

Foreword

The Place of Phenomenology and the Phenomenology of Place

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Can there be any inquiry into place that is not phenomenological? Can there be any inquiry, and especially any phenomenological inquiry, that does not involve place? Whatever else phenomenology may be, it is surely, at the very least, a form of inquiry into appearance and the apparent—into *phenomena* and the *phenomenal*. That inquiry may be descriptive, or it may be analytical; it may concern itself with what appears or with that which enables appearance, and yet in that very concern with appearance—with the *phenomena*—phenomenology is already and unavoidably concerned with place, since every appearance is, by its very nature, contextual, situated, and placed. Phenomenology is thus always concerned, even if sometimes only implicitly, with place. But if any and every appearance is placed, so too is every inquiry also itself *placed*. In the case of phenomenology, which is in part characterized by a concern with its own conditions of possibility, the concern with place is a concern both with the place of appearance and with the place of its own appearance. In the language I have used elsewhere, phenomenology always takes the form, whether explicitly recognized or not, of a *topology* or *topography*.

The close relation of appearance and place, and so of place to phenomenology, is a particularly important feature of the twentieth century phenomenological tradition that develops from Husserl and that encompasses Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty among others. Husserl may not take place as an explicit theme (though he does address space at some length), but many of his own key concepts—most notably the concept of horizon—clearly have connections back to the notion of place. One might even argue that the development of phenomenology after Husserl is in part characterized by the gradual uncovering and explication of the place of phenomenology as well as of the phenomenology of place.

Even outside of the conventional European phenomenological tradition, in the thought for instance of the Japanese Kyoto School, and especially in Nishida, the connection between appearance and place and the placed character of thought is evident once again. As soon as we turn our attention to the phenomena—to the reality of what appears or comes to presence—

then we are also drawn to attend, even if sometimes indirectly, to the way that appearance takes place and is held in place (and here we see the way place properly encompasses time as well as space).

It should not be surprising to discover that phenomenology has played a central role in the development of place-oriented thinking over the last fifty years or so—a period that has indeed seen place become an increasing focus for scholarly attention. Even within geography, a discipline that has its own important tradition of thinking about place in the work of thinkers such as Ratzel and Vidal de la Blanche, phenomenology nevertheless played a crucial role in the turn towards place that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s in the work of such as Tuan, Buttimer, Relph, Samuels, and others. Phenomenology was not alone in its influence here—psychological and ecological ideas were also at work—but it is hard to envisage the turn towards place in humanistic geographic circles without phenomenology. The same is true elsewhere—in architecture for instance, ideas concerning the importance of place have been largely driven through the appropriation into architectural thinking of ideas from phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and also Bachelard. Even environmental thinking, which might otherwise be thought to have exercised its own influence in the turn towards place, has been strongly influenced by the place-oriented thinking of phenomenologists, notwithstanding its frequent mediation through the work of others.

Perhaps we become phenomenologists in the very turn towards place, in the move to take place as a focus for our attention. In that case, to be a thinker of place is necessarily to be a phenomenologist, just as to be a phenomenologist is to be a thinker of place.

The essays gathered together here provide powerful testament to the closeness of the connection between place and phenomenology—and they do so in extremely diverse ways from discussions of video games, cryptocurrencies, and social media to analyses of architecture, painting, and landscape. Yet, these essays also demonstrate the way in which the phenomenological attentiveness to place not only remains central to reflection on human life and activity but also turns out to have a crucial part to play in the investigation of some of the most important new developments in the contemporary world—especially developments around technology, media, and communications. It is often assumed that what is most characteristic about contemporary technologies is that they operate to free us from the constraints of place.

The mobile phone, the Internet, mechanized transportation, and virtual reality systems are all readily understood as enabling us to act in ways that give us control over space and time in new ways, that break down the barriers between places, that enable the equal accessibility to us of all places irrespective of our bodily location (rendering even bodily location ambiguous). Yet although there can be no doubt that technology changes the way places appear, the

fundamental role played by place in the very possibility of appearance, including the appearance even of technology, remains unchanged. It is this that seems to be very clearly demonstrated in the essays here—and the point brings us right back to the way place and phenomenology are themselves so closely related through the way both connect to appearance.

It is the placed character of appearance and phenomenology's own concern with such appearance that must underpin any inquiry that aims to bring place and phenomenology together. It is still a question, however, as to exactly how place and phenomenology are to be understood in any more developed sense within such an inquiry. The question, as to the nature of phenomenology and the various forms in which phenomenology may itself appear, recurs throughout many of the essays contained here. In many respects, this is the primary question on which almost all of these essays converge. The question can be given more precision by saying that what is at issue is the following: how is phenomenology to be understood once it is explicitly situated in relation to place?

This is not a question that seems to me to have been given sufficient attention in the literature so far, and even this volume represents only a starting point for a more adequate inquiry. The question goes beyond any exploration merely of the methodological usefulness of phenomenology for certain forms of empirical inquiry, or as a framework to enable inquiry within certain fields, or with respect to certain objects—it is the very character of phenomenology that is at issue.

To some extent this question connects with a deep uncertainty that has arisen within contemporary phenomenology: on the one hand phenomenology originates as an inquiry that looks to investigate appearance as it occurs in experience (one might add: in subjective experience, except that such a characterization immediately raises questions as to what "subjective" really means here), and yet on the other, phenomenology is also increasingly drawn towards a conception of itself as "naturalistic," and even "scientific." This uncertainty is not itself directly thematized here, at least not in any especially salient way, but it does sit in the background of those approaches that look to connect phenomenology with cognitive scientific approaches or to combine phenomenology with certain forms of technical inquiry.

If we do take the phenomenological connection to place seriously, and we also attend to what place itself might be (the latter question being seldom directly addressed—even in this volume), then phenomenology will always stand somewhat apart from any purely "naturalistic" inquiry, if by this is indeed meant a form of inquiry that models itself on the natural sciences and its modes of explanation. The concern with appearance is a concern that cannot be captured within the frame of any straightforwardly empirical inquiry nor within the bounds of any particular natural scientific discipline (which does not mean that the inquiry into appearance does not connect with such inquiries or disciplines but only that it is not restricted to them nor

exhausted by them).

I would be inclined to say that this reflects the properly "transcendental" character of phenomenology (there is a further connection here between the transcendental and the topological or topographic), except that the notion of the transcendental is nowadays so little understood and so often misused. Moreover, even putting questions of its "scientific" character aside, phenomenology will always remain irreducible to any set of methods or principles of the sort that can then be "applied" in any straightforward fashion. There is no "method" or no set of "principles" that completely determines the proper manner in which place (or appearance either for that matter) is to be inquired into. Taking place seriously means taking seriously the placed character of any and every inquiry and recognizing that different inquiries will look to place in different ways and with different aims and interests.

This will also apply to phenomenology, and it is one of the reasons why phenomenology has developed in so many different forms (including what Ihde refers to in his chapter as "postphenomenology"), and with so many different "applications"—phenomenology operates, one might say, in many different places. Still, in saying this, one must not lose sight of the fact that these different places, and these different modes of phenomenology, all reside within the more encompassing structure of place as such and with respect to a conception of phenomenology that can itself be located, even if not uncontentiously, in relation to that structure. The difficult task is to hold both ends of what is at issue here together—to keep hold of place and phenomenology as they appear in their multiplicity and their unity.

If place and appearance are tied together, so that every appearance is placed (something affirmed by Aristotle no less than Nishida), then the inquiry into place, and so also phenomenological inquiry, must be counted as the most fundamental form of any inquiry—the mode of inquiry that underpins all else (here its genuinely transcendental character does indeed become evident). This is why the inquiry into place, and so also phenomenology, has a continuing importance that is all the stronger precisely because of the uncertainties that seem to surround place in the contemporary world. It is not only the uncertainties of place created by technology that are relevant here, but the uncertainties that come from the displacement of individuals and populations, the disruption of environmental systems, the destabilization of identities and communities, and the loss even of any sense of the place that might belong to human beings in a world that also encompasses what goes beyond the human. What this suggests, moreover, is that the issues at stake in relation to place, and that must also be addressed by phenomenology, are not only those concerning the way place is configured in different domains and with respect to different modes of appearance or experience, but also those issues that relate to place in the sense of ethos—place as that which is the basis for ethics.

To invoke this sense of place is not, contrary to some commonly held assumptions, to

invoke a reactionary or conservative sense of ethics, or reactionary and conservative politics along with it. It is rather to recognize that ethics too is shaped by the relation of appearance to place and especially by the relation between appearance, place, and commonality. If ethics essentially concerns the relation to others, as well as to oneself and the world, then ethics can only arise in that common place in which relationality is first possible.

Ethics has its origins in place. Although one might say that the issue of the relation between place and ethics receives little in the way of explicit attention in the pages that follow, it is never far from the surface of the discussion—questions of value and identity, of responsiveness and responsibility, and of involvement and implication run throughout these essays. If one cannot think phenomenology or appearance without place, one also cannot properly think place without ethics—to be in place is already to be oriented in ways that give order and significance to what is around us, that set orders of responsibility and obligation, and that shape our sense of who and what we are. Just as this book concerns itself with place, then so too does it concern itself, whether explicitly or not, with the very ethos, in its many forms, in which our lives are shaped.