

Presence and Human Presence — Jeff Malpas

From the early period of Greek civilization to the recent period of our century, “being” [*Sein*] has meant: presence [*Anwesen*] – Martin Heidegger¹

To speak of ‘human presence’ is to speak first of all of the presence *of* the human, but this also means the presence *to* the human. There is no human presence that is not doubled in this way – every instance of human presence, whether it involves the presence of one or many involves both the presence of and the presence to. In the presence of community, it is the presence of others as well as of ourselves to which we are all, each of us, witnesses; in the presence of solitariness, it is our own presence to which we are witness in the most direct fashion. Moreover, even when alone, we are never wholly apart from the presence of others – in our very language, our habits, our mode of being, we bring others with us – and so the presence of others also remains a part of the presence to and of ourselves. We remain in the presence of others, though they may be present differently, even in solitude.

To speak specifically of *human* presence, as it is to speak of ‘presence’ in a way that seems qualified by the ‘human’, also suggests a form of presence that is other than the human – a form of ‘non-human’ presence. Certainly presence cannot be restricted to the presence of the human *alone* – it includes the presence of other living things, of animals and plants, even of the non-human presence (however it may be understood or described) that we refer to as the divine or the sacred; it includes the presence of the land and the sky, of mountain, forest, river, lake, and sea, as well as more basic elements felt and sensed; it includes built and made forms also, whether bridge, house, tower, or road, sign, shed, wall, or ruin. These forms of non-human presence have often, of course, been animised or anthropomorphised so that they are experienced and understood as if they were all forms of a presence *like* the human,

even as if they *were* human, and yet their presence remains *other* than the human, even though it is a presence that inevitably *accompanies* human presence.

Indeed, if human presence always involves a *doubling* simply in its being a presence *of* and *to* – so that all human presence already, just inasmuch as it is human, involves some presence of *otherness* – so there is a further doubling that arises from the way in which human presence invariably involves and is accompanied by the presence of that which is other than human. Presence as presence of and to is always a presence that implicates both the presence *of and to the human* and the presence *of and to that which is other than human*. Presence is indeed a happening that involves the happening of *the world* and not of any solitary or self-same thing apart from the world. Presence is thus always multiple – and since it is always a presence of and to, and so is always in some sense relational, one might say too that presence is also always the presence of things *in communion*. To speak of *human* presence, then must already be to speak of *worldly* presence, and there can be no presence apart from the world.

Yet if human presence is always worldly presence, must worldly presence – or indeed, presence itself – always entail human presence? For instance: a stone sits on a riverbed – can one speak of the presence of the stone to the water that flows around it or to the fish that swims with that flow without there being some human presence that witnesses this? Put more broadly, must presence always be a presence *to* the human? The question is a commonplace one that appears in many forms even when presence is not explicitly evoked. It is a question that can be seen to underpin idealist and phenomenalist positions (positions that essentially construe presence as identical with presence *to* the human – whether understood as identical with ‘mind’, ‘idea’, ‘subject’ or whatever – and sometimes makes all presence dependent *on* the human), and that appears in the familiar and almost stereotypical problem of the novice philosopher: does a tree falling in the forest make a sound if there is no one to hear it?

Commonplace though it may be, the question is to some extent a mistaken one, and it is so just inasmuch as it treats presence as if it were primarily something that can be approached purely from the perspective of discrete things in their prior separation rather than from the perspective of the world within which things already belong to one another, are already implicated with one another. If presence belongs to the world, as to the world in its entirety, including the human and the non-human, then there can be no question of presence that does not involve both human and non-human together. Could there be a world that stands completely apart from the human? Even the raising of such a possibility is to project such a world out of the world – out of *this* world – that already includes the presence of the human. It is to raise it as a possibility that itself comes to presence in this world – and where else could there be any such presence, even of possibility? The question of presence, like the question of world itself, is always and only a question that already implicates the entirety of the world, human and non-human, and that can also only be asked out of that world. To suppose otherwise is to suppose that we can raise the question of presence in a way that prescind from the conditions of its asking – that we can question and yet ignore our own presence in that very questioning.

What this might be said to imply is that we ought not speak of human presence as if it were one form of presence among others, but instead think of presence as indeed a happening in which human and non-human are always drawn together, as indeed a happening that is also always a *worlding*. Yet although presence cannot be thought apart from the happening of world in its entirety, and the happening of world, inasmuch as it is thought, is always a happening in which the human is implicated along with the nonhuman, still there is something more to be said about how presence does indeed implicate the human. That this is so is suggested by the very fact that the distinction between human and nonhuman presence emerges as significant and salient in itself. The distinction between human presence and the presence that is other than human is not a distinction that simply

stands alongside, say, the distinction between the presence that belongs to the plant and that of the non-human animal, or between the presence of the sky as it stands in relation to the earth. Indeed, one might say that these forms of presence are all different from the presence that is associated with the human in that none of these forms of presence themselves bring to presence any *question* about their presence. What is at issue here is not strictly speaking a query as to whether human presence is required for there to be *other* forms of presence – as if human being somehow made or facilitated such presence – but rather concerns the nature of just that presence that belongs *to the human*. Human presence is not differentiated from other forms of presence because of any merely *biological* or more broadly *physical* difference that marks off the human from the non-human – and so human presence is not human *in virtue of* biological or physical difference (similarly, the ‘human’ is not merely a biological or a physical category). Instead, human presence finds its character as human precisely in being a mode of presence in which presence itself comes to presence *as* presence (and so the ‘human’ is properly an *ontological* category). One way of capturing this point is to say that human presence is that mode of presence in which presence, both presence and human presence, appears such that it can itself in question – *presence appears as uncertain, uncanny, obscure*. This is not a claim about whether presence is *possible* only in relation to human presence, but rather points to the character of human presence as such that it puts *its own presence* in question, and in so doing also puts *presence* in question. This does not mean, of course, that it puts presence ‘to the question’ – as if what were at issue were the interrogation of presence. Human presence is no less at issue here than is presence itself, and the questioning at issue is a questioning that questions itself, and that therefore essentially takes the form of a hopeful and expectant *attending to* or *listening* – even though what it attends to or listens for is itself uncertain. One might say of human presence that it is just that form of presence that is uncertain about its own character as presence – in a way that is not true of any other form of presence, for which certainty or uncertainty, knowing or not knowing, are simply irrelevant.

Since human presence carries with it this sense of uncertainty, uncanniness, questionability, so human presence is always faced with the need to take a stand in relation to presence – to its own singular presence, to the presence of others, to the presence of that which is other than human. This ‘taking a stand’ can involve the passive overlooking or even the active refusal of that presence, in any of its modes, or it can involve the engagement with it. Such engagement means, above all else, the acknowledging of the way one’s own presence is indeed part of a communion of presence, part of a larger relationality of interaction and inter-responsivity, as well as part of a bounding and differentiating. The ‘doubling’ that belongs to presence is itself reflected in the gathering and separating that are both aspects of the same ‘event’ of presence, and that are also part of that event as a ‘worlding’ – a happening of world that is at the same time a happening of self and of other.

If we think of what is at issue in the word ‘presence’ as the word appears in English, then ‘presence’ means something very like ‘being close to’, or perhaps even more directly, ‘being there’. The same ambiguities that attach to the term presence can also be found in relation to these latter two terms, but ‘being close to’ and ‘being there’, understood as in terms of presence, also draw attention to the character of presence as tied to place – to the ‘there’, to ‘nearness’. Presence does not occur in some levelled out unbounded expanse. Presence is indeed ‘here and now’ – it is the opening up of the world in this moment, this place. The ‘there’ and the ‘now’ that appear here as belonging with presence, are not, are more than a presence itself, to be construed as locatable on some extended plane or in some series of countable instants. There is no presence in mere extension or series nor even in duration alone. The theologian Paul Tillich writes that: “Our time, the time we have, is the time in which we have ‘presence’. But how can we have presence? Is not the present moment gone when we think of it? Is not the present the ever-moving boundary line between past and future? But a moving boundary is not a place to stand upon. If nothing were given to us except the ‘no more’ of the past and the ‘not yet’ of the future, we would not have anything. We could not speak of the time that is *our* time;

we would not have 'presence'".² Presence is not to be understood as simply the presence of the present instant in time any more than it is the presence of the isolated location in space. Presence is indeed the happening of world, but it is also the happening of time and of space as these both arise in and out of the *there*, the *here*, the *now* that is presence itself. Presence is that gathered, differentiating, bounded, openness that we experience in the very experience of our being there, in our time, in this place. It is this that we may also call simply 'being'.

¹ *Wegmarken, Gesamtausgabe* Vol. 9 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1996), p.400.

² Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), p.130.