

Human Being as Placed Being

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Although I am certainly not opposed to a phenomenological characterisation, I think of my own work as, for the most part, 'topological' or 'topographical' rather than 'phenomenological'. Yet I also take phenomenology, along with hermeneutics, to be essentially topological in character (a point I have argued for elsewhere). It is precisely this topological character that seems to me to underpin the connections between architecture, environment and phenomenology that the EAP Newsletter has been concerned to explore and articulate over the past twenty-five years. One of the problems with some contemporary phenomenology, however, is that it seems to lose sight of this topological orientation (and so also to lose sight of its properly transcendental character). In fact, the continuing contemporary significance of phenomenology seems to me to reside neither in its cognitive scientific relevance nor in its possible connection with aspects of analytic thought, but rather in the way issues of place and environment arise as central to phenomenological inquiry even if they are sometimes obscured within it. This is also why phenomenology also remains important to my own work, in spite of my ambivalence about whether that work is itself to be understood as primarily phenomenological in character.

If phenomenology is understood as that mode of philosophical inquiry that is directed primarily at an understanding of 'phenomena' – at an understanding of 'what appears' or 'is present' – then its topological orientation is already evident in the fact that every appearing or presencing is itself a 'taking place'. It is this 'taking place', which is bounded, as well as open and dynamic, that grounds the idea of topology as philosophical. Such 'taking place' is the proper *topos* of the phenomena – the *topos* of appearing or presencing. The significance of such a *topos* is not affected by the shifts in the character of place and space that supposedly characterize contemporary globalised modernity. In fact, we can say that even globalized modernity appears only in and through specific *topoi* – globalisation is something that occurs only in and through particular places, in respect of specific things, localities, and practices. *Understanding globalisation thus requires an understanding of place* – and this is all the more so given the way in which one of the characteristic features of globalization (and of technological modernity more generally) is to obscure its own placed character. In this respect, too much of the contemporary discourse around globalization and modernity, even supposedly 'critical' discourse, fails to engage with the real character of modernity since the conceptual framework it employs (typically that of unbounded flow and connection) is precisely the framework of modernity's own self-representation – and so also the self-

representation of contemporary corporate capitalism and bureaucratic-technocratic governance.

The *topos* of the phenomena is a *topos* in which we are always involved – as such, the inquiry into *topos*, the turn back to place, is also a turn back to ourselves. It is, I would say, a turn *back to the human* (although a turn that also puts the human in question – puts *ourselves* in question). The mode of being that is the human is most succinctly characterized as that mode of being that is always turned towards *topos* – even when it seems to be turned away. *Human being is thus placed being*. This is especially important both for architectural and environmental thinking, since it is our own embeddedness in place, and the embeddedness of place in us, that underpins and ought also to guide environmental care and concern as well as architectural design and practice. Greater environmental attentiveness is likely to be achieved only through greater attentiveness to our own human being – which here means our being in and through place – and the same holds for good architectural and design practice (which is also why so much contemporary architecture falls short *as architecture*). Moreover, in emphasising the environmental here as tied to place, what is also emphasised is a conception of the environmental that itself encompasses the architectural (as the architectural itself overlaps with the environmental). On such a topological or topographic conception, the environmental is not merely that which pertains to the 'natural' or the 'unbuilt' (to that which is *other* than the human), nor is the architectural about only the 'cultural' or the 'built', but instead both refer us to the entirety of the surrounding world as it is brought to focus *in place*, and that therefore includes the built and the unbuilt, the cultural and the natural, the urban and the wild. In this way, the genuinely interconnected and interdependent character of the world is brought into focus as an interconnectedness and interdependence that is both encompassing and yet also concentrated; that is complex and multiple, and yet comes to salience in the singularity of place.

Recognising the topological character of phenomenology means recognising its environmental and its architectural relevance, and yet this may also be thought to bring with it a need to rethink the character of phenomenology. Although it does not do away with phenomenology as a mode of philosophical analysis and description, it suggests that phenomenology has an additional task that is directed toward the uncovering and articulation of our everyday involvement in the world, as that involvement occurs in and through the places in which our lives are embedded, and as it brings those places, and the wider environmental context, with all its complexities and interdependencies, to light. Such a task requires a mode of phenomenology that speaks to the phenomena in their immediacy, their singularity – and in their everydayness. Such a phenomenology would be a phenomenology of the everyday, but also a phenomenology attuned to the place of the everyday and the everydayness of place. To some extent it is a

phenomenology that is already present, although less in the pages of Husserl and Heidegger, than in the articulation of the placed character of experience that is to be found in much contemporary architecture, art, music, film and literature, as well as in many forms of personal reflection and practice. Perhaps the turn to a more explicitly topological sensibility, even in conjunction with phenomenology, also requires a turn towards a closer engagement with ordinary life as well as popular culture – to an understanding of *topos* in its most prosaic forms as that out of which any more developed engagement, including with environmental questions, must arise.

This understanding of phenomenology is also one that brings with it a fundamental concern with the ethical – where ethics is itself already oriented towards the question of our placed being in the world. Here place brings together the ethical with the ontological, so that the two are seen as properly and inextricably bound together. Our being placed does not merely *determine* our being, it *is* our being, and as such it is also that which is the foundation for our being *as ethical* – it is in being placed that we are given over to the question of our proper relation to ourselves, to others, and to the world. It is thus that environmental concern, as a concern with the world and our relation to it as that is articulated in and through place and places, itself arises as a concern that is both ethical and ontological. Such a concern has been clearly evident through the pages of the EAP Newsletter. Congratulations, as well as thanks, to David Seamon, and to the Newsletter, on 25 years of sustained engagement. Let's hope for at least another 25 years more!