Disclosing the Depths of Heidegger's Topology:
A Response to Relph

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Ted Relph's review of <u>Heidegger's Topology</u> acknowledges the importance of Heidegger's thought in the contemporary turn to place within the Humanities and Social Sciences, just as it acknowledges the importance of the philosophical inquiry into place as such (Relph is also particularly generous in his estimation of the role of my work, in <u>Heidegger's Topology</u> and elsewhere, in contributing to this). Moreover, Relph provides a strikingly apt and vivid image of the way the concept of 'place' has, in recent years, 'exploded' across many different areas and disciplines, in a proliferation of different forms and uses. While there are many works that deploy various senses of place, and that also delineate the detailed textures and forms of particular places, when it comes to the theoretical inquiry into place, the focus, for the most part, is not on place as such, but either on the effects of place or else on place as itself an effect of other processes. Thus David Harvey, as Relph notes, treats place as a social construction, claiming that the only interesting question then concerns the social processes that give rise to place (see Harvey, 1996: 293-4) – here place is nothing more than an effect; Doreen Massey, on the other hand, treats place, which she refuses to distinguish from space, as significant largely in terms of the consequences of our imagination of place (see Massey, 2005: esp. 5-8) – here it is the effects of place that are given priority. Even the work of a theorist such as Henri Lefebvre (see especially Lefebvre, 1991), so often cited as a key figure in the literature on place, turns out to be important, less for his elucidation of the concept, than for the prioritization of space and place as acceptable terms within critical discourse (moreover, in Lefebvre, of course, one also finds much the same treatment of space and place as effects of social and

economic factors as is evident in Harvey's own Lefebvrian-inflected writing), and much the same is true of other prominent theorists such as Foucault, and even Deleuze and Guattari. Part of Heidegger's importance is that not only has his work played an important role in enabling the appearance of place, as well as space, as a key theoretical concept in writers such as Lefebvre, as well as Foucault (a point that Stuart Elden's work has done much to establish – see, for instance, Elden, 2001), but that Heidegger is also one of the few philosophers, and the only major twentieth century thinker, to thematise place as such, and to provide an analysis of its structure and significance – so much so that the later Heidegger could refer to his own work as a 'topology of being'. For anyone interested in the attempt to say more about place than is available in the work of such as Harvey and Massey, or, indeed, in Lefebvre and Foucault, Heidegger must be essential reading.

Yet while Relph and I seem to be in agreement on the importance of Heidegger as a central figure in the thinking of place, we disagree in our assessments of just what is most significant in Heidegger's treatment of place. Focussing on the concept of dwelling that looms so large in Heidegger's later thinking, Relph observes that while he finds this aspect of Heidegger's philosophy 'appealing because it reinforces my own doubts about modern placelessness', he nevertheless also views it as 'the most superficial' aspect of Heidegger's thought. Relph takes the turn towards the concept of dwelling in later Heidegger as indicative of a shift from 'rigorous phenomenological description to a selective historical judgment'. There is no doubt that there is a move away from a certain conception of phenomenology in Heidegger, although as I note towards the end of the discussion in <u>Heidegger's Topology</u>, there is an important sense in which a form of 'phenomenological seeing' remains central to all Heidegger's thinking (see Malpas, 2006: 307-8), but I would certainly dispute Relph's claim that what characterises the later Heidegger is a shift to a 'selective

historical judgment', just as I would also take issue with Relph's own judgment as to the superficiality of the Heideggerian account of dwelling.

It is important to note that the concept of dwelling is already present in <u>Being and Time</u>. In a brief and highly condensed passage in §12 (the main elements of which reappear in 'Building Dwelling Thinking'), Heidegger distinguishes the way in which Dasein is 'in' its world from the way in which a physical entity is 'in' space (a sense of spatial-physical 'containment' that allows one thing to be said to be 'in' another as the water is 'in' the glass or the glass is 'in' the room). Heidegger refers to this first sense of 'in' in terms of dwelling (see Heidegger, 1962: H54). As deployed in <u>Being and Time</u>, the concept of dwelling remains obscure and problematic (see Malpas, 2006: 74-83), but in the later thinking it becomes one of the central ideas in Heidegger's articulation of the enriched conception of place, one which actually includes within it both spatial and temporal elements, to which human being is tied. In this respect, it is a mistake to see the notion of dwelling as tied to some pre-modern mode of life – not only does it render the concept itself superficial, but it also constitutes a highly superficial reading of what Heidegger has to say about it. What is at issue in Heidegger's talk of dwelling is not a comparison in the 'quality of life' between different historical periods, but rather the nature of human being as intimately tied to place. Dwelling is thus Heidegger's name for the topological mode of being that belongs to human being – and not merely the human in some selected historical period, but to the human 'as such'. It is precisely because humans <u>dwell</u> that the technological transformation of the world that occurs in modernity is such a challenge, an affront even, to what it is to be human – the essential character of human life as dwelling is contradicted and obscured by the re-presentation of the human in terms of consumption, productivity, preference and utility. Moreover, just as Heidegger's critique of technology is directed at a pervasive

tendency that underlies technology rather than being necessarily instantiated in any particular technological device, so too is Heidegger's account of dwelling intended as a description of a fundamental mode of being, rather than something to be instantiated only in certain lives rather than others.

Although Relph rejects the Heideggerian concept of dwelling as 'superficial', he is rather more sympathetic towards Heidegger's critique of technology – a critique that Relph reinterprets as a critique of 'rationalism.' I think that the use of the latter term here is ill-advised – while there is a certain calculative rationality that Heidegger views as problematic, it is a serious mistake, even if a widespread one, to treat Heidegger as an 'anti-rationalist' in any more general sense. However, there are undoubtedly important points of convergence between Heidegger's account of modern technology and its essence (which Heidegger refers to as '<u>das Gestell</u>' – 'the Framework'), and the accounts to be found in the work of a number of other twentieth century thinkers including Foucault's analysis of the rise of governmentality and the bio-political, Weber's description of the processes of rationalisation and bureaucratization, and Adorno's account of instrumental rationality. Such convergence is perhaps unsurprising given the prevalence of ideas concerning the problems and limits of technology in pre-war European thinking. What marks Heidegger's account out as distinctive, however, is the way in which the critique of technology is tied to a topological analysis of which Heidegger's account of dwelling is an integral part. Nowhere is this more evident than in the essay 'The Thing' – itself part of the original lecture sequence from which 'The Question Concerning Technology' also came – which begins with Heidegger's announcement of the phenomenon that has come to be known as 'time-space compression' (Heidegger, 1971: 163; see Malpas, 2006: 278-9). Relph himself assumes a connection between 'rationalism' and the loss of place – not only does he see such 'rationalism' to be associated with placelessness,

but he also sees evidence of the decline of 'rationalism' in the resurgence of interest in place – but it remains unclear how or why such a connection should obtain. If my account is correct, then Heidegger provides an answer here – one that works through the elucidation of place in relation to being, and, in terms of dwelling, to human being, and through his analysis of the way in which technology itself operates in relation to place. The fact that Relph seems not to have appreciated this aspect of Heidgger's topological thinking may indicate a deficiency in my own presentation of these ideas in <u>Heidegger's Topology</u> – it may well be the case that much more needs to be said in order to bring out the complexity and detail of Heidegger's later thought – although I suspect that part of the difficulty here is that any writing on the later Heidegger still stands under the shadow of the often partial and superficial readings that have dominated much of the literature to date, and that pervade the broader appropriation of Heideggerian thinking (especially in fields outside of philosophy).

Relph finds the Heideggerian response to the danger of technological modernity, at least as I articulate that response in <u>Heidegger's Topology</u> in terms of the importance of ideas of openness, indeterminacy, wonder, and also, though not mentioned by Relph, of questionability (see Malpas, 2006: 302-303), to be 'insubstantial', and Heidegger's own comment in the <u>Der Spiegel</u> interview that 'only a god can save us' to be disingenuous and evasive. I can sympathise with Relph's dissatisfaction here, but I think it also misses the point concerning what is at issue. Once we analyse the operation of technological modernity topologically, then we can see how it actually transforms our experience of place in ways that are at odds with the underlying character of place, and the underlying character even of that mode of being that belongs to technological modernity itself, but which it also conceals. My emphasis on the importance of concepts such as openness, indeterminacy, wonder and questionability, and

the modes of comportment associated with them, is intended to direct attention towards key elements in an experience of place that obscures neither own embeddedness in place, and the nature of that embeddedness, nor the character of place as such. Moreover, that we should look for a more concrete solution to the problems of technological modernity, while unsurprising, is also mistaken. Our contemporary situation is not the result of a process over which we, either collectively or individually, have mastery. Indeed, the desire for mastery, and the appearance of the entire world as potentially subject to control, is itself an integral element in the particular formation of the world that is technological modernity. The relinquishing of the desire for control, and the recognition of the extent to which all-encompassing solutions are beyond us, will themselves be key elements in that 'other beginning' that might presage the shift to a truly 'post-modern', 'post-technological' world.

The later Heidegger's apparently weary insistence on the limits in our ability to change the course of the world should not be construed as indicating a failure of vision or some lapse into quietistic resignation. It follows directly from a recognition of the essentially placed character of human being, and the limitation and fragility that follows inevitably from it. If it were possible to reconfigure our current forms of social and political organisation around a recognition of such placedness, then we would have a solution to many of our contemporary ills. Yet there is no concrete way in which such a wholesale reconfiguration can be brought away in a directed and purposive manner. What we can do is work, as Heidegger suggests, in the many small ways that are available to us, to reorient ourselves to our actual situation, to reorient ourselves to the proper place in which find ourselves – beyond this, however, there is no 'saving power' that we ourselves can exercise.

Heidegger's Topology attempts to provide an account of the way in which place provides a starting point for Heidegger's thinking as well

as an idea towards which it develops. Indeed, it is only in the very late thinking, from perhaps 1947 onwards, that Heidegger's topology emerges in a fully developed form (although a form that can only be appreciated when viewed in terms of the problems in the earlier thinking to which it is also a response). If we are to take Heidegger as making a significant contribution to the philosophical analysis of place in the twentieth century, then it must be primarily on the basis of the later thinking rather than the earlier. But the later thinking also makes demands on the reader that are much greater than those of the earlier work – demands that follow, in part, from Heidegger's own attempts to think topologically – and as a result the later thinking is more prone to being misread and misconstrued. I had hoped that Heidegger's Topology would go some way towards correcting this tendency, but if Relph's comments are taken as an indication then the work would seem to have fallen short of at least one of its objectives. On the other hand, if the sort of topology or topography in which I take Heidegger to have been engaged, and to which I take my own work to be a contribution, does indeed constitute a different, if not entirely unprecedented, mode of thinking, then perhaps one simply has to accept certain inevitable difficulties in the communication and elucidation of that thinking. Heidegger's Topology does not, however, stand alone. Not only does it seem to me to be supported by the work of others in the same field, most notably, of course, by that of Ed Casey, but it should also be read against the background on my other work. In this respect, Heidegger's Topology is only the second book in what should be a sequence of works that will together, so I hope, provide a more fully elaborated account of the philosophical topology that is adumbrated in Heidegger.

References

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