



Opening Up the Space Between Us
2024 MLE Banner Theme

Though the view should be as vast as the sky, keep your conduct as fine as barley flour.

— attributed to Padmasambhava

Our relationship lives in the space between us – it doesn't live in me or in you or even in the dialogue between the two of us – it lives in the space we live together and that space is sacred space.

— Martin Buber

Why do you stay in prison when the door is so wide open? Move outside the tangle of fear-thinking. Live in silence. Flow down and down in always widening rings of being.

— Rumi

Over the centuries, we have become very skilled as “masters and possessors of Nature” (among other things), and have collectively worshiped at the altar of certainty. But we have also come to see, since Descartes, that this paradigm is an optical illusion (Einstein) that secludes us from the vaster possibilities of knowing, convened through a recognition of our interdependence. If we take seriously the continuity between life and mind, then it would make sense to regard the conditions of our mind as none other than the conditions for the different positions and structures that we find in the outer world. How we seek to know and understand in large part determines how we enter into relation with others, with the world, and with experience itself. Our epistemological outlook, in other words, can serve to either open up the space between us or shut down the possibility of encounter; it can either be a condition for generative forms of “ethical know-how” (F. Varela¹) or dull the edges of our ethical perception and sensibility.

By taking up “**Open Space**” as the banner theme for 2024, we wish to invoke a more expansive, interconnected, and panoramic epistemology for engaging with the world, one which allows for a natural form of clarity (“**Seek Clarity**”) to emerge, through “always widening rings of being,” as Rumi so elegantly put it. We aspire to take up this theme as a *value* (featured as it is in our constellation of MLE Values), mined as much for its conceptual density as for its everyday, down-to-earth call to action. When we “open space” and “seek clarity,” what new horizons appear before us which might not otherwise have been possible?

¹ See Varela, *Ethical Know-How: Action, Wisdom, and Cognition*, SUP, 1999.



Open Space

Keep an open heart and a clear mind and creativity will burst forth by itself.

We must avoid the trap of certainty ... and cultivate our inner flexibility.

– Francisco J. Varela

The world is in constant flux and transformation. Trying to stabilize the world with dogmatic or inflexible attitudes is a trap, given the inexorable fluidity of the world. It's important to accept that the fluidity of the world cannot be dealt with by trying to stabilize or check its dynamic. We should, rather, focus on developing our own flexibility, which is given to us through our physiology and our experience. Education should focus on cultivating our capacity for flexibility rather than on learning x or y content. Learning how to change is a new discipline.



Seek Clarity

Practise directness and purity in thought and action.

Clarity and insight arise in the gap between thoughts, the open ground of Being.

– Francisco J. Varela

At a point in your process of being aware you let go of something and allow something else to arise. There's a creative discontinuity. We usually think consciousness is continuous, that it's a solid thing, but it's not. The creative process and the spiritual one are about learning to be much more light about what's happening in our minds: just let it go, put it down. At that moment there's a break, a discontinuity, a gap, and within that gap, there is an open ground which is Being and this space is the eternal source of novelty and insight. In fact, insight happens in the gap.

The illusion exists that there is pure rationality. Emotions and rationality are always an emulsion. Science at its living core is pure contemplation.

Some questions that might guide us in our exploration:

What is implied by open space? Does it imply the absence of boundaries and edges, or is it in fact inclusive of such boundaries and edges? How might it **decenter the subject and disrupt our habitual understanding of the subject-object relationship**? How might open space help us to **interrogate and reimagine our tired narratives based on “either/or” thinking**?

How does open space relate to the notion of **groundlessness**, which figures prominently in many of the **world's great contemplative traditions**? What does groundlessness have to teach us about the condition of life on this planet, as



well as about how we live and think and work together? What does groundlessness look like when brought to bear in the field of relationality? Can we use this template to ask, as Jarrett Zigon does in his recent work², “How is it between us?,” in order to establish a **more robust and versatile relational ethics**?

As humans, is it possible to **rest in open space without shutting down**? How does open space affect us on a cellular level, a cognitive (sense-making) level, and a symbolic level? Is it possible to **achieve clarity in our thinking and our actions without solidifying a particular position**? How can we grow our tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, and find within those qualities a source of epistemic robustness? How can we attend to the “unfinished business of knowing,” as Hanne De Jaegher³ puts it, without falling into an overdetermining attitude or a form of passive disengagement? What might we learn from summoning a “listening epistemology,” as described by contemporary enactive thinker Ezequiel Di Paolo⁴? Can open space in fact be generative of a certain form of clarity, one which is perhaps **closer to wisdom than to knowledge**?

If we truly take up open space as an attitude or a way of being in the world, what sort of epistemological outlook is required of us? What sort of **ethical-social understanding** thereby becomes possible? Might this change the ways that we do science and philosophy, and **collaborate in academia** more generally? What does it mean to put an attitude of receptivity, openness, and permeability at the center of our relations in our lives and work? Could doing so transform us into more powerful practitioners of care?

Finally, beyond its epistemic value, does open space lend itself to a particular form of **aesthetic expression** (whether that be had in art, architecture, religion, philosophy, or otherwise)?

As a panelist in MLE’s 2024 Inaugural Panel, we invite you to reflect on these questions from your particular horizon of inquiry and life experience, seeing where they might lead you and others in the discussion — not simply as theoretical questions but as lodestars for orienting to a more awakened, equanimous, and compassionate life. Let’s reflect together on what “opening the space between us” might mean for the future of our work together and for the future of life on this planet.

² Jarrett Zigon, *How Is It Between Us? Relational Ethics and Care for the World*, University of Chicago Press, 2023.

³ See Hanne De Jaegher’s talk at the 2021 Varela International Symposium, “[Enactive Epistemology and Ethics: Ways of Participating.](#)”

⁴ See “Enaction and Dialectics, Part I,” published on October 6, 2022 in *Dialectical Systems: A Forum for Biology, Ecology and Cognitive Science*. URL: <https://www.dialecticalsystems.eu/contributions/enaction-and-dialectics-part-i/>.