

Place and Topography: Responding to Cameron and Stefanovic

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Place and Experience has, as its subtitle, ‘a philosophical topography’. The phrase is not intended merely to indicate the book’s orientation to place as the central concept in its analysis, but also to draw attention to a particular methodological orientation within the work, a methodological orientation that looks to give primacy to a non-reductive and relational mode of analysis, while also acknowledging a connection to Martin Heidegger’s characterisation of his own thinking as a ‘Topologie des Seyns’ – a topology of being.¹ Although neither Ingrid Stefanovic nor John Cameron make any reference, in their comments on Place and Experience, to the idea of topography as such, the issues that they each discuss are directly connected with that idea. Indeed, I am grateful to Stefanovic and Cameron, not only because it is always gratifying to be able to engage in dialogue of this sort, but also because they give me the opportunity, in responding to their comments, to say a little more about what a philosophical topography involves.²

To begin with, however, I should say something about topography as it relates to Heidegger’s work, since this is where much of Stefanovic’s discussion has its focus. Heidegger talks, of course, not of topography, but rather about topology, and while this can be taken to imply a slightly different orientation, as I use the terms they have a very similar meaning.³ As an explicitly cited notion, topology appears only quite late and rarely in Heidegger’s thinking. As I have argued elsewhere,⁴ however, a topological approach can be seen to underlie much of Heidegger’s work both early and late. In spite of the shifts in his thinking that occur between the 1920s and 1950s, all of his work can be seen as an attempt to articulate, that is to ‘say’, the unitary place in which things come to presence, in which they come to be. The place at issue here (which appears in various guises as the ‘Da’ of Dasein, as the lighting/clearing, die Lichtung, that is the happening of the truth of being, as the gathering of the Fourfold in the Ereignis) is itself constituted only through the inter-relations between the originary and equi-primordial elements that themselves appear within it. In Being and Time those elements are delineated through the analysis of being-in-the-world and unified in the structure of care and temporality; in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, they are seen in terms of the originary strife between earth and world; in the Beitrag,

as well as later essays such as ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’, it is the interplay between earth and sky, gods and mortals that is seen as providing the basis (the ‘ground’ even) for the gathering of world.

The topography at work in Place and Experience operates in similar fashion to this Heideggerian topology in that it looks to understand the way in which experience comes to be in place (where experience is understood just in terms of the appearing, the coming to presence of things) through the interplay between the embodied agent, the environment in which agency occurs (and so also the things upon which agency acts), and the other agents with whom agency is invariably coordinated (whether linguistically or otherwise) an interplay in which no one of these can be given priority. Subjectivity and objectivity are seen as similarly reciprocally determined notions neither of which can be taken as the sole basis for the larger structure of which both are part. Place is presented as the underlying ground here, not as something that stands beneath these elements as some determinate entity, but rather as itself constituted through the interplay of those elements (as Heidegger’s Fourfold, and so the World, is constituted through the play of earth, sky, gods and mortals), while also constituting the unitary frame within which those elements themselves come to presence.

These ideas are, of course, difficult to summarise without making them dense and perhaps even opaque, but they are ideas that are set out at greater length in Place and Experience and elsewhere. What is perhaps most important in relation to Stefanovic’s comments is to see the way in which this account of the grounding role of place involves a reconceptualisation and reappropriation of the notion of ground as such. Such a reconceptualisation and reappropriation seems to me to lie at the very heart of Heidegger’s own thought⁵ – it is part of the task of remembrance that is required if we are to overcome, in some way, the forgetfulness of being that is characteristic of metaphysical thinking.

It is largely because my aim in Place and Experience was to set out the conceptual and methodological underpinnings for my account of place – to set out, one might say, the basic idea of topography as such – that Place and Experience has, as John Cameron correctly notes, very little explicit discussion of the ethics and politics of place. But such issues were certainly not far away in my thinking and the final chapter of the book does begin to move in the direction of the ethical through the way in which it takes up issues of mortality, finitude and fragility. But Cameron has

noticed something that is perhaps more important here, and that is the way in which the conceptual and methodological core of Place and Experience, what I have been talking about in terms of topography, must also underpin any attempt to arrive at an ethics and politics of place, and more specifically, the special role that has in this regard. Narrative certainly has a central role in my discussion of place,⁶ partly because of the role of memory in the constitution of identity and because of the way I treat memory as itself place-bound, but also because of the way I understand place as itself constituted in terms of agency and movement. The narratives of place are thus the narratives that come with the pathways that open up in and through a landscape, with the possibilities and modes of action that are built into a room, a building, a plaza, a city street, with the salencies that emerge from engagement with a particular thing or task. This is, admittedly, a broader use of the term narrative than the term may traditionally lead us to expect, but it is a use of the term that also picks up on the ways in which place, landscape, country is narratively articulated within many Indigenous cultures, including those of Aboriginal Australians.

If we understand place as tied to narrative in this way, and of narrative as tied to place in its turn, then inasmuch as our belonging to place must be foundational to any attempt to think place in ethical terms, so we must understand that belonging as essentially underpinned by a dense and interconnected set of narratives – narratives that are constantly being re-membered, re-formed and re-articulated. The articulation of place is also an articulation of ourselves – it is thus that ethics enters centrally into the picture. But it is also an articulation that cannot be undertaken in any general or abstract way. While we can map out the topography of the concepts at issue here, in the end, the articulation of place is a matter of the articulation of the particular pathways, activities, directions, and concrete relations in which we are already enmeshed. The techniques that are needed in such articulation are the techniques that we have always used: story, song, poem, painting, sculpture, dance – all provide ways by which both place, and so ourselves, can be spoken, recognised and, in some part, understood.

In this latter respect, the ethics of place is also a poetics, and this, perhaps, is one of the main lessons to be drawn from Heidegger's own talk of 'topology': logos and topos are not separate from one another, but are already intimately bound together in poiesis. Moreover, as Heidegger understands matters, it is precisely the bringing

into view of this belonging-together of topos, logos and poiesis that is the task of the thinker.

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¹ See 'Seminar in Le Thor 1969', in Seminare, Gesamtausgabe 15 (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1986), p.344.

² Unfortunately, this brief reply will not allow me properly to discharge the debt I owe to John Cameron to say more about the ethical and political implications of such a topography – it is an issue that I intend to address on another occasion.

³ My preference, in Place and Experience, for topography over topology is largely determined by the need to distinguish between my own topo-analysis and that of mathematical topology, while at the same time drawing on associations with the techniques of triangulation and traverse associated with old fashioned topographical surveying. Elsewhere, however, I have employed the language of topology that is favoured by Heidegger, who understands it more specifically as a 'saying of place.'

⁴ See 'From the transcendental to the topological: Heidegger on unity, ground and limit', in Jeff Malpas (ed.), From Kant to Davidson: Philosophy and the Idea of the Transcendental (London: Routledge, 2003); and more particularly 'Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World', in Steve Crowell and Jeff Malpas (eds), Heidegger's Transcendentalism (forthcoming, 2005).

⁵ Indeed, the idea of ground ('der Grund') is the focus for two key works: 'Das Wesen des Grundes', 1929 and Der Satz vom Grund (1955/56).

⁶ Ed Casey has also picked up on the centrality of narrative here, although he sees it in more problematic terms – see the exchange between us in *Philosophy and Geography* 4 (2001).