Mesologics and Mesology (as opposed to Ecology)

"Mesologics" is related to misology, which is the study of milieus (ambient worlds). The word mesology comes from the Greek *meson* (middle, centre, half, medium). Mesology as a field of research had initially been proposed to the French "Société de Biologie" in 1848 by the physician Charles Robin. Yet, the plural "mesologics" suggests two more ideas. A milieu cannot be absolute. Not only does it, as a centre, depend on a set of relations at the node of which it is located, but as an environment it can also signify the contrary: it can be what surrounds this centre. For example, the ambient world (*milieu*) of a fish is the water in which it is living, but any fish is itself in the midst (*milieu*) of the water it sees, which is proper to that single fish. In short, each living being is in the midst of its ambient world. In French, the geometrical point located "in the middle" ("*au milieu*") of something is not a life environment (*un milieu*). In the phrase "the middle of the road" (*le milieu de la route*), "milieu" does not have the same meaning as in "*le milieu rural*" ("the rural environment").

A logical problem arises: two different sets of logic coexist but they do not exclude each other but compose a logic situated on a middle ground: a *meso-logic*. The plural 's' of mesologics is thus important.

But is this really possible? A *meso-logic* is not admitted by Aristotelian logic, which has been structuring European thought and, in particular, the sciences. You can have either A or non-A, but not both. It is precisely this third possibility that is illustrated by the ambivalence of the word *milieu*, since it means both one thing (a centre) and the contrary (an environment). This ambivalence is not only that of a word, it is also the essence of what mesology studies: milieus. A milieu is not a substance able to maintain its identity independently from other elements; a milieu is a set of relations between beings and things. Which things? In the case of the human milieus, it is all those items with which we are related and which condition our existence and which are in return conditioned by our existence.

Milieu and Environment

The distinction between milieu and environment is important and it is reflected by the difference between mesology and ecology respectively. The latter distinction has been established by the Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō (1889-1960). The modern natural science called ecology is interested in the environment in the form of an *object*, which is not supposed to contain human subjectivity. Even if it is relational (like ecosystems or trophic

links), in its essence it is not supposed to depend on the point of view of the observer. It is detached from our existence which is why it can be "scientific." For ecology, the environment exists in itself and can be measured.

Milieu (*fūdo* 風土), on the other hand, as it is defined by Watsuji, does not exist in itself, precisely because in this environment human existence is not eliminated. On the contrary, human existence is structured by its relationship with a milieu, just as a milieu is structured by human existence. Therefore a milieu cannot be a pure object: it is necessarily fraught with our subjectivity. Watsuji thus coins the concept *fūdosei* 風土性, which is *mediance* in English. Right at the beginning of *Fūdo*[1] he explains that "the aim of this book is to elucidate mediance as the structural moment of human existence (*ningen sonzai no kōzō keiki* 人間存在の構造契機)". This means that the human being (*ningen* 人間) cannot be reduced to an individual entity (which Watsuji calls *hito* 人), since it also includes a relational set, that is, the interlinking of persons and things, which Watsuji calls *aida* 間. It is only in the dynamic relation of those two components that *ningen* concretely exist; and it is this relationship that Watsuji calls *fūdosei*.

Watsuji's approach is phenomenological and hermeneutic. However, it was corroborated by two other approaches, which are not related to his own method since they both are positivist:

- First, in the domain that would later become ethology, the German naturalist Jakob von Uexküll (1864-1944) publishes (almost at the same time) a book[2] in which he establishes a capital distinction between *Umgebung,* which is the objective environmental datum, and Umwelt, which is the ambient world proper to a given species. This distinction is the exact counterpart of Watsuji's distinction between environment (*kankyō* 環境) and milieu (*fūdo* 風土). The only difference is that Uexküll studies animals in general, whereas Watsuji studies the human in particular. In other words, Uexküll considers the ontological level of the biosphere (the whole of living milieus) while Watsuji considers the ontological level of the ecumene (that is, the whole of human milieus).

- Thirty years later, in *Le geste et la parole* (1964)[3], the French anthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan (1911-1986) interprets the emergence of our species as an interactive process between an individual "animal body" and a collective "social body", the latter being progressively constituted by the exteriorisation and deployment – in the form of technical and symbolic systems – of some of the functions of the former. This techno-symbolical social body, which Leroi-Gourhan frames with the help of the methods of palaeontology, is nothing

other than what Watsuji had called *aida* or *aidagara* 間柄 (which can indeed be translated as "social body"). And what Leroi-Gourhan calls "animal body" corresponds, in Watsuji's terminology, to *hito*. The only difference is that the Watsujian mediance concerns more explicitly the *human* relationship with the environment.

For misology, the second half of human mediance is not only a social and techno-symbolical body; it is also necessarily inscribed into ecosystems, and thus represents an eco-techno-symbolic system. Accordingly, we will speak of a *social* body rather than of a *medial* body which is our milieu. The deployment of this medial body out of the animal body corresponds to the deployment of the ecumene out of the biosphere. In both cases – but at different scales – what is at work is the structural moment of mediance.

As a dynamic coupling of an individual animal body and a collective medial body, the "structural moment" of human mediance is both spatial (thus constituting milieus and the ecumene) and temporal, because it works as an historical process. Through technical systems, this process *deploys* our corporeality as far as the end of the world (we can see for example galaxies situated at more than ten billion light years, or pick up stones on Mars); but at the same time, symbols "*reploy*" the world into our animal body, in the form of neuronal connexions which represent the world in our flesh.

In short, technology cosmizes the human body and, at the same time, the symbol somatizes the world. This deployment-reployment is the transmission (*trajection*) which, out of the environment, creates our milieu, or an *Umwelt* out of the *Umgebung*, thus establishing our mediance.

This movement always goes in a certain direction, as it is inscribed in a human history grafted on natural history (evolution); and it has a meaning proper to those beings which it concerns, that is, the beings existing in that milieu by dint of that history. As Watsuji wrote, it is the milieu which gives history its flesh, and it is history which gives a milieu its sense.

Accordingly, in our medial body, that is in the milieu and in history, everything is *trajective:* it is both objective and subjective. Objective, because it necessarily supposes the existence of facts (an *Umgebung*); yet subjective, because it also supposes our existence, which interprets this *Umgebung* in order to make it our *Umwelt* or our reality.[4]

This always contingent double sense of reality – which is both factual and possible, *Umgebung* and *Umwelt,* environment and milieu, A and non-A – poses a logical problem that can only be overcome by a *meso-logic* including (and not excluding) the middle. This logic does indeed exist: it has been developed in India around the third century. It uses the tetralemma, which is represented by the following four stages: 1. Affirmation (A is A); 2.

Negation (A is not non-A); 3. Double negation (neither A nor non-A); 4. Double affirmation (both A and non-A).

The Western tradition never went beyond stages 1 and 2. Even in the Hegelian synthesis there is no coexistence, but deletion of the thesis and the antithesis, and the law of the excluded middle is thus respected. This law forms the basis of a philosophical dualism. It requires to foreclude (lock out, reject, *verwerfen*) our medial, eco-techno-symbolic body, since it cannot allow a situation in which A is always also simultaneously non-A. By the same token, it requires to foreclude both trajectivity and mediance, which provide the meaning that things and other people have for us, and which we have for others.

We have to overcome the foreclosure of the medial body in order to come to terms with our milieu. Needless to say, this overcoming does not signify the rejection of science, the methods of which remain indispensable for knowing the physical foundations of reality. On the other hand, physics itself, at quantum level, has come to acknowledge the interrelation of A and non-A.

Augustin Berque (2011)

---

[1] 1935, *Fūdo*. The English translation *Climate and Culture* from 1961 is very inaccurate. One should refer rather to the German, the Spanish, or the French translations. See my *Fûdo, le milieu humain*, Paris, CNRS, 2011.

[2] Jakob von Uexküll: *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, University of Minnesota Press, 2011 (*Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen,* 1934).

[3] *Gesture and Speech*, MIT Press, 1993.

[4] This question is elaborated in my *Écoumène. Introduction à l'étude des milieus humains*, Paris, Belin, 2009 (2000).