

# Comparing Topographies: Across Paths/Around Place: A Reply to Casey

J. E. Malpas

*School of Philosophy, University of Tasmania, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia*

I

The idea that there is significant work to be done in explicating the nature and philosophical significance of place is likely to be viewed by many philosophers as a peculiar notion. If place is thought of at all in contemporary philosophy, it is mostly as something that is reducible to the notion of spatial location or, perhaps, as an element in the subjective human experience of the world. Ed Casey is one of the very few contemporary thinkers who has seen that there is indeed more to place than this and who has also tried to communicate that insight in a number of important books and essays—most notably, *The Fate of Place*. Indeed, in my own work, it has sometimes felt as if I were merely following along in Casey's wake, trying to assemble something from the flotsam and jetsam that he has left behind. I am especially grateful, then, to have Casey comment on my own foray into the realm of “topo-analysis”—my book *Place and Experience*—and very appreciative of (even a little embarrassed by) his fulsome praise.

Casey is quite correct, I think, in identifying so much that the two of us agree upon—perhaps it is inevitable that there is such agreement given the centrality each of us accords to place—but he has also accurately identified a number of points of difference, or apparent difference, in our work. In the comments that follow, I want to explore some of these agreements and differences further. It seems to me that in thereby mapping out the various trajectories of our crisscrossing pathways in and around place, not only are our own ideas better illuminated, but so too is the topography of place itself brought into sharper relief.

II

If there is one central insight that lies at the heart of *Place and Experience* it is the idea that what we are as living, thinking, experiencing beings is inseparable from

the places in which we live—our lives are saturated by the places, and by the things and other persons intertwined with those places, through which we move, in which our actions are located, and with respect to which we orient and locate ourselves. It is this idea that is captured in what I call, near the start of the book, “Proust’s Principle” and one of the reasons Proust, and in particular his *A` la Recherche du Temps Perdu* figures so prominently in the latter sections of the book is precisely because that work seems so strongly to convey this idea of the place-saturated character of human life. One might say that this is a somewhat romantic notion, but if so, then the aim of *Place and Experience* is to show that such “romanticism” can be given a firm foundation in more sober and analytical considerations deriving from the analysis of concepts of objectivity and subjectivity, of causality and action, of mind and mental content, of body and world.

Of course, if what we are is so fundamentally determined by the places we inhabit—so that we are, as it were, constituted through the ongoing interplay of different places over time as they come together in one place at a time—then this need not yet imply anything like the epiphanic experience of place to be found in Proust nor need it imply that every human identity is constituted around just one significant, loved place, or even around a small number of such places, in the way that the life of Proust’s narrator, Marcel, is constituted around the place that is Combray. The exact way in which the place-bound character of a life is structured and expressed will depend on the character of the life itself—this does not rule out the epiphanic experience, but it does not require it. Thus it seems likely that many people never experience place as anything other than the apparently mundane backdrop to their lives, while many also fail to see any particular place or places as having a special or determining effect on their identities and yet this need not run counter to the claim that human lives are nevertheless constituted through their complex relatedness in and to place.

Proust’s Principle can be viewed as making a claim about what might be thought to be the underlying structure of the sort of life that is proper to human being whether or not it is recognized in any such life. The life that is explored in *A` la Recherche du Temps Perdu* exemplifies that principle in an especially strong form inasmuch as the life of Marcel is one in which, not only is the relation to place

given explicit recognition as a part of that very life, but a single place also takes on a special role in the constitution and articulation of that life. One might argue—although in *Place and Experience* this argument is not made explicit—that since a life is indeed constituted in and through its relation to the places in which it is lived, so the richness of that life, and the development of a sense of its own unitary character and self-identity, is directly tied to the way in which the lived relation to place comes to be articulated and expressed in that life. In that case, to live in a way that is neglectful of place will be to live in a way that is neglectful of that life itself—it will be to live in a way likely to give rise to an impoverished and perhaps even fragmented mode of existence. To care for and attend to our own lives thus demands that we also care for and attend to place.

Inasmuch as one of the aims of *Place and Experience* was indeed to develop and defend this account of place as having a fundamental role in the determination of our own life and experience, so Casey is quite correct to see my account as essentially “ontological.” Yet this ontological concern is not a concern with the basic determinative structure merely of human being—there are, in fact, *two* axes to the ontological account worked out in *Place and Experience*. The first involves the ontology of human being— what one might call the ontology of “experience”—the second, the ontology of place.

### III

That the ontology of place is itself worthy of investigation is something amply demonstrated by Ed Casey’s own work. The forgetting of place within the Western philosophical tradition has led to the relative absence of any proper ontological investigation of place or else, when some such investigation is forthcoming, to accounts that largely deprive place of any significance in its own right. Clearly, one cannot undertake to provide an ontology of experience—of human being—in which place plays a central role without also providing an account of place that is adequate to that role. In the absence of any such account within the tradition, the ontology of place thus becomes a necessary complement to the ontology of experience. Indeed, given the intimacy of the connection between place and human being, it may be better to talk of a single ontological

structure that is at issue here which can be aligned along one of two axes: the axis of experience or the axis of place.

My explicit focus on the ontological here may be seen as one of the differences between my own work and that of Casey. Yet inasmuch as we both accept the role of place in the determination of human life and experience, both of us agree in treating place as an ontologically basic concept, and both of us, to varying degrees, are concerned with bringing to light some of what Casey calls the “pervasive traits of place.” Moreover, the sense of ontology that is relevant here is undoubtedly one derived largely from Heidegger’s phenomenological conception of the ontological project. For this reason too, I would say that both Casey’s work and my own should indeed be viewed as phenomenological in orientation. The difference between us is that while Casey’s approach aims to achieve a certain density of phenomenological description, mine is more oriented toward a form of phenomenologically grounded analysis. Casey himself presents this difference in terms of an emphasis, in my work, on place as a “transcendental condition of possibility” or a “necessary framework” in contrast to his own stress on the “bare particularity of place” and its concrete description. As it turns out, the difference at issue here is not merely one of stylistic emphasis, but seems to indicate a more basic divergence concerning the ontology of place itself. Indeed, this divergence seems actually to underlie most of the other points of divergence to which Casey draws attention, particularly our differing views on the perdurance versus fragility of place as well as on the nature and role of narration.

There is no doubt that Casey and I agree on the Archytean principle that “to be is to be in place.” In this respect we both take place to be a fundamental “condition of possible,” not only for the appearing of human lives, but for any appearing whatsoever. Thus far we both agree that the inquiry into place is indeed an inquiry that has a certain “transcendental” character. Casey emphasizes, however, that the way in which place operates in this respect is as a *material* condition (analogously to Kant’s postulation of the ether, in the *Opus Postumum*, as a material condition of the human experience of space), and so as always defined in terms of its specific content, rather than as a purely formal structure. What worries Casey is that the more overt “transcendentalism” of my approach tends me away from the idea of place as material condition towards just such a

formal, “structural” conception.

It is certainly true that I frequently use the language of “structure” and “framework” in my explication of place. However, I would also emphasize that such talk is not intended to imply that place is therefore some sort of empty, purely formal notion nor should talk about the structure of place be taken to mean that place somehow stands behind or in addition to that in which any particular place might be said to consist. Place only appears in the concrete places that we inhabit and through which we move, and, in this sense, place is certainly not a merely formal condition of possibility but, in Casey’s terms, thoroughly “material.” Unlike the Kantian ether, however, place is not some sort of homogenous, featureless “stuff,” but is instead constituted through an “assemblage” or better an *interplay* of elements and, as such, possesses a structure that consists in the internal articulation of those elements. Part of my aim in *Place and Experience* was to delineate that structural articulation and so to map out the basic “topographical” framework that can be discerned, in countless variations, in each and every place. It is this topographical framework that is meant when I talk about place as itself a “structure.” Moreover, when one looks away from the structure of place to the structure of experience, the idea of that topographical structure—the structural conception of place—becomes especially important, since it is not just that particular places give a certain character to our lives and experiences, but rather that the topographical framework that is the structure of place, which I, perhaps a little confusingly, sometimes refer to just as “place,” is also determinative of those lives and experiences. In this respect, as I remarked above, the ontology of place and the ontology of experience turn out to be almost identical.

More needs to be said, however, if we are to clarify these matters in relation to the points that Casey advances. In particular, an important and underlying issue concerns the very idea of ontology as such. Here I would distinguish, albeit somewhat crudely, between two conceptions of the ontological project. One is essentially substantialist and reductive—taking a particular range of phenomena as its starting point, it looks to identify certain basic entities, or types of entities, as that from which those phenomena can be derived; the other is more relational or structural in its orientation—beginning with certain phenomena, it remains with

them, seeking to understand them through their mutual interrelation and integration. The standard view of place within the Western philosophical tradition exemplifies the first conception of the ontological project. According to that standard view, the ontologically basic notion is that of physical space; place is taken to be derivative of this and as identical with a certain portion of such space, demarcated according to social convention or custom, invention or stipulation, and perhaps associated with particular sets of subjective response or otherwise invested with socio-cultural significance. My own approach exemplifies, or purports to exemplify, the latter conception: the aim is to understand place, and its relation to experience, in terms of the interplay between a variety of elements. Place is thus a fundamental concept, not in virtue of being that to which other concepts or phenomena can be reduced, but rather inasmuch as it provides the over-arching frame within which those concepts and phenomena interconnect, while place is itself articulated and explored through its interconnection with those other concepts and phenomena. Inasmuch as place is thereby seen as providing the “frame” within which experience, and indeed all appearance, is possible, then so too is experience itself understood as constituted through the interplay of elements in and through place.

If one is to retain the centrality of place while avoiding both reduction and substantialization, then it seems to me that there is no choice other than to view place, not merely as internally structured and articulated, but as itself constituting a certain kind of structure. Moreover, my adoption of this particular conception of the ontological project is not without justification in its own terms. Indeed, I take much of Heidegger’s work (itself an important source of inspiration for the project undertaken in *Place and Experience*) to itself constitute a critique of substantialist-reductive ontology (this is what seems to me to lie at the heart of the Heideggerian idea of *Seinsvergessenheit* and the associated critique of metaphysics) as well as articulating a certain relational-structural ontology of its own—an “ontology” (though perhaps an idiosyncratic one) that is exemplified, in one form, in the idea of the *Topologies des Seyns* (Topology of Being) that is central to Heidegger’s later thought.<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, I would view Heidegger’s phenomenological appropriation of ontology in *Being and Time* as an explicit attempt at a re-oriented conception of ontology that looks, not to entities, but instead to the larger, more

encompassing “structure” within which they appear,<sup>2</sup> while Heidegger’s use of the language of activity and “event” seems to me to move in a similar direction.

The idea that place can be understood, in one respect at least, in structural terms, should not then be confused with the view that place is a “mere” structure or that it is something imposed on or additional to the actual phenomena at issue. The structural conception of place is intended, instead, to capture something of the dynamic and relational constitution of place, including the interrelation between places, between place and experience, and between place and a number of other fundamental concepts. It is this idea of dynamic interrelation or interdependence that Casey rightly picks up on when he notes that the “minimalist” idea of a mutual influence between place and person is actually underlain by a “more complex interrelationship between place, subjectivity, intersubjectivity and objectivity.” It also seems to be partially captured in Casey’s own characterization of place as “like a comprehensive *glance* into space” (my italics), for the glance is itself the encompassing and relating of things that occurs with a single sweep of the eye, while it also expresses something of the dynamism that is an essential element in the idea of place as I have attempted to articulate it.

#### IV

It is partly because of my adoption of this relational and dynamic conception as applied to place itself (rather than because of any views concerning the nature of the self in relation to place) that I am led to emphasize the “fragility” of place in contrast to Casey’s own talk of “perdurance.” In *Place and Experience* the emphasis on fragility arose out of a discussion of the way place appears in the poetry of John Clare and the way in which the fragility and vulnerability of the places Clare loved, and in relation to which his own identity seemed to be defined, mirrored the fragility of Clare’s own life and experience. Indeed, much of Clare’s poetry carries, not only a sense of place, but also a sense of loss or potential loss—even those poems that celebrate particular places seem also to remind us of the fragility of those places and of their vulnerability to destruction or decay.<sup>3</sup> In the argument of *Place and Experience*, then, it is the impermanence of place that is taken as a sure indication of our own mortality and finitude. As Casey sees

matters, however, it is the shifting and impermanent character of the self that comes first and that stands, in his view, in stark contrast to the perduring character of place. But if place is indeed understood in the dynamic and relational fashion that I have outlined above—a fashion that Casey himself seems often to affirm (for instance, in his talk of place as event or as “like a glance”)—then there can be no alternative other than to recognize the necessary alterability, the vulnerability, the fragility of place itself.

Yet the emphasis on fragility need not, of course, rule out some forms of perdurance. And this is as it should be, for there is no doubt that there is a certain sort of permanency that attaches to place and to our experience of it. This is perhaps especially striking in the Australian context. For indigenous Australians place—which is given complex expression through notions of both “site” and “country”—is that from which all things come and by which they are sustained. Place appears as the narrated landscape—written in hill and plain, rock and tree, watering hole and river-bed—that is articulated through the activities and journeying of the ancestral figures of “the Dreaming.” Place, constantly disclosed and disclosing, “perdures,” or better, abides, as that in and through which things have their being and in this respect place can indeed be seen as standing in contrast to the ebb and flow of ordinary human life. The abiding character of place understood in this way in no way implies, however, that place is thereby severed from human response or influence. Human action must always be in accord with the narratives etched into the landscape, and yet those narratives—and so place, both country and site—must be attended to, nurtured and preserved. Development—whether in the form of the mining of the land, the damming of rivers, the building of towns and roads—threatens to obliterate, or, at the very least, to conceal, the very narratives that are constitutive of place, while the loss of indigenous Australian culture and ways of life, especially indigenous languages and systems of knowledge, is similarly a loss of place. Even the abidingness of place that is found in the indigenous Australian understanding of place is thus consistent with an insistence on the “fragility” and vulnerability of that place—place is that which abides, but it is also that which requires respect and care.<sup>4</sup>

## V

Casey's concerns in relation to both the "structural" tendency in my account of place and my emphasis on place as implicated in the same fragility as that which affects human life and experience come together in a further concern on Casey's part that relates to my employment of the notion of narration. In *Place and Experience* I argue that the sort of unity that characterizes human lives is a unity best understood in terms of the unity of narrative or story and I say much the same thing about the unity that characterizes place. Casey suggests that this focus on narrative is problematic in that it "cannot help but favor the temporal dimension of human experience" and thereby, he seems to imply, to detract from the focus on place itself. Moreover, Casey further objects to the idea that the structure of place might be understood in terms of narrative on the grounds that narrative, while perhaps an element in place, cannot be what determines the identity of place.

The emphasis on narrative, however, is a direct consequence of the conception of place as dynamic and relational. If place is not some static backdrop to action, but instead encompasses the embodied self, understood in active relation its surroundings, then place must be determined in ways that are directly related to the possibilities for action and movement that are available to agents in relation to their surroundings.<sup>5</sup> Understanding place in this way must mean giving a central role to narrative, for it is only through some form of narrative structure, however expressed, that the action-oriented dynamics of place can be articulated. Moreover, the unity that I argue belongs to places, and to human lives, would also seem best expressed through the unity that is characteristic of narrative—a complex and dynamic unity in which different elements are preserved in an ongoing and developing interrelation.

The role of narration in relation to place is perhaps most readily apparent when one reflects on the way in which places always possess a certain history, both cultural and personal—a history that is often central to the very identity of those places. This is something made very clear in Proust, especially in Poulet's reading of Proust, according to which particular places are such that in them time takes on the form of space.<sup>6</sup> Places become the concretization of narrative and of memory. Moreover, places are structured by the narratives that belong to them

even when those narratives do not have any clearly historical sense to them. The Hopi plaza dance seems to me to have a narrational structure in this sense—a structure that derives from the activities, and their socio-cultural significance, that are played out within it. For indigenous Australians, the narrational structure of place is particularly clear. The “country” in which indigenous Australians dwell, to which they belong, and in which their very identity is inscribed, is a narrated landscape—not a landscape onto which a story is somehow imposed, but a landscape, a countryside, that carries a narrative (or rather a complex skein of narratives) in its very features and contours. On such a view, narrative is not merely an ingredient in place, but is determinative of place as such—place and narrative are thus bound intimately together. In *Place and Experience*, I suggested that this indigenous Australian conception of the relation between place and narrative was not an extreme view, but merely expressed something that is characteristic of place more generally, though a view that seldom achieves such explicit expression.

It is significant that the centrality given to place in indigenous Australian conceptions is not usually taken to indicate any prioritization of the temporal over the spatial or the topographic. Indeed, the way in which narratives are always taken to be embedded in place might be taken to imply, not only a significant role accorded to narrative in the constitution of place, but also a conception of narrative as itself essentially spatialized and placed, rather than as primarily temporal. This would certainly be in keeping with the character of indigenous Australian thought as giving priority to the spatial, or better the topographic, over the purely temporal.

More generally I would argue that it is mistaken, in any case, to think of narrative as essentially temporal in its structure. In fact, I would suggest that thinking of narrative in such a temporalized fashion is itself an expression of the tendency towards forgetfulness of the topographic. Narrative may certainly be construed as a “recounting of happenings,” but even this does not imply that narrative is therefore temporal in form, for what are we to understand by “happening” here? Certainly, happenings are not purely temporal phenomena. Every happening is an unfolding of things—an e-vent, as some translators of Heidegger would have it—in their interrelation. As such, every happening occurs

through both simultaneous juxtaposition and temporal displacement—to use the terms I take from Poulet on Proust—or, as we might also say, through both spatialization *and* temporalization.<sup>7</sup> Just as every happening thus implies a place (is the unfolding of place *in* place), then, so every place might indeed be understood as an ongoing happening or event. As such, every place can thereby also be understood in terms of narrative and story. Moreover, as places are identified and individuated, in part, through the way they relate to other places, and so by the journeys between places, so might the journey, and the relating of places, be taken as the basic and underlying structure for narrative.

## VI

If the overall orientation of *Place and Experience* is towards the working out of an ontology of both place and experience, and as it attempts to do this in a way that preserves a sense of the interrelation between these two, while also avoiding any substantialist or reductive treatment of either, then so part of the working out of the ontology at issue here must be a reworking of what ontology itself might be—a reworking that emphasizes the dynamic over the static, the relational over the substantial, the holistic over the reductive. In this respect, I think many of Casey's criticisms are surely belied by what I take to be Casey's own sympathies in favor of just such a dynamic and relational approach—sympathies expressed in some of the comments already noted.

One of the reasons why place has so often been overlooked, ignored and forgotten, it seems to me, is precisely because of the way in which it does indeed require a more dynamic and relational approach, and by its resistance to formalization and clarification. This does not mean, however, that place lacks any structure or character that is proper to it. Instead it has a character that must be mapped out in a manner analogous to the methods of the topographical surveyor—a method that calls upon our practical involvement in the landscape to be investigated and that depends on attending to the interrelation between the elements that make up that landscape. Of course, as anyone who has ever used a map knows, landscapes change as do the conventions of surveying and of mapmaking, and so the map that is the product of the surveyor's art is more to be construed as a record of the activities of the surveyor *in* the landscape, than of the

landscape in some pure, eternal form. Similarly, not only does the topography set out in *Place and Experience* aim to make explicit the dynamic character of what is mapped, it also aims to make explicit the dynamic character of the map-making itself—that is, of the philosophical-ontological project that is undertaken there. In this respect the task of attending to place, of retrieving it from the oblivion into which it seems all too easily to fall, is not a task to be undertaken once and for all, or that can be accomplished in just a single pass. Instead, it requires a constant returning to place, a constant re-mapping of the ontological landscape, a constant re-thinking and re-membering of who we are and where we find ourselves. In this respect the crisscrossing of paths between Ed Casey and myself, and the mapping and re-mapping of those paths, can itself be seen as one part on the project of an ongoing inquiry into the ontology of place, an ongoing project of retrieval, an ongoing topography.

## Notes

1. The idea of such a “topology” is something I explore at greater length in “Saying the Place of Being: Heidegger and the Question of Ground”, unpublished ms.
2. See especially the discussion in *Being and Time*, H34 ff. The brief discussion here draws on ideas I have developed at greater length elsewhere; including “Saying the Place of Being: Heidegger and the Question of Ground,” as well as: “The Transcendental Circle,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 75 (1997), 1–20; and “Gadamer and Davidson on the Ground of Understanding,” in *Gadamer’s Century*, eds Jeff Malpas et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, forthcoming).
3. See especially Clare’s “The Flitting.”
4. Shifting from an Australian to a European context, a similar emphasis on place as both “perduring” (or abiding) and also “fragile” would seem to be an important element in the idea of “dwelling” as it is developed in Heidegger’s later “topological” thinking.
5. At this point I think I ought to correct what seems to me a slight misunderstanding on Casey’s part concerning my emphasis on action. Casey writes that: “Despite his wish to de-anthropomorphize the study of place, Malpas is finally committed to an agent-based model of place.” My account does not, however, base place in agency as if agency were the ground of place. Instead it takes agency as central to the concept of a person, and to the notion of self, while it takes activity (which encompasses both that which acts and that which is acted upon) as the central notion in the understanding of place. I see no reason, therefore, to regard my focus on activity is somehow in tension with my emphasis on a de-anthropomorphized conception of place—in this respect, I would suggest that, rather than being anthropomorphic, my account is better viewed (with a nod to Gibson) as “ecological.”
6. It is worth noting that I do not regard Proust as prioritizing the temporal: indeed temporality presents a problem for Proust that is actually overcome through narrative.
7. In *Place and Experience*, I suggest that space and time ought to be understood as different, but interconnected aspects of what is a single structure of dimensionality. See *Place and Experience*, pp. 105–6, 168, 187. As a result I am sometimes critical of the idea that either space or time can be understood as completely independent concepts. Moreover, while neither is strictly speaking “derived from” place, the idea of dimensionality that encompasses space and time is itself available only in relation to the concept of place.