literature I refer to refers to Asperger syndrome, which was often used before 2013 to refer to what is sometimes called high-functioning autism, and now diagnosed as “Autism Spectrum Disorder, Level 1.” For those new to autism, I recommend this page by novelist Katherine May, to start exploring it: <https://katherine-may.co.uk/autism-resource-page>.

<sup>4</sup> I follow Timpe (2022), among others, in referring to people who are not neurodiverse as neurotypicals.

<sup>5</sup> For an insightful discussion of the roles played by diagnostic labels in different contexts, see Werkhoven, Anderson, Robeyns (2022).

For a clear overview of many debates surrounding what autism is and how society should respond to it, see Hens, Robeyns, and Schaubroeck (2018).

can be described as separate from their context and history, and whilst I appreciate the intersectionality of our multiple identities that make each of us unique, I also believe that labels might be useful<sup>6</sup>. When we reflect on who we are, for instance when facing an important choice or planning, a new label can be momentous in offering us a new template to make sense of our experience and identity. New templates can help us both to re-assess and possibly redirect the course of our lives (Schechtman 2015), and to not universalize our ‘old’ templates. Getting to know new templates and new labels, such as “neurodivergent” or “autistic,” might help recognize and reflect, for instance, on different tendencies in self and others in relating to one’s place and to others — differences in sensory sensitivity, executive function, emotion management and empathy, in styles of movement, learning styles, capacities, and strengths. Awareness of different frameworks and templates should lead to the realization that there is no universal framework that anyone can impose on others: no “normal” template everybody should adopt to look at themselves and make their choices towards “success” or “happiness.” A label pointing at a certain community to which one might belong, and the frameworks it offers, should neither encourage identity politics or bubble formations, nor prevent the recognition that similar tendencies and templates can have different manifestations in different contexts and situations — on the contrary, they are meant to make us appreciate and value the input of, and the dialogue with, different people. Even if it is not neurotypes, traditions, religions, or socio-economic classes that encounter each other, but unique individuals, knowledge of different frameworks and labels might well help navigate encounters across differences: not because they correspond to anything universal, but as tools or bridges. They allow us to recognize how unique and profoundly different everybody is — starting from recognizing that different cultural or situated universals might underlie our experiences and the stories we tell about ourselves. This recognition is the first step towards decentring: towards

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<sup>6</sup> I would like to thank Martha Gabriela Sánchez Martínez for her questions about the ontological status of what I call the “autistic person” and the “neurotypical,” which resulted in these reflections.

encountering each other, listening to each other, taking each other seriously, and then practising to enter in dialogue with each other.

Another kind of universals that are fruitful to engage with are what I call “universals for this time and place”<sup>7</sup>: universals that are the possible *outcome* of a real dialogue. As opposed to relativism — which might cause indifference to what others think or experience —, the shared will to find common ground leads to dialogues and co-creation of new, shared universals: new frameworks, goals or values through which people try to re-think their predicaments together. We do not carry out dialogues across differences, in order to discover the universal essence of autism, of philosophy, of dialogue... or of decentring, as the universal solution to all forms of discrimination, or as the universal practice that all people across different traditions and neurotypes should engage in at all times and in all places. Co-created “universals for this time and place” are the expression of a joint task and of the shared desire to create a better world — neither a discovery of something eternal nor a final destination<sup>8</sup>.

I will try to show that my concept of *decentring* — created in dialogue with Dōgen, autism experts and other thinkers — is such a “universal for this time and place”, one that might help with contemporary predicaments such as paternalism, gaslighting and discrimination towards minorities, and, in general, with the incapacity to enter in dialogue across difference.

Decentring involves the capacity to stay present and leave the centre spot to someone else. Think, for instance of a teacher who models themselves after a skilled host: they know when to leave the floor to a student, letting them take on the host’s role; they become the guest of the student and listen to them<sup>9</sup>. Decentring can be as simple as refraining from putting one’s bag on the next seat on a train. By holding one’s bag on one’s lap, one can welcome the incoming passengers to sit, creating space for them,

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<sup>7</sup> In Robbiano (2022), I describe continuous decentring and dialogue across differences in continuous search for “universals for the time being,” as the alternative attitude both to universalism and to relativism.

<sup>8</sup> I am very grateful to Fabrizio Giordano, Enrico Fongaro, Li-fan Lee, Tatsuya Murayama, Martha Gabriela Sánchez Martínez and Paul Ziche, in dialogue with whom I further developed this notion.

<sup>9</sup> Bret Davis’ questions in personal communication, and his references (2017) to Huayan and Zen’s dialectic of hosts and guests helped me articulate my notion of decentring.

expressing appreciation of their needs<sup>10</sup>. Decentring also involves realising that there is no neutral way to be in a place: placing my bag on the seat or holding my bag; looking at other passengers or pretending not to see them — no option is neutral: they are all ways to relate to the place we share with others, in different, non-neutral ways. Most of the time, decentring is harder than holding one's bag — throughout this paper, I will develop this concept and make some recommendations.

One might wonder if my appeal to decentre is compatible with appeals to “centre,” ground or root ourselves, act from some central point or barycentre in our body, centre oneself with breath etc, which one might be familiar with from meditation, martial arts, or management<sup>11</sup>. What others may call “centring”, I describe as “finding oneself in a place.” This means realising to be “here”: connected to the place we inhabit, as embodied beings. Decentring is not only *compatible* with finding oneself in a place: finding oneself in a place and realising that we share it with others, is *fundamental* to decentring.

I will here focus on the role of decentring in encountering the other, across neurotypes, that is, in the context of a dialogue or collaboration between a neurodiverse person on the autistic spectrum or autistic person (AS) and a so-called neurotypical (NT). I will suggest how decentring could help both in communicating and co-creating across their differences.

While I primarily approach the concept of decentring as a philosopher, I also approach it as someone who wants to help themselves and others navigate their everyday encounters across differences in neurological characteristics and functioning<sup>12</sup>. I do not have a formal diagnosis, but some of my everyday experiences

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. the concept of “access intimacy”, developed by described by Mia Mingus, writer, educator and trainer for transformative and disability justice, as “that feeling when someone else “gets” your access needs” (2011) and as “interdependence in action [since] [...]it reframes both how and where solidarity can be practiced.” (2017) I thank Konstantina Georgelou for referring me to this concept.

<sup>11</sup> I am grateful to Peter Hershock and Yuki Imoto for suggesting I clarify this point.

<sup>12</sup> Timpe (2022, 159): “There’s no single accepted definition of what neurodiversity is. For present purposes, it can be thought of as ‘a cluster of claims and an associated movement contending that a variety of conditions currently classified as psychiatric disorders [or cognitive disability] are in fact normal-range differences in mental functioning caused by normal variations in brain wiring’ (Wakefield, Wasserman, and Conrad 2020, 502).”

suggest the autism spectrum. I have sensory issues — lights, sounds, and tight clothes can be painful. I find it difficult to process spatial-motor information, e.g. following directions or copying movements. However, I can easily visualise time, when making plans and devising strategies. Understanding the rules of a game by watching people playing it and understanding jokes do not come naturally to me. Up to a certain age, for each word I knew in any foreign language, I effortlessly remembered the context in which I learned it. I can be either anxious or exhausted without recognizing the triggers: were there strong emotions in that meeting, rules I could not catch, or was it the beamer that made me struggle to focus on voices rather than on its noise? But when I am deeply interested in a topic or involved in a project, I seem to have infinite energy and concentration. I do not consider anything done before I understood it or dealt with it in depth, which can be seen as perfectionism or excessive seriousness, and which can result in spending much time on certain tasks. I can be hyper-empathetic and might have difficulties not to feel someone else's emotions as if they were my own. But I can be quite successful in “seeing,” motivating, leading, and coaching other people. Therefore, knowing about autism and that these experiences might “make sense” if taken together, helps me deal more effectively with them, and normalise them or cherish them, both in me and others, especially when trying to decentre towards successful collaborations across differences.

Dōgen's use of the Buddhist frameworks of dependent origination, his take on our relation to our place, together with the “double empathy problem” and the idea of blindness to styles of movement, developed in the context of studies on autism, help me express what may hinder or help both NT and AS towards decentring.

I will argue (Thesis 1) that NT might resist decentring vis-à-vis AS (cf. majority groups resisting decentring vis-à-vis minority groups); that (Thesis 2) AS might have advantages at decentring, some shared with other minorities and some more specific. I will then argue (Thesis 3) that both might profit from bodymind<sup>13</sup> practices, towards decentring.

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<sup>13</sup> I write “bodymind” as one word following Shaner (1985, 203): “The term “bodymind” is used to denote oneness between body and mind. The absence of the hyphen signifies that body and mind, in the Japanese philosophical tradition, is not interpreted as two things that are very closely

## 2. *The Framework. Dependent Origination and Being in a Place*

Recently, autism scholars are becoming sceptical of frameworks, in which autistic people or their brains, are seen as unchangeable carriers of essential characteristics resulting in typical behaviour. Krueger and others see an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosis as the outcome of many factors including the circumstances in which a person developed<sup>14</sup>. This approach is compatible with the Buddhist framework of dependent origination<sup>15</sup>, which can help us reflect on the encounter of different people *in a place*. In this framework, individuals are always in a place, which is an integral part of them: no phenomena, person, or being exist in isolation. One's "place" consists of all factors that contribute to who one is at a given moment — among which other beings with their perspectives. In this framework, patterns in the changes around one might suggest stability and regularity, seemingly unchanging individuals, relations, and places — however, change is continuous, and no state of affairs is linearly caused: constellations of factors constantly give rise to new states of affairs.

In the *Genjōkōan*, Dōgen recommends studying the self in the framework of dependent origination and co-transformation<sup>16</sup>:

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interconnected. On the contrary, bodymind is to be interpreted as originally one. The choice of "bodymind," instead of "mind body," reflects the order in which these terms are usually written in Japanese [身心 *shinjin*] [...]."

<sup>14</sup> Krueger (2021, 376): "the idea that ASD can be reduced to cognitive deficits or neural dysfunctions faces[...] increased skepticism. It now appears more likely that ASD is a multilevel, multidimensional process whose outcome is driven by the interplay of diverse factors operating at different time-scales (evolutionary, cultural, social, individual-psychological) and levels of description (biological, cognitive-behavioral, phenomenological, sociocultural) [...]. In other words, ASD has a complex ontology that cannot be comprehensively understood by viewing characteristic social impairments merely as disordered function within single brains. Rather, characteristic features depend upon both circumstances and where one is located on the spectrum."

<sup>15</sup> Sanskrit: *pratītyasamutpāda*; Japanese: 因縁, *innen*, or 縁起, *engi*.

<sup>16</sup> Dōgen deals with dependent origination e.g. in *Bodhisatta Shishō-hō*, *Bodhisattva's Four Methods of Guidance* (Tanahashi 1985, 44): "You give yourself to yourself and others to others. The power of causal relations [因縁, *innen*, dependent origination] of giving reaches devas [divine beings], human beings, and even enlightened sages."

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 [of the world] is to let drop off the bodymind of the self and the body-mind of others.” (Dōgen, *Genjōkōan*<sup>17</sup>, trans. Davis 2023, 62-163)

Our self is not a permanent core or a set of essential characteristics, which define us independently from who or what we are relating with. It is non-independent and non-permanent; in Buddhist terminology, it is “no-self.” Dōgen suggests that we are a capacity to relate —with the whole of our bodymind — to the myriad things: all beings that constitute the place we inhabit, and with whom we share it. Davis (2022, 30) understands this passage as pointing towards an emptying of the self that is “an opening of oneself to others. In studying the self, we discover that deep inside us lies an openness to the outside.” Dōgen might be interpreted as suggesting that we are our capacity to decentre, which we need to practise: the capacity to receive, respond, to relate to all beings that form our context, from which we are not separate.

How does Dōgen help us find ourselves in a place? And how does this help towards decentring and carrying out dialogue across differences? In the *Genjōkōan*, Dōgen refers to fish and birds<sup>18</sup> that, without need to fulfil any prerequisites, are in their place in an optimal way, while carrying on their own activities:

if there were a bird or a fish who aimed to move through the water or sky only after having completely surveyed the water or sky, it could not find its way or attain its place in them. If it attains this place, then, in accordance with this everyday activity, truth presences.<sup>19</sup> (Dōgen, *Genjōkōan*, trans. Davis 2009, 258)

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<sup>17</sup> The format of many of Dōgen's writings are lectures (ranging from two to several pages) that he delivered to his monks. I refer to them with the Japanese names, e.g. *Genjōkōan*, to make it possible for the reader to recognize them in the translation they have, since different translators translate the titles very differently.

<sup>18</sup> Tanahashi (1985, 245, note 13) suggests that “fish and bird refer to those who practice. Water and sky refer to the realm of practice.”

<sup>19</sup> Davis interprets ‘genjōkōan’ (現成公案), which is the title of the lecture from which this passage is taken, as “the living presence of truth in the here and now of everyday reality” (255). In this

Davis (2009, 255) explains Dōgen's image as pointing out that it is possible for us to presence the truth: "awakening to the truth that is always presencing beneath our feet." Whereas in other passages Dōgen stresses the temporal dimension of this awakening, in this passage, he stresses the importance of place (ところ, *tokoro*). Finding or attaining one's place<sup>20</sup> while practising, by carrying out one's everyday activities<sup>21</sup> is needed for truth to presence. Dōgen explains that being in a place does neither mean to be in a fixed place, nor to avoid crossing the boundaries of a place: fish and birds move incessantly according to their need, and never find a limit. Moreover, being in a place does not require one to survey the place or draw its map. The place is part of what one is: if the birds and the fish would leave the air and the water, they would die. To be a fish means to be in water: there is no fish without water. To be alive means to be embodied and active in a certain place.

If humans want to decentre and open to others, we need first to realise that we are always embodied and embedded in a specific place, never in no place at all. This is a place that we share with others, with whom we are interdependent. Awakening to the fact that others are part of who we are is more than the theoretical realisation that there is no neutral way to occupy the space. It involves choosing to inhabit our space in a way that is welcoming to other beings that occupy the same place; it involves being ready to decentre.

What steps are recommended to a self in a place who is ready to "decentre"? One needs to first learn *that* there are different perspectives. And then effort must be made

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passage 'genjōkōan' appears first as a verb (genjōkōan su): "このところをうれば、この行李したがひて現成公案す [genjōkōan su]"; Davis translates: "if it attains this place, then, in accordance with this everyday activity, truth presences" (258). Tanahashi (1985, 72) translates: to actualize "the fundamental point."

<sup>20</sup> "このところをうれば" "if it attains this place", or as Tanahashi more loosely translates: "When you find your place where you are."

<sup>21</sup> The Buddhist dictionary shows that 行李 can refer both to the "baggage that one carries on a journey", and "to actualize the truth in all of one's every day activities." (cf. <http://www2.buddhistdoor.net/dictionary/details/%E8%A1%8C%E6%9D%8E>)

to learn to see *from* different perspectives<sup>22</sup>. Dōgen suggests first learning other “standards”, other frameworks: “You should study the green mountains, using numerous worlds as your standards. You should clearly examine the green mountains’ walking and your own walking.” (Tanahashi 1985: 98) Rather than judging the other with one’s own standards, if one wants to meet the other, and to practise creating a new reality with them, one needs to try and understand the perspective of the other. Dōgen explains that knowing some facts about the other is not enough:

All beings do not see mountains and waters in the same way. Some beings see water as a jeweled ornament, but they do not regard jeweled ornaments as water. What in the human realm corresponds to their water? We only see their jeweled ornaments as water. Some beings see water as wondrous blossoms, but they do not use blossoms as water. Hungry ghosts see water as raging fire or pus and blood. Dragons see water as a palace or a pavilion. Some beings see water as the seven treasures or a wish-granting jewel. Some beings see water as a forest or a wall.” (Dōgen, *Sansui-kyō, Mountains and Waters Sutra*, trans. Tanahashi 1985, 102)

Yes, dragons and ghosts see water differently from us, but what corresponds to our water in their world: What do they drink? How do they clean themselves? Dōgen explains that understanding that we cannot have a description of water that would be objective and meaningful for all beings is important, but not enough. We should not pat ourselves on our backs for understanding that a fish or dragon might experience water as a palace, a ghost as fire, gods watching from the sky might see it as jewelled ornaments. In fact, we still don’t know what corresponds — for fish, ghosts or gods — to our water: e.g. as a drink, as something to clean oneself, or a

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<sup>22</sup> These are also the first two of the three steps towards the practice of diversity in education, which I deal with at length in Robbiano (2023a). I will refer to the three steps below.

place to relax or work out. We are not yet seeing reality from the perspectives of the other.

It takes time to reach that perspective, but it can be done both according to Dōgen and to Jim Sinclair (1993): an autism-rights movement activist, who speaks from an AS perspective. We could read his words as if they were coming from Dōgen's dragons, asking humans to decentre:

Recognise that we are equally alien to each other, that my ways of being are not merely damaged versions of yours. Question your assumptions. ...Work with me to build bridges between us [...]. you'll find a world you could never have imagined. Yes, that takes more work than relating to a non-autistic person. But it can be done —unless non-autistic people are far more limited than we are in their capacity to relate. We spend our entire lives doing it. (Sinclair 1993)

Both Dōgen and Sinclair seem to agree that rather than describing the other as incapable of meeting us, or as in need of help to learn to see in the same way as we see and do as we do, we need to try to meet them on their own terms. We need to understand that the world looks different from the perspective of another being and take it on us to try and access this perspective. Without the recognition of our differences and of the uniqueness of the other to whom we are relating, we cannot decentre: we project our own experience on the other, are incapable of empathising with them, and might think that it is the other one who is bad at empathising. Decentring involves *realising that we and the other might have very different experiences, appreciating, valuing and “trying on” their perspective, so that we can build bridges*. Dōgen suggests we try “learning in practice of water seeing water [...]”: “This is not learning in practice only of the time when human beings and gods see water; this is learning in practice of water seeing water. Because water practices and experiences water, there is the investigation in practice of water speaking water.” (*Sansui-Kyō, The Sutra of Mountains and Waters*, Nishijima and Cross trans. 1994, 145-146) Dōgen asks us to

look at water while centring the perspective of water: listening to others, trying to see from their eyes, speaking their language.

In the framework of dependent origination, we are continuous with our place and the other. Ontologically there is no centre for us to occupy; however, phenomenologically, we might experience ourselves and our subjectivity as central<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, decentring — which involves both understanding “rationally” the world of the other and seeing from their eyes — requires a great effort. And yet, decentring is crucial towards taking responsibility for how we continuously co-create our world with others<sup>24</sup>. In fact, it is only after learning the language of the other and meeting them on their terms, that we can start developing a common language and collaborating, across differences, responsibly and successfully.

### 3. *General Difficulty at Decentring and Empathising with the “Other”: “Double Empathy Problem”*

One of the things that stand in the way towards decentring has been called the “double empathy problem”: “[...] when autistic people and those not on the autism spectrum attempt to interact, both might have difficulties at empathising with each other: a ‘double empathy problem’” (Milton 2012b, 10); empathy is a ‘two-way street’ (2012a, 884). In other words, when “people of different dispositional outlooks and personal conceptual understandings... [attempt] to communicate meaning”, a “breach in the ‘natural attitude’ (Garfinkel 1967) occurs” (Milton 2012a, 884): the interaction across differences cannot be mastered by navigating on an automatic

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<sup>23</sup> Buddhist philosophers deny any permanent and independent self, but they recognize and distinguish two kinds of subjectivity: *svasaṃvedana*: the ‘self-illuminating,’ ‘self-reflexive,’ character of conscious states; *ahaṃkāra*: ‘I-maker’ awareness, the sense of oneself as a single entity enduring throughout time and “our tendency to act and make decisions which reflect our own self-interests.” (Krueger 2011, 30-31) One might see some resemblances with the “minimal self” and the “narrative self”, or narrative identity, discussed above — and about the opportunity that this framework offers for re-interpreting our *ahaṃkāra* and re-framing our sense of oneself as impermanent and fundamentally related to other beings.

<sup>24</sup> Hershock (2014, 3-4) makes the relation between responsibility and the framework of dependent origination very clear: “[...] responsibility implies the possibility of responsive creativity. We can change our values, intentions, and actions. Precisely because all things arise in dynamic interdependence, the dramatic topography of our own experience is always open to revision.”

pilot: both need to make an effort to communicate across different languages and ways of life.

Sinclair (1988) suggests that it is impossible to determine how well someone empathises with someone else; what we can do is just to practise to take others' perspectives — which is what AS always do, and which is also what NT should do:

I keep reading that autistic people lack empathy and are unable to take others' perspectives [...] if empathy means being able to understand a perspective that is different from one's own, then it is not possible to determine how much empathy is present between persons without first having an adequate understanding of each person's perspective and of how different those perspectives are from each other. (This would require an observer with perfect empathy for all parties!). When I am interacting with someone, that person's perspective is as foreign to me as mine is to the other person. But while *I am aware of this difference* and can make deliberate efforts to figure out how someone else is experiencing a situation, I generally find that other people *do not notice the difference in perspectives* and simply assume that they understand my experience.” (Sinclair 1988, emphasis mine)

Standing in the shoes of someone different from us always involves effort, which is premised on the recognition that the other one is different from me, and that I cannot understand someone else by assuming that they feel or think as I feel or think, or as someone else does. Davis (2017, 130) reminds us that “capacity for genuine empathy, after all, is also that of ek-stasis (literally ‘standing outside oneself’),” and points at Huayan and Zen masters who suggest that this capacity is what allows one to carry out a real dialogue, in which there is a mutual exchange of the role of guest and host, rather than having only one dominant perspective to which the guest must adjust.

Milton formulated this problem in 2012 as a response to the general characterisation of autistic people as fundamentally lacking “theory of mind”<sup>25</sup>: the “ability to [...] assume understandings of the mental states and motives of other people.” This characterisation comes close to the stereotypical representation of AS as closed in their own world, insensitive to their context. Milton laments that this approach essentialises AS and blames them for not being good at playing their role in society. Society is seen as the place where one is expected to understand those who are neurotypical and behave as neurotypicals typically behave. AS are objectified: seen as the objects of treatments that involve teaching them language and behaviour of neurotypicals. What Milton attributes to NT who does not take AS as subject, but objectifies them, can be regarded as incapacity to decentre on the part of NT, who behaves as if they had the right to always occupy the centre and look at others as objects gravitating around them: “ [...] far from owning the means of mental production about one’s own culture, the ‘autistic individual’ often becomes [...] the ‘thing’ that is ‘intervened’ with [...] the ‘autistic voice’ is made ‘invisible’.” (Milton 2012a, 885) Milton is echoed by the novelist Katherine May (2018, 81-82) who, referring to the website of the UK National Autistic Society, writes “these descriptions are totally external, pitched at a paternalistic outsider [...]. The assumed subject is mute, unaware, incompetent [...]. The whole diagnostic thrust lies in placing a person on a neat, medical shelf rather than engaging with their experiences.” According to both Milton and May, what most studies lack is the attempt to learn the “language” of AS, which would enable researchers to involve the perspective of AS, seen as a subject with a voice, rather than an object of observation and intervention. (Milton 2012a, 885)

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<sup>25</sup> Recently, many scholars are rejecting this characterisation, see e.g. Krueger (2021, 374): “For several decades, these social difficulties were thought to arise from a core Theory of Mind deficit that impedes the individual’s ability to attribute mental states to others and to use these attributions to predict and interpret their behavior (Baron-Cohen et al. 1985). But this cognitivist and individualistic approach is no longer the consensus view. One worry is that it overlooks embodied and relational features of the individual’s social impairment [...], as well as the role that interpersonally-distributed interactive factors play in shaping characteristic dysfunctions [...].”

If Milton were to use Dōgen's concepts, he might say that society asks only autistic people to make an effort to learn the language of the other, to "learn in practice of neurotypical seeing neurotypical." Milton points out that this framework completely misses the fact that when AS and NT try to understand, empathise with, and collaborate with each other, they are both in relation with each other, and therefore they both need to do their work if they want to encounter the other.

Krueger (2021) suggests that rather than "lack of theory of mind", AS might have "style blindness." He refers here to the manners or styles of actions and movements which NT learn effortlessly, by co-regulating with others, which allows them to attune their actions to different contexts: think of how a handshake is performed, softly or violently, or of different styles of smiling or laughing. NT adjust the volume of their voice, their posture, or their intonation, to match the one of the other. He suggests that AS's "style blindness" makes it difficult for them to co-regulate their own expressive actions to those of neurotypical others.

Krueger acknowledges that there are different ways in which NT and AS experience the world, and different movements that help each address situations skilfully. In fact, AS also have styles of movement that attune them emotionally to the place in which they are — e.g. repetitive movements of the body such as finger-snapping or tapping objects, called "self-stims", which may be seen as "enactive processes by which individuals with ASD skilfully meet the physical, perceptual, and emotional demands of their situation (Leary and Donnellan 2012, 51)" (Krueger 2021, 379). However, AS are often taught to suppress such styles of movement not to embarrass NT — think also of the need to learn to look someone in the eyes not to make them think one is not interested. We might say that NT also have style blindness to AS's styles of movement, resulting in what we might call "double style blindness": both find each other's styles puzzling or off-putting. In other words, the ways in which AS and NT respectively respond emotionally to the world and register and co-regulate within their own spaces may result as puzzling or annoying, across the neurological gap. However, whilst AS are supposed to learn to reproduce NT styles, nobody

would suggest NT to mirror AS' styles of movement or to *avoid* eye-contact<sup>26</sup> to attune to the AS other.

Milton (2012a, 885) addresses the political dimension of the two-way difficulty between AS and NT in understanding the other or interacting attunedly with them: “social interactions happen within a [...] context [...] infused by unequal power relations.” When two different beings fail to understand each other, often the one in the margin is blamed for not understanding the one who is — because of history, power or what not — in the centre. If the therapist, the teacher or the NT colleague understand their function of being helpful to the autistic patient, student or AS colleague, only in terms of teaching AS how to learn the NT language or styles of movement — they are assuming, perhaps unconsciously that, since they are central in society, they do not need to make any effort to empathise with AS and see from their perspective. However, if we see this encounter, e.g. therapist-patient, teacher-student, and colleague-colleague, in the framework of dependent origination, we realise that we are all co-creating a certain reality across boundaries and we all might want to do that in the best way, which requires decentring and learning the language of the other.

Krueger (2021a) discusses relations between AS and NT through critical phenomenological frameworks in which the human being is structurally related to others in a social context, in which those belonging to dominant groups might feel more at home than others. Krueger does not refer to dependent origination, but to Watsuji's concept of *aidagara* (“betweenness”) — and notes that Watsuji is influenced by Buddhist notions of emptiness and no-self (2021a, 22) — and to Sarah Ahmed's phenomenology of “disorientation.” Ahmed draws attention to the disorientation experienced in common spaces, e.g. by non-white bodies, who are stopped by the police more frequently than others, and who develop the permanent and pre-reflective feeling of being disoriented, under threat of being stopped, and thus never

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<sup>26</sup> A beautiful exception to this is described in Akomolafe (2022): when his child was flapping and screaming on the floor of a shopping centre, his wife “instead of trying to control Kyah, instead of trying to pull him into her world, she knelt and crawled up to where he lay, stretching herself out next to him. ‘I felt I needed to meet him halfway,’ she would later tell me. ‘To come into his world – instead of dragging him into mine’.”

feel at home. Krueger extends this phenomenology of disorientation to autistic people whose styles of movement are often not attuned to common spaces created around neurotypical styles of movements. This results in social impairments that arise from: “a felt sense of being bodily and affectively out-of-sync with neurotypical spaces not set up to accommodate non-neurotypical styles of being in the world.” (Krueger 2021a, 21) AS confirm feeling at ease in “autistic spaces – again, spaces where these bodily practices [e.g. self-stims, avoiding eye-contact] are viewed as acceptable practices for finding one’s way.” (Krueger 2021a, 30) Thus, what have been regarded as AS’s cognitive impairments are actually *social* impairments that work both ways and are context-sensitive: both AS and NT suffer disorientation when exposed to spaces and styles of movements and ways of navigating them that are characteristic of the other group, whereas they are at ease within their “own” spaces.

Summing up, we should refrain from seeing AS in isolation — and rather imagine an encounter between AS and NT from the perspective of dependent origination and of being in a place. Perhaps nobody is good at exiting their own world, decentring, and being empathetic to different others with whom we share our place. And it might well be that NS and AS, have different capacities and liabilities in encountering a different other.

#### 4. *Thesis 1. Resistance to Decentring on the Part of Those Who Have Traditionally Been in the Centre (Dominant Group, NT) vis-à-vis AS/ Minorities*

Whilst NT and other members of dominant groups might be good at theory of mind when encountering other NT or other members of their group, the question is whether they are also good at understanding the thoughts, emotions and responses of different others. Lugones (1987), among others, suggest some people belonging to dominant groups are “at ease in a world” and have difficulties at “world travelling”: at recognizing others as other subjects, with a valid way of life. They rather cling to their central position in society, regarding themselves as rational or normal. They might engage in what Roth (2008, 5) calls “cognitive imperialism,” which makes

them feel entitled to put their worldview, assumptions, and experiences in the centre and to present them as objective: as obtained without having any perspective and as the only candidate for truth. They judge others by “arrogant perception,” not by standards of the perceived person. (“loving perception”, Lugones 1987)

In manuals such as Attwood (2007), AS are contrasted to NT, e.g. by describing NT as better and quicker at processing, filtering, categorising stimuli or information and preparing a quick response to them. However, there might be a liability connected to this capacity. One’s readiness to filter and categorise new input through old schemas or frameworks might well lead to always single out and seeing a certain picture: one that might be coherent and intelligible, but perhaps not the best one to appreciate any specific situation. Moreover, one might also run the risk of confusing the picture one selected for reality as it is. NT might be inclined by their readiness to categorise the world and others, to see everyone else as an object neatly fitting in a category of their making: they might well behave as other people “at ease in a world” and do not attempt to decentre and see AS as subjects: to see them on their own terms.

The picture that might emerge is the following: NT are good at categorising and might value this attitude as efficient. They might suggest that they do not put themselves personally in the centre, but a rational, normal observer who can order middle-sized objects, or objects of science, in a standard and repeatable way, for the sake of prediction, technological advancement, and communication. They might find it sometimes acceptable to order *people* in recognizable categories. For instance, for administrative, legal, or medical reasons, or when dealing with job applications, a person can be seen as an “object” to be put in the right category, say: male, diabetic, non-EU citizen, employee, A-level student, residency permit holder, ASD [...] They might add that when they meet a person face to face, they do not pigeon-hole them, but recognize them as a “you,” another “I” — a rational being, another subject, worthy of respect; that they would not use them as means or discriminate against. However, what started with efficiency might turn into a habit. Piaget teaches us that when we, especially in our youth, are confronted with new information, we first engage in “assimilation” (Piaget in Kopf 2022, 76): we filter, reduce it to fit existing conceptual schema. Only if that does not work, we engage in “accommodation”,

which involves the revision and adaptation of one's cognitive structures to new situations, and the development of new behaviour. It is a possibility that people in dominant groups and people, who are inclined to quickly categorise new input into their old trustworthy categories, have difficulties in taking the other as it is, as another subject.

J-L. Marion (Biesta 2021, 91) sees the attitude of putting oneself in the centre and seeing the rest as objects for one to categorise and control, as the attitude adopted by those who want to protect themselves from being *surprised* by the world. People might adopt this attitude to keep those different from oneself at a certain distance from the centre, possibly in the margins, so that they will not surprise and frighten those in the centre. In other words, when the myriad things — which Dōgen sees as what can “actualize” us, that is complete us and make us what we are— consist of beings and people who are different from those in the centre, the first thing that stands in the way of accepting Dōgen's framework of dependent origination and decentring, for the dominant group, is *fear*. The others are seen as “they”: objects of a certain kind in front of “us.” This prevents those who identify with “us” from seeing “them” as a subject like “us,” as unique individuals with their own perspective just like we are. Resistance to any framework that describes us as intimately related to others, such as dependent origination, can be attributed to fear of the other, that also involves fear of *decentring* in front of the other. Decentring can also be resisted since listening to someone and taking them as a subject involves empathising with their emotions. People might not want to experience other people's emotions, which they might regard as exhausting. The phenomenon of blocking or resisting the empathy one might feel for others is referred to as ‘dyspathy’ by Cameron (2012), who suggests that stereotyping others is one way to block one's empathy towards them.

Summing up, there might be resistance on the part of NT towards seeing AS as another subject and recognizing that both are “equally alien to one another”, and in need to decentre vis-à-vis one another. There might be resistance towards letting go of the centre, for those who regard themselves as entitled to it, by being “normal.” They might want to stay where information and people are ordered, objectified and pigeonholed, e.g. as “patient,” or as “not normal,” to make sure they might not

surprise or frighten one. NT might resist decentring, which involves *listening to others as to other subjects, recognizing their movement and “styles” as valid as NT’s, and possibly feeling their emotions.*

### 5. Thesis 2. Epistemological Advantages of AS

If, in Dōgen’s framework, the self is the capacity to “decentre,” open up to the myriad things, how does AS fare at decentring?

Some literature on autism tends to stress not only lack of theory of mind, but also AS’ tendency to “social withdrawal” (Attwood 2007, 28; 89; 140): to isolate themselves from the context<sup>27</sup>. Timpe (2022, 168) suggests reframing the issue “as a mismatch with neurotypical structuring of social environments” depending on problematic social norms that disadvantage neurodiverse people. Once we see this in the context of dependent origination, we might come to appreciate that, if AS self-isolates and withdraws, multiple contextual factors might have contributed to it, rather than the presence of some “anti-contextual” tendency in the make-up or essence of any AS<sup>28</sup>. Often AS, rather than self-isolating, camouflages and masks and often passes (for NT). For instance, rather than showing behaviours that come natural or are beneficial to AS, such as stimming or avoiding eye contact, AS learns from a young age to move in socially accepted ways, i.e. the way that comes natural to NT. Social pressure to conform, thus can be seen as a contextual factor that has led AS to train to decentre, in the sense of learning the perspective of NT others — which is exhibited in all forms of camouflaging and masking, in which AS are socialised. AS practise decentring, in the same way as other minorities do, as Lugones (1987, 3) tells us, “out of necessity,” and develops the epistemological privilege that can be acquired e.g. by people of colour, who have cultivated a “double

<sup>27</sup> Timpe (2022, 167-168) shows that this was stressed by Leo Kenner’s early research on autistic children in the 1940’s and persists now in the DSM-V, which mentions “persistent “deficits of social communication and social interaction,” and “significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning” among the criteria.

<sup>28</sup> Attwood explains that the tendency to social withdrawal can be related to the “lack of social competency” (2007, 24) and the fear of making “social mistakes” (2007, 88-89) — which suggests awareness of the disabling effect of society.

entendre” or double consciousness (DuBois 1903). Another example is the “new mestiza” described by decolonial feminists, who cultivates her in betweenness or *nepantla* (Ortega 2016, 26-27 after Anzaldúa and Lugones) and can transform her never being at ease in any world into capacity to world-travel, i.e. to undergo epistemic shifts to other worlds of meanings (Vazquez 2015 and Lugones 1987)<sup>29</sup>. Autism activist Sinclair (1993) also stresses that autistic people, like other minorities, have a history of trying to relate to others on the terms of the others —that is on the terms that society regards as normal: “Each of us who does learn to talk to you, each of us who manages to function at all in your society, each of us who manages to reach out and make a connection with you, is operating in alien territory, making contact with alien beings. We spend our entire lives doing this.” Other autism literature mentions that AS are constantly required to recognize the existence of different frameworks and display creativity in switching between them. Attwood (2014, 66) suggests that, since AS profit from conceptualising and visualising scripts to navigate everyday situations, they are more trained than NT to create new scripts or new rules when a situation changes. In fact, they are used to observe others, changes, and differences (Attwood 2014, 70). AS are used to develop new frameworks and scripts as a preparation for new interactions, to train to meet the other halfway, to learn the vocabulary and the gestures of the other, in order to function in a world where NT is at the centre. So, the first answer to the question “How does AS fare at decentring?” is: pretty well, since AS needs to constantly practise decentring.

There is a second answer to this question, in the light of Dōgen's dependent origination, in which the self is the capacity to open up to the myriad things, and “centre” them instead of oneself. Davis (2017, 136-137) suggests seeing each of the myriad things from the Zen perspective of dependent origination as a unique “event of interconnection.” One should see each being with whom we share our place, as “the host that invites us and all other things to be its guests.” As we will see below, among the various characteristics attributed to AS, in manuals, autobiographies and

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<sup>29</sup> Ortega (2016, 34) is aware of Harding’s critique of the idea that being in a marginalised position immediately translates into epistemic privilege, and that reflection and practice are always needed. See also Haraway (1988).

other genres, there seems to be the cluster that suggests a “permeable skin” or great openness to receive the myriad things “as they are”: as guests, rather than as objects of our categorization. What the literature generally stresses is only one possible outcome of this openness: a sensory or emotional overflow and the need to withdraw, or a “meltdown or a shutdown”<sup>30</sup> if one is too late to withdraw. In Davis’ framework, the suggestion would be that whereas AS hears the request of the myriad things to be hosted by AS, AS behaves as a host who goes to bed before the guests leave the party. As we will see, this is not the only possible outcome.

Among this cluster of characteristics that suggest a “permeable skin”, or openness to receive things as they are, one can find 1. sensory sensitivity — that is lights, sounds, smells, or textures can be experienced at times as coming straight to one’s core<sup>31</sup> —; 2. “executive dysfunction” (Attwood 2007, Chapter 9, 228-258): an umbrella term for the tendency to let in a vast amount of details without having the capacity to see the overall picture: think of listening to someone giving directions that are experienced like a waterfall of sounds, in which it is close to impossible to parse words<sup>32</sup>; of the difficulty in processing different kinds of information received at the same time, e.g. someone looking at one’s eyes<sup>33</sup> and talking at the same time, or two people talking at the same time. Moreover, 3. emotions of others can be felt very intensely, as to be sometimes indistinguishable from one’s own<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Attwood (2007) discusses meltdown both in Chapter 6 “The understanding and expression of emotions” and in Chapter 8 “Language”.

<sup>31</sup> “One of the most important aspects of autism that for many years went fairly unrecognised was that of sensory sensitivities. Autistic people often report both hyper-sensitivities to sounds, lights, smells, and touch [...]” (Milton 2012, 8-9)

<sup>32</sup> This might be regarded as an example of an impaired executive function, and of weak central coherence: of being “good at attending to detail but appear to have considerable difficulty perceiving and understanding the overall picture, or gist.” (Attwood 2007, 241)

<sup>33</sup> This is described in one of the diagnostic criteria for ASD: “Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.” cf. e.g. <https://www.autismspeaks.org/autism-diagnosis-criteria-dsm-5>

<sup>34</sup> This has been referred to as hyperempathy: “We are not the blank, unfeeling automata so often portrayed in literature. We are funny, loving, hyper-empathetic humans whose brains function a little differently[...]” (May 2018). Obviously this causes puzzlement since lack of empathy is one of the stereotypes; one can sometimes find recognition that both are possible: “some may struggle with

It seems that sensory, cognitive, and emotional inputs come straight, ‘unfiltered’ into one’s bodymind, suggesting the image of a permeable skin. This predisposition might well result in difficulty in processing much information at the same time, or in physical suffering and exhaustion from absorbing much unprocessed information at once, including other people’s emotions<sup>35</sup>. Thus, whilst I follow the recommendation by Wakefield et al 2020 to study AS in relation to their context, rather than in isolation, I wonder if they follow their own recommendation when they (2020, 509) ask: “is mild context insensitivity sufficiently beneficial?”, and seem to presuppose “lack of sensitivity to context” (509) as an essential characteristic of AS. I would prefer to say that what looks like “lack of sensitivity to context” is a *possible* result of the interaction among many factors in a specific place, where AS might have felt the need to withdraw and put some distance between them and the context as a response to sensory or emotional overflow, because of too much — rather than too little — sensitivity to context, to start with.

However, another outcome is also possible. An analysis of the encounter between AS and NT in a certain place might make us re-evaluate AS’ permeable skin, or weaker filters, which do not reduce, block, or assimilate the input coming from one’s context. If we analyse an AS-NT encounter, through the framework of dependent origination and of finding oneself in a place, we see what has been labelled “executive dysfunction” — lack of capacity to extract a meaningful picture from the received input, or difficulty to filter or process different kinds of inputs — in a surprising light. If the conditions are favourable, an enhanced “permeability” to the place can result in a greater predisposition to centre the place and the beings that are part of it, rather than oneself; receiving the other “as it is” without projecting one’s intentionality and filters on it. If in the light of dependent origination, the place and AS are co-dependent, whilst sometimes AS might resist the myriad things or be overwhelmed

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empathy while others may feel completely overwhelmed by other people’s feelings.” (Armstrong 2015)

<sup>35</sup> The Intense World theory formulated by Markram, Rinaldi, and Markram (2007) supports this description. See also Rizzo and Röck (2021), and Hansen (2019).

by them, at other times, when the context permeates AS, AS displays a great proficiency at decentring, which subsequently allows them to respond attunedly. Heightened and unfiltered sensitivity to context can be seen as openness to the myriad things and can be considered beneficial to AS who can have an immediate relation to others and develop a deep connection to them. It can also be beneficial to other members of the community who might well feel seen and appreciated as another subject by AS, and subsequently gain ownership and agency and desire to collaborate to the flourishing of that community. If context is suitable, AS, who is capable to receive myriad things (light, information, emotions) on their own terms, can become e.g. enthusiastic teachers who easily and immediately transmit their love for the discipline to their students, whom they see for who they are, and develop therefore a very authentic relation with (Wood, Crane, Happé, Morrison, and Moysé 2022, 23); lawyers who can relate to the experiences of their clients and make sure they understand explain legal terms (Moss 2023<sup>36</sup>); animal scientists “the principle is to work with the animal’s behaviour instead of against it” (Grandin 1986, 146). All people are co-dependent with the place they inhabit together with others. The predisposition of AS for openness, permeable skin, or lack of filters to one’s place might reveal this co-dependency very clearly, since the responses might be more extreme: either isolating oneself from it (and appearing context-insensitive) or becoming one with it. In the second case, what has been seen as executive dysfunction might now be seen as a predisposition towards decentring that can have excellent effects on one’s relations to others<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> “Haley Moss [Florida’s first autistic lawyer] also finds that Extraordinary Attorney Woo [K-drama with an autistic lawyer in the lead] reflects many of her experiences as a lawyer. While her photographic memory is a great advantage, she has also found that she is able to connect easily with clients who have similar experiences as her;” “[t]hose who have similar life experiences as me tend to have trust in me. I can relate with them better than other lawyers do. Also, I tend to break things down when talking about a case and this made some clients understand legal terms better.”

<sup>37</sup> It might be fruitful to put my concept of decentring in dialogue with Georges Canguilhem’s attempts to deconstruct the concept of normality (Canguilhem 1978) and with his emphasis on the value of each unique human being, which he tried to defend from medical rationalisation. Canguilhem also stressed the importance of the relations of the individual with its environment. He defined the individual as “that which cannot be divided without losing its own characteristics. It is a minimum of being. But no being is a minimum. The individual implies its own relation to a wider being’ [...] For an organism, the ‘wider being’ [...] is the external ‘milieu,’ a complex web or organic and inorganic

### 6. Thesis 3: Bodymind Practices Might Facilitate Decentring for Both Groups

Decentring can be characterised as *recognizing — with the whole of one’s bodymind — the possibility of a radically different way of being, moving, and experiencing a certain place*. Whereas some of us have grown up thinking that learning happens in the mind, East Asian traditions such as the one in which Dōgen operated — deeply influenced by Confucius (Kongzi) and Confucian philosophers — insist on the importance of somatic practices<sup>38</sup> towards self-cultivation and harmonious relations. Dōgen insists that self-cultivation, learning in practice, can be done with the true human body, which is “this lump of red flesh”:

To study the way with the body means to study the way with your own body. It is the study of the way using this lump of red flesh... It is not that the true human body is unlimited; the true human body is just the true human body. At this moment it is you, at this moment it is I, who is the true human body, the entire world of the ten directions. (Dōgen, *Shinjin gakudō, Body-and-Mind Study of the Way*, trans. Tanahashi 1995, 91-93)

What we need to know in order to encounter and collaborate with different others, can be learned in practice, with “this lump of red flesh.” Taking on the perspective of the other, and co-creating with them, is not a mental exercise<sup>39</sup>, as Krueger and Timpe made it clear above, in the case of encounters between AS and NT. There might be bodymind practices that facilitate decentring across different styles of

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beings endowed with a certain significance for the organism." (Gayon 1998, 319). I thank one of the anonymous referees for signalling the relevance of this author.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Graham Parkes’ papers about the importance of somatic practice for Dōgen, e.g. Parkes (2013, 85).

<sup>39</sup> Davis (2023) explains that Dōgen see the paths of studying with the mind and with the body as converging — the world can be seen as mind or as body, and self-cultivation can be seen as attuning our mind or body to the mind or body of the universe through practices, such as sitting meditation, that facilitate the realisation that we are intrinsically interwoven with reality.

movements and neurotypes: practices that help both AS and NT connect to their shared place and respond attunedly and creatively to it and to each other. Practices that make one see the other as a “you,” as another “I,” and empathise with them while keeping a sense of who one is, in terms of one’s way of life, characteristic experiences and values, rather than closing off to the other with whom empathy seems difficult. Such practices might help NT not to see oneself in the centre looking at everything as if from the outside and objectify it; and AS not to get into a meltdown because of being overwhelmed by one’s context.

What practices can help us decentre with the whole of our bodymind? Above, we saw Dōgen’s call, in *Sansui-kyō*, to “learn in practice of water seeing water”. He then recommends continuing the practise in this way: “we must move back and forth along, and spring from, the vital path on which the other studies [in practice], and fully comprehends, the other (Bielefeldt in Heisig, Kasulis, Maraldo 2011, 153-154). Practice — the Chinese character 修 (pronounced *shu* or *san* in Japanese) is part of many words in this quote — helps experience water from a water’s perspective: i.e. to encounter the other on their own terms. Practice is what allows one to develop agility in switching between seeing and acting as the other, to seeing and acting as ourselves, and back: “we must move back and forth”. At some point, we might “spring from the vital path”: our movement becomes spontaneous and attuned to each other, we not only understand the language and the style of movement of the other, but we can also create a new perspective, a new language,<sup>40</sup> a new “universal for this time and place,” or way of moving together.

In the words of the *Genjōkōan*, the duality of self and other must drop off, just like that of body and mind. (Davis 2023, Raud 2023) Such a dropping off happens to people who are practising, among other things, not to objectify their views and perspectives as part of a fictional permanent self. They are practising to become what Chan master Linji calls “True Person without Rank.” This true person reflects the decentred — and also embedded, embodied and agile — attitude I am sketching.

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<sup>40</sup> See Hara (2023) about “participant-led research” (*Tōjisha kenkyū*) groups in Japan, where neurodivergent individuals among others, in dialogue with each other, try to find linguistic expressions that enable them to communicate what normalized speech acts cannot.

They are not attached to one specific position: they are neither attached to any rank they might have in society, nor are they clinging to a specific perspective on an issue, but, at the same time, they are this “lump of red flesh”: embodied and embedded. Roth (2022, 40) explains how Zen master Jōshū Rōshi sees this “true person of no fixed position as one free from attachments, but also one who has found one’s dwelling place [*sumaibasho*]. Jōshū Rōshi stressed that ‘there is no practice divorced from the dwelling place.’” Roth comments: “it is within this place and space that the fundamental activity of the universe is manifested — that of both guest and host, self and world, subject and object, extending to the entire cosmos” (2022, 11). Hershock (2014, 68) also refers to this ‘true person of no rank’ — as to someone who, thanks to their creativity and capacity to relinquish their own horizons of meaning, is “capable of according with any situation and responding as needed to orient its dynamics in an enlightening direction.” Their creativity consists in responding to this very situation in which they find themselves.

Interestingly, in Aztec philosophy, where thinking together is deemed much superior than thinking on one’s own (Purcell 2023, 279), it is held that one can become rooted (which is deemed as more important than being happy) through bodymind practices that allow one to harmonise one’s own body, one’s body with one’s mind, and one’s own bodymind with others in one’s community: “[...] the Aztecs thought that, in order to become rooted, one had to undertake practices of three sorts: embodied practices some of which were like yoga, ritual practices for character habituation, and relationship practices to maintain supportive groups in a good society.” (Purcell 2023, 279)

So what kind of bodymind practices should we develop and then engage in so that we can “learn in practice” (參學 *sangaku*), to decentre, to become agile and creative in harmonising our mind with our body and us with other people, towards a flourishing, non-polarized society? I will here give some examples in the hope to inspire the development of more of these practices and their introductions in our communities, starting from schools and colleges.

Krueger 2021 suggests a form of music therapy in which AS and NT children learn to listen to and make music together, because: “musical activities like listening,

singing, and joint music-making provide a regulative context in which children with ASD can — alongside neurotypicals — co-construct alternative musically-guided FV [styles of movement].” These children develop together a common body-language: “Instead of expecting children with ASD to responsively conform to neurotypical FV, both instead quite literally meet in the music; musical environments function as a common space for developing shared (i.e., musically scaffolded) FV in which participants are jointly responsive.” (Krueger 2021, 380)

Dōgen included both sitting meditation, and activities such as painting and cooking, which, like other “pathways arts”<sup>41</sup> — e.g. martial arts, calligraphy, tea ceremony, and music — can make us more capable of receiving the other, by asking our bodymind to listen and see the other with attention and care, and developing attuned responses.

Painting a decayed tree and polishing a brick<sup>42</sup> of dead ash continues without stopping. Even though calendar days are short and urgent, study of the way in this manner is profound and deep.” (Dōgen, *Shinjin gakudō, Body-and-Mind Study of the Way*, trans. Tanahashi 1985, 91-93)

[T]he position [of head cook] requires wholehearted practice... After you have received these materials, take care of them as your own eyes... Select chopsticks, spoons, and other utensils with equal care, examine them with sincerity, and handle them skillfully.” (Dōgen, *Tenzo kyōkun, Instructions for the Tenzo [Head cook]*, trans. Tanahashi 1985, 53-55)

All these activities are carried out in a shared “place,” in which different perspectives, embodiments and ways of life can meet, to which we need to learn to listen. Job and

<sup>41</sup> The word for “path” (道, Chinese: *dao*, Japanese: *dō*) is often part of their name.

<sup>42</sup> When Dōgen refers to painting trees and polishing bricks, Tanahashi explains these activities as metaphors for Buddhist concepts. E.g. painting means to express enlightenment (Tanahashi 1985, 317), while polishing a brick points to sit in meditation with too much attachment for the result (319). However, attention should also be paid to their literal meaning: by visualising these activities we can appreciate Dōgen's attention to embodied practices.

Vazquez (2023, 63) discuss exercises to “relinquish the self” that Jacki Job uses to help dancers develop greater sensitivity to inputs from the specific place where they are, and from each other<sup>43</sup>. They are exercises in which, in Vazquez’ words, “space is practiced as a place for the hosting of others, the hosting and weaving of difference.”

In many pathway arts, the first step towards decentring — which I have called elsewhere “Step One<sup>44</sup>: Learning new frameworks”— happens through the repetition of fixed sequences of movements, called *kata* in Japanese. By performing *kata* over and over again, one imitates the gestures of past masters<sup>45</sup>, until they somehow become second nature. When this happens, we appropriate a new framework, and with it some kind of access to another world. A new way of moving, our body, sword, or brush, becomes available. By taking on a bodymind practice we realise that learning a new framework involves more than knowing some facts: it means accessing a world and “a style of movement,” with the whole of oneself, after having temporarily emptied oneself from one’s habitual movements, assumptions, and behaviours. Learning other frameworks through our bodymind, by repeating Confucian *li* (ritual moments) such as sequences of movements (*kata*) codified in a certain pathway art, helps take some distance from our own frameworks and automatic responses<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> Jacki Job (Job and Vazquez 2023, 63-64) refers to an exercise for her dance students: “I have an exercise where one person stands with their eyes closed and allows another to look at them. I then ask them to allow a similar gaze from the space itself. We then begin to play with a sense of closing and opening the body’s multiple eyes whilst the space gazes back [...] Soul listening is felt inside the body, as well as on the skin, and everything becomes alive.” This exercise helps them develop many eyes and ears that allow them to receive not only the other but also the space in which they are going to dance together.

<sup>44</sup> Robbiano (2023a) deals extensively with the theoretical background of the three steps in Dōgen and bell hooks and with the practice of diversity in higher education through these steps, and leaves the somatic aspect implicit.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Fongaro (2023)’s insightful paper about self-cultivation through the dialogue with past masters while learning *kata* with one’s bodymind. He describes three steps that show important similarities with our model — firstly, what one imitates is seen as an object; then, one tries to become the subject of the same movement and finally one is free to transcend the gesture of the old masters, while at the same time, never forgetting it.

<sup>46</sup> It might be interesting to look into similarities between learning *kata* and Social Stories™, a technique devised by Carol Gray (2021) to teach autistic children how to learn step-by-step how to behave in specific social situations.

The next step of decentring — Step Two: “Listening to unique others, see from their eyes” — requires the capacity to empty oneself of one’s own plans and preoccupations, and put the other — or our material — in the centre. Pathways arts, crafts, cooking can all be considered appropriate bodymind practices, since they train our capacity to “listen” to ingredients, people, environment and material, as “subjects” rather than imposing our intentionality on them. Meditation is part and parcel of pathway arts, since it sharpens one’s attention, helps to empty oneself of one’s characteristic way of approaching reality, and strengthens one’s capacity to listen to the uniqueness of what is outside of us. Davis (2022, 28) explains that the practice of meditation makes us aware of and alleviates karmic editing (Davis 2022 21; 27-29): “step by step, breath by breath, enables us to become aware of this entanglement [“in the narratives and preferences of our minds”] and to participate more freely and responsibly in shaping the ways in which we experience the world.” Davis (2022, 29) refers to the Daoist sage Zhuangzi, who influenced Zen thinkers, and who tells of artisans, like carpenter Qing who was praised for carving perfect bell stands. When asked about his secret, he refers to his practice of “fasting to quiet the mind”, which allows him to let go of various layers of intentionality — such as preoccupation with money, honour, clumsiness — until, when walking in the forest, he somehow becomes one with the right tree, and manages to carve it in the most attuned way<sup>47</sup>. We could say that, after emptying himself, the bell carver sees from the perspective of each unique tree, before selecting the one who “wants to become” a bell standard.

These two “decentring” steps prepare us for the practice of Step Three: “Co-create in dialogue with many ‘you.’” Here we train to receive and respect other people, and even our material, as unique co-creators. We train to adapt the forms of past masters

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<sup>47</sup> “When I am going to make a bell stand [...] I fast to quiet my mind, and after three days, I no longer presume to care about praise or reward, rank or salary. After five days, I no longer presume to care about honor and disgrace, skill and clumsiness. After seven days, I become so still that I forget I have four limbs or a body. When this happens, for me it is as if the royal court has ceased to exist. My skill is concentrated and the outside world slides away. Then I enter into the mountain forests, viewing the inborn Heavenly nature of the trees. My body arrives at a certain spot, and already I see the completed bell stand there; only then do I apply my hand to it. Otherwise I leave the tree alone.” Zhuangzi (2009, 152, Chapter 19)

to the unique present context — e.g. to respond to the thickness of today’s ink today, to the thinness of this paper, to the quality of this brush, until we reach “ante-originality” (Maraldo and Maraldo 2022): the kind of creativity that pathway artists, such as calligraphers, achieve by first modelling past masters and then transcending them while performing in the now. We practise our capacity to integrate with others, materials, environment and create something new together, gracefully, and creatively.

These practices might well help us develop the agility and capacity to take a leap and respond spontaneously to any unique situation, or any unique ‘you’ — e.g., this person at the other end of neurodiversity spectrum, this ingredient, tree, paper —and develop together a common language or creatively renewing a diverse community. Creativity — i.e. the “ability to adjust oneself again and again to different contexts, challenges, and options” (Brillenbug Wurth 2017) — can be seen as an extension of the capacity for accommodation (Piaget, in Kopf 2022, 76, see above) — that replaces the assimilating habit of reducing anything to one’s old conceptual schemes. This kind of creativity does not express itself by imposing a form on a material or another person without taking into account their uniqueness and responding to it: we transform the other and our shared place, while we allow ourselves to be transformed:

This is the way to turn things while being turned by things. Keep yourself harmonious and whole hearted in this way and do not lose one eye, or two eyes. (Dōgen, *Tenzo kyōkun, Instructions for the Tenzo [Head cook]*, trans. Tanahashi 1985, 56)

Dōgen framework — which sees us as changing and in a place, as transforming the other and the place while being transformed by them — can be used to devise new practices in which we approach other beings with care and co-create together with them, engaging in what one might call “back-and-forth creativity,” to create, in the words of Yuki Imoto (2022, 17-18) “a space for imagining a non-dualistic, intersubjective sense of being in the world, where we learn experientially about our

interconnectedness, and about being vulnerable and compassionate in and through relation”. We need to meet across neurotypes, disciplines and ways of life; and devise practices that can develop creativity through decentring, through bodymind practices in a specific context, towards responsible and attuned co-transformation of self and other<sup>48</sup>.

### 7. Conclusion

In this paper, I formulated a certain conception of decentring, in dialogue with the Japanese mediaeval philosopher Dōgen, and autism scholars and other thinkers, which I have presented as a “universal for this time and place”: a practice that I recommend as the way to go, towards a responsible co-creation of self, other and world. I have argued that decentring is needed when entering in dialogue or collaboration across differences. I focussed on the context of an encounter between a neurodiverse person on the autistic spectrum (AS) and a so-called neurotypical (NT). Various conceptual tools — coming from Dōgen’s adaptation of the Buddhist frameworks of dependent origination and the concept of finding oneself in a place, together with the double empathy problem and insights on blindness to different styles of movement, developed in the context of studies on autism — helped me make suggestions about what may hinder or help both NT and AS towards decentring.

I first argued (Thesis 1) that NT might resist decentring vis-à-vis AS; and that (Thesis 2) AS might have advantages at decentring, some shared with other minorities and some more specific.

Interaction across differences can be difficult, and often AS is described as incapable of understanding thoughts, and feelings of others. From the perspective of dependent origination, when two people interact, or fail to interact or to empathise with each other, the whole context needs to be considered: the two people might not share the same cultural universals, frames of reference, or styles of movement, or they might

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<sup>48</sup> Yuki Imoto (Keio University), Masaki Matsubara (University of Tsukuba), Neera Malhotra (Portland State University), and I, in collaboration with theatrework practitioner Toshimitsu Kokido, are working together to explore the introduction of such practices in higher education.

resist empathising with the other and seeing from their eyes. NT might resist trying to “see as the other sees” and feel entitled to objectify AS and to attribute stereotypical characteristics to them. AS, because of their weaker filters, or permeable skin, might have epistemological advantages, shared with other minorities, and neurological advantages towards decentring. However, there are also contexts that trigger AS to close off from their context rather than to open up.

I have then argued (Thesis 3) that both AS and NT — as other individuals engaged in intercultural dialogues or in any kind of collaboration across differences — might profit from bodymind practices that help decentring vis-à-vis each other. This might allow them to develop a capacity for creative response and attunement to reality, which involves taking responsibility for the transformation of each other and our world, in dialogue with each other. I have suggested that we need to look together for bodymind practices that could help decentre towards co-creation. The goal is to flourish together in a community and in shared places in which diversity is not only accepted, not only valued in theory, but practised every day. Since no two humans are identical and no two situations are, and therefore any interaction between two people is across differences, not only in order to engage in any kind of intercultural dialogues but also in order to interact with anyone else, we both need to make an effort to travel to the world of the other. This is an important realisation that might be facilitated by recognizing different cultural universals, different frameworks, by using labels and zooming on some tendencies. Moreover, it is also crucial to be aware that people always meet in a specific place: how they respond to each other, whether they manage to attune themselves to each other or not, should not be explained by referring to some essential characteristics of one or the other. The whole situation needs to be considered: all participants are responsible for how they co-create their shared place.

This paper tries to contribute to the realisation that nobody has any good reason to believe that it is the *other* who needs to travel to *my* world. I argue that meeting across worlds requires effort on both sides, and that travelling to the world of the other, building new worlds and shared places together require recognition of the embodied and embedded natures of any encounter, and the will to develop and to engage in

embodied and embedded practices that facilitate decentring. And that practising encounters and co-creations across differences is one of the joys of being human.

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