

In the Vicinity of the Human: From Anthropology to Topology

Jeff Malpas – Tasmania/RMIT

Jeff.malpas@utas.edu.au

Geography and Environmental Studies, Private Bag 78, University of Tasmania, Tasmania
7001, AUSTRALIA

ABSTRACT: Beginning with the situated character of the question concerning the human, this paper argues that the problem of the human is itself inextricably bound to the problem of situation or place. Consequently, any genuine philosophical anthropology must take the form of a philosophical topology. This line of argument is developed through the work Abraham Heschel, Martin Heidegger, Martin Buber, and also Helmut Plessner.

KEYWORDS: Philosophical anthropology, Philosophical topology, Place, Human being, Situation

In the Vicinity of the Human: From Anthropology to Topology

Jeff Malpas

In a little book titled *Who is Man?*, published in 1965, the rabbinic scholar, theologian, and philosopher Abraham J. Heschel writes:

No genuine problem comes into being out of sheer inquisitiveness. A problem is the outcome of a situation. It comes to pass in moments of being in straits, of intellectual embarrassment, in experiencing tension, conflict, contradiction ...To be human is to be a problem, and the problem expresses itself in anguish, in the mental suffering of man... The problem of man is occasioned by our coming upon a conflict or contradiction between existence and expectation, between what man is and what is expected of him. It is in anguish that man becomes a problem to himself. What he has long disregarded suddenly erupts in painful awareness (Heschel 1965: 1 & 3).

In this essay, I aim to explore the way the 'problem of man', or better, the problem 'of the human' – the problem around which philosophical anthropology is constituted – is indeed tied to a certain 'situation'. Moreover, the connection at issue here is one that involves more than the identification merely of a provocation or context, but rather concerns the very character of the human and the 'problem' that the human presents. The anguish, as well as the conflict or contradiction, to which Heschel refers is no mere accidental accompaniment of the problem at issue, but reflects the way in which problem and situation belong essentially together. The very situation of the human is a situation that makes a claim on the human such that there can be no possibility of standing aside from it (which is why it is not a matter of mere 'inquisitiveness'), and it cannot be stood aside from because the situation belongs to the very being of the human even as it also challenges it.

Of course, it might well be thought that the way the human appears as a problem is peculiar to *modernity* – as if it is the peculiar demands of modernity that make the human a problem *for* the human. In that case, the problem of the human would be connected to just that specific situation, that specific 'place', that is the situation of modernity, and the anguish of the human would be the anguish of the modern. Yet although there is

undoubtedly something to be said about modernity in this regard, the situation to which the problem of the human is connected is not restricted to modernity alone.

Certainly, there is no difficulty in finding the problem of the human appearing in an ancient as well as a modern context. Although it offers no anthropology as such, the so-called 'Ode to Man', from Sophocles' *Antigone* (lines 332-75), to which Heidegger gives such attention – and especially to the line "There is much that is strange [*deinon*] in man, but nothing that surpasses man in strangeness" (Heidegger 1959: 146)¹ – nevertheless makes the human both central and problematic. Not only does the 'Ode' demonstrate the problem's ancient provenance, but the strangeness or 'uncanniness' (Heidegger talks of the *unheimlich*) of which Sophocles speaks also indicates the way the problem of the human is indeed not a problem in the sense that that arises merely from a complexity of calculation or the need to encompass a multiplicity of considerations. More particularly, and in more modern terms, it shows that the problem of the human is not a problem resolved by the reduction of the human to some biological or physical entity. Such 'naturalising' approaches leave little room for the strangeness or uncanniness that is at issue here – as Heidegger puts it, what is at issue "can never be discerned through the mere description that establishes data" (Heidegger 1959: 149; see also Heschel 1965: 8-10). On such approaches, the 'problem' of the human is thus not so much resolved as remaining unaddressed, and often unacknowledged.

The strangeness that is at issue in the 'problem' as it appears in the *Antigone* is directly related to the 'anguish' of which Heschel speaks. The human is a problem not because human beings simply find themselves difficult to fathom, but because they experience themselves in a way that is unsettling, that is somehow at odds with their own being – as Heidegger's reading of the Greek *deinotaton* as in terms of the "overpowering", the "violent", "[that which] surpasses the limits of the familiar" makes so very clear. The fact that for all its striving, for all its strength and ambition, the human comes, in the end, "to nothingness" captures the unsettling uncanniness of what is at issue in a particularly stark form. It is thus that the 'problem' of the human does not name any problem merely of *knowledge*, but a problem of the very *identity* of the human – which is partly why Heschel's question concerns the 'who' and not merely the 'what' of man – which is to say that the problem is both *ontological* and, in a profound and fundamental sense, *ethical* at one and the same time, and it is so both in the context of the Sophoclean drama and of our own

contemporary circumstances. As Heschel says, the problem of the ethical “is not a problem added to the self; it is the self as a problem” (Heschel 1965: 36)² – and it is also, therefore, *the human as a problem* (Heschel 1965: 36). The problem of the human arises *for us*, that is, *for we human beings*, in a way that makes a demand on us – that *affects* us, even that *compels* us, that is itself both *an act* and bound to our character *as acting*. It is thus a problem that cannot properly be abstracted or set aside, that is most intimate to us, and also, perhaps, most threatening.

“The issue is old”, says Heschel, but then he adds, “yet the perspective is one of emergency. New in this age is an unparalleled awareness of the terrifying seriousness of the human situation” (Heschel 1965: 13). Although the problem of the human does not belong to modernity alone, the problem of modernity is itself tied to the form in which the problem of the human now appears. The tendency towards the surpassing of the human that is part of the very strangeness of the human, and so is itself at issue in the problem of the human, is now even more powerfully present and even more challenging to the human than ever before. It is not only a challenge present in the threat of nuclear annihilation (which, together with the memory of the camps, is clearly at the fore of Heschel’s thinking in the 1960s, and is no less real now than it was then), but of impending environmental catastrophe, of a now-constant fear of global economic failure, of rising inequality, and with it increasing levels of social and political instability, of a world-wide refugee crisis, of a generalised war of terror prosecuted by means of the drone strike as well as the suicide bomber – and all of this as technology continues to proceed at an ever faster and more disruptive pace.

Heschel writes that whilst, in the Enlightenment “a major concern of philosophy was to emancipate man from the clutches of the past... [t]oday our concern seems to be to protect ourselves from the abyss of the future” (Heschel 1965: 15). The power ‘of’ the human to overpower even what the human might be seems now to have reached, if perhaps asymptotically, a point of extremity. Moreover, so overpowering has it become that the human itself, and even the human *as a problem*, is obscured and often almost forgotten, such that Heschel can speak of “a new scepticism [according to which] ... it is the humanity of man that is no longer self-evident” (Heschel 1965: 25). Yet just as the human nevertheless remains, so it seems that the problem of the human, and so its strangeness and its anguish, remains too, though in a radical form alongside its equally radical denial – a

denial that holds that there is no 'human' being, but only the being of the clever (or not so clever) animal; a denial that the human is more than just that which can be accommodated in the mechanism of the market; a denial that the human is anything other than something 'constructed' and so also able to be 'deconstructed'; a denial that the human is anything other than a moving play of metaphors, a mere image, even a self-created illusion.

All genuine problems, as Heschel affirms, arise out of a situation – we might add, out of the way the situation claims and challenges. Yet in the case of the problem of the human, not only does the problem come to appearance in *particular* situations – just as the problem of the human is posed in the Sophoclean 'Ode' in the midst of the conflict between Creon and Antigone, and as it now arises, as Heschel himself suggests, in an especially urgent form in the more general situation of *modernity* – but the problem pertains directly to a situation that itself belongs essentially to the human. Heschel writes that "Being human is not just a phrase referring to a concept within the mind, but a situation, a set of conditions, sensibilities, or prerequisites, of man's special mode of being. We can attain adequate understanding of man only if we think of man in human terms, *more humano*" (Heschel 1965: 3). Heschel's comments here may seem to beg the question in an obvious way, since how can we think of the human in human terms when the human is precisely what is in question? Part of Heschel's point is that we cannot think the human in terms that are drawn from outside of the human, and in this respect the point is a familiar one: it cautions against any reductionist or eliminativist approach to the human – effectively against any of those approaches that dismiss the problem and ignore the strangeness. However, as Heschel presents it, the point also arises out of an emphasis on being human as referring, not to any mere concept or abstraction, but to something that is itself "a situation, a set of conditions... of man's special mode of being".

The way Heschel himself takes up this idea of the human 'situation' is, in part, through the idea of an inner space – the space of the "inner life" – that stands in contrast to the outer space of the physical or what Heschel calls the 'factual', at one point saying of the human being that "his thoughts are his situation" (Heschel 1965: 7). This might be taken to suggest that what Heschel takes the human situation to be is something entirely taken up *within* and determined *by* the human alone – situation, then, would mean just a certain 'state' of the human. Yet Heschel goes on to describe the "essential sensibilities" that make up being human in terms of the modes of response to the realities of which the human

being is aware – responds “to the being that *I* am, to the beings that surround *me*, to the being that transcends *me*” or, more particularly, says Heschel, in terms of how the human being “relates to the existence that he is, to the existence of his fellow men, to that which is given in his immediate surroundings, to that which *is* but is not immediately given” (Heschel 1965: 4). This suggests that the situation at issue is one that is itself constituted by that to which the human responds, but which also extends *beyond* the human – both beyond human being as such as well as beyond any individual human being (a point that is crucial to Heschel’s own theological position). The human situation thus encompasses the multiple dimensions of relationality by which human being is ‘in’ the world – and so the situation cannot properly be one restricted to ‘thought’ or to the ‘inner’ alone.

In fact, Heschel’s focus on the ‘inner’ is closely tied to his emphasis on the way in which the consideration of the problem of the human proceeds, first and foremost, through the consideration of the problem of the self. “There are two ways”, writes Heschel, “of facing and inspecting human being: from within or from without”, but he also claims that “there is only one way of comprehending man’s being-there, and that is by way of inspecting my own being” (Heschel 1965: 34). Heschel’s argument here, which to some extent remains implicit, is that the inquiry into the human cannot be undertaken in some completely detached fashion, but is always an inquiry into the being of the one who inquires, an inquiry into *my own being* as human, an inquiry into *my self*. Heidegger seems to echo in the background of some of Heschel’s discussion here – in spite of Heschel’s proximity to Buber (see Even-Chen and Meir, 2012) – not only in his reference to human ‘being-there’, but in the very idea of the way in which the problem of the human is indeed tied to the way ‘my own’ being-human arises as an issue ‘for me’: “No one will live my life for me, no one will think my thoughts for me or dream my dreams. My own being, placed as it is in the midst of many being, is not simply being here too, being around, being part of the environment. It is at the very centre of my consciousness that I am distinct” (Heschel 1965: 34-35). It is because of the way my own being is at issue that the problem of the human is indeed a problem that arises in anguish, and that is felt as strange and uncanny.

The way in which the problem of the human concerns the situation out of which it also arises – a situation that includes that very situation as a problem – demonstrates a form of existential-hermeneutic conditionality or circularity that goes beyond any mere formal or logical relation of context-dependence (see Heidegger 1999; see also Malpas 2016a: 207-

211). It is this that underlies Heidegger's own focus, in *Being and Time*, on the question of being as that question arises in relation to the being of human being – to *Dasein*. *Dasein* is the being for whom, “in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it” (Heidegger 1962: H12), and this ‘being an issue’ is precisely a matter of being given over to being *in a certain way*, of being given over *to a there/here* (to a *Da*), of being given over *to a situation* – and given over in such a way that the very situation itself makes a demand on *Dasein*, calls upon *Dasein*, puts *Dasein* itself *into question*. The way the problem of situation emerges as central here already points towards what Heidegger will later call ‘topology’ (*Topologie*) – the saying of place – as characterising the nature of his thinking overall (Heidegger 2004: 47; see also Malpas 2006). In addition, it indicates the way the hermeneutical, which Heidegger connects directly to the existential and ontological, has to be understood as itself tied to situation and to place. The ‘hermeneutic situation’ here appears as that very locale in and out of which understanding first finds the ground that is proper to it (see Malpas 2015a: 354-366).

In spite of his criticism of philosophical anthropology (see esp. Heidegger 1997: 144-162), and of the primacy given to the question of the human (itself very much tied up with his own *Auseinandersetzung* with neo-Kantianism), Heidegger's own approach is not one that *abjures* the concern with the human so much as it *radicalises* that concern – and the radicalisation is indeed directly tied to Heidegger's focus on that which is also at stake, even if presented differently, in Heschel's focus on the human situation. This radicalisation of the problem of the human rather than its unequivocal dismissal is perhaps clearest in Heidegger's ‘Letter on “Humanism”’ (Heidegger 1998). It might also be said to be evident, though more problematically so, in Heidegger's attack on the Kantian prioritization of the question of the human – the question, as Kant puts it, “Was ist der Mensch?” – over the questions of knowledge, of action, and of hope in the 1929 *Kantbuch*. Heidegger's claim is that the Kantian emphasis on the former question, and so the Kantian emphasis on anthropology, all too readily obscures the way in which what is at issue in the latter questions essentially concerns finitude and limit, which is to say, in the terms Heschel uses, *situation*.

The idea of situation already brings with it an essential connection (even if Heschel himself does not make this explicit) to finitude and limit, just as place is itself intimately tied to bound (see Aristotle 1983; see also Malpas in press). The danger is thus that taking the

question of *the human*, put in just those terms, as the underlying question may indeed lead us away from the question of *situation*. Similarly, if the problem of the human is understood as the problem of the 'human situation' (even though, in one important sense, this is surely correct), then there is always the possibility that the emphasis here will be on the *human* rather than on the *situation*, and that the problem will then be addressed by looking, not to the question of the situation, but rather to the question of the human alone, and so may well lead to either back into the philosophically murky depths of traditional anthropological inquiry or to a substantialist (which is to say also *subjectivist*) idea of the human as that in relation to which the situation is understood. Buber famously contests Heidegger's reading of Kant on this point – which is one reason why the Heideggerian echoes in Heschel's account are worthy of some brief comment – arguing that Kant's concern is not with finitude, but rather with the human capacity to engage with that which goes beyond the finite and so with the human in its relational totality (Buber 1978: 120-121; also 163-171).

Notwithstanding the complications involved in this dispute (which cannot fully be addressed here), one possibility that should not be overlooked is that both Buber and Heidegger may be right, if in slightly different ways. It is only through and in virtue of its finitude, in virtue of its situation (its *being here/there*), that human being can engage with that which goes beyond the finite, and so it is not necessary to view this as a choice between the focus on the finite and that which goes beyond the finite. Moreover, the Heideggerian emphasis on the question of finitude – on the question of *situation*, or, as Heidegger will later put it, on *topos* or *place* (*Ort/Ortschaft*) – itself moves us, when it is properly understood, in the very direction of the larger relational structure that so concerns Buber. In other words, the question of finitude is not a question that concerns the human *as solitary*, but rather directs attention to the human *as situational* and *as relational*. That Buber overlooks this in his reading of Heidegger's position, or at least of that position as set out in *Being and Time* and in the *Kantbuch*, is partly a consequence of tensions and ambiguities within Heidegger's early thinking, but it is also due to Buber's own failure adequately to recognise the fundamental role of situational and relational elements even in Heidegger's early thought. One might also say that what Heidegger overlooks, at least in his seemingly unqualified refusal of the anthropological in the *Kantbuch*, is the extent to which the question of finitude or situation itself underlies the question of the human from the very beginning, and so a genuinely radicalised 'anthropology' (if that is indeed possible) would be

one that saw the question of the human as the question as essentially tied to the question of situation and of finitude.

The situation of the human is fundamental to the very problem of the human, and so too the problem of the human *is* the problem of situation. The strangeness or uncanniness of the human is a strangeness or uncanniness that belongs to the problem of the human, but so too does it belong to the situation of the human. It might even be said that the strangeness, the uncanniness of the situation of the human – its *unhomeliness* (to pick up on the literal translation of the German *Unheimlichkeit*) – is what is itself at issue in the problem of the human. The being of the human, which is a being that is essentially situated, is also an uncanny being precisely because *situatedness* is itself uncanny. Here it should be emphasised that ‘situation’, whether in Heschel, in Heidegger, or even in Kant, cannot refer to any form of simple location of the sort that might be designated using spatial coordinates or a set of physical dimensions alone (just as the human is not to be identified with any merely biological or physical entity either). There is indeed no ‘problem’, no strangeness or uncanniness, about simple location. What differentiates situation from mere location, and what is also the basis for its strangeness or uncanniness, is the very conditionality or circularity that is part of the hermeneutical situation, and that Heschel takes up in terms of self-knowledge or self-understanding. Situation has a *self-reflexive* character – it incorporates its own character *as situational* within it – that mere location does not.

Significantly, however, talk of circularity or reflexivity does not provide any clarification of the situation in non-situational terms – reflexivity is itself a situationally derived-notion that depends on the idea of a ‘returning’ or ‘turning back’ and much the same is true, even more obviously perhaps, of circularity. It is the idea of situation that underpins the ideas of reflexivity and circularity, and not the other way around. Moreover, neither is the reflexivity and circularity issue here to be construed in purely *formal* terms. The reflexivity and circularity at issue here are most fundamentally and essentially evident in the very appearing of situatedness as itself an element in the concrete situation – it is the reflexivity and circularity evident in the way the asking of the question ‘where am I?’ already depends on being somewhere and being oriented, if inadequately, to that somewhere. Here is the real strangeness and uncanniness – the *real unhomeliness* – that belongs to the human and to the situation of the human: to be human is to be in a situation and yet apart from that situation, to be placed and yet also displaced, to be at home and yet also

homeless. It is thus no accident that philosophy is so often construed, as Novalis suggests (and Heidegger reiterates), as a response to homelessness, and as arising out of the desire to be 'at home' in the world – something that is also said to determine the character of human life as such.

The situation or situatedness at issue here is thus 'eccentric' – since it is both situated and unsituated, placed and displaced, at home and homeless, so it is at one and the same time *in* and at the same time *out* of the centre that seemingly belong to it (the original meaning of 'eccentricity'). Helmut Plessner refers to the human situation – or what he calls human 'positionality' in just this way – human being is essentially characterised, according to Plessner, by its 'eccentric [or *excentric*] positionality' (*exzentrische Positionalität*) (Plessner 1980-1985; see also de Mul 2014: 15-17 and Grene 1966: 273-277). Plessner's own philosophical anthropology can be understood as an attempt to make clear the nature of this particular mode of positionality. Significantly, Plessner understands his mode of positionality by direct reference to the ideas of boundary and centre. In the case of the human being, the positionality of the human not only means that the human being is bounded, and that human being is centred within those bounds, but that human being is also directed to its own centre and bounds, and so is both within and without at the same time – in bodily terms: "A living person is a body, is in his body (as inner experience or soul) and at the same time outside his body as the perspective from which he is both" (Plessner 1980-85: IV, 365).

Part of what is significant about Plessner is precisely the way in which the human situation is itself directly taken up in this idea of eccentric positionality (and with it of boundary – *Grenze*), and so the way philosophical anthropology is thereby tied to situation. Moreover, just as Heschel characterises the human situation as relational – asserting that the human situation is one in which the human "relates to the existence that he is, to the existence of his fellow men, to that which is given in his immediate surroundings, to that which *is* but is not immediately given" – so too does Plessner understand human 'positionality' in similarly relational terms. This latter claim should not be surprising, since the very notion of situation, which it is itself a 'place' or 'placing', entails the idea of being 'in relation to', and so situation, or *situatedness*, can be understood as itself a mode of *relatedness*. Admittedly, Plessner uses the term 'positionality' (*Positionalität*) whose relational connotations, though they are not absent, are weaker than those usually

associated with 'situation' (largely because position is itself a much simpler notion and more amenable to formalised treatment), but Plessner's use of 'positionality' clearly carries a set of situational connotations as essential to it. What is characteristic of Plessner's approach, and does represent a point of contrast with Heschel's, is his emphasis on positionality as tied to the body, and so of the notion of eccentric positionality as tied to the nature of the lived human body, rather than on self-understanding and thought.

Yet if what Heschel demonstrates, as well as Plessner, is the way the *problem* of the human inevitably turns us back to the *situation* of the human (just as this is also indicated, even if somewhat superficially, by the way in which the problem of the human is so often put as a problem concerning the human 'place' in the world³), then what is also evident in Heschel, and in Plessner, is the way this can nevertheless lead to just the sort of account against which Heidegger warns, namely, one that threatens to ground the *situation* in some *human* character or capacity. In Heschel, the danger (although greatly mitigated by the strength of Heschel's emphasis on the relationality of the human) is that the human situation becomes a matter of *an inner life* given in thought and understanding; in Plessner it threatens to become a matter of the *human body* and of bodily action (and it is arguable that the relational account Plessner offers is itself secondary to this bodily emphasis). This means, in Plessner especially, that situational or 'positional' notions are used to describe aspects of human being, but in a way that takes the positional and the human, and especially (notwithstanding Plessner's distinction between *Leib* and *Körper*) *the bodily*, as priorly assumed notions.

The key point at issue is essentially the following: is the human situation determined primarily by its character *as human* or by its character *as situational*? Given that what is first put in question is the idea of the human as such, so the human situation cannot be understood merely as *a function of* the human. Instead, the way situation emerges here suggests that the human should be understood as arising in and out of what Heschel calls the 'human situation', in and out of what Plessner calls 'eccentric positionality', in and out of the human 'place' – but that means that situation, positionality, and place ought to be taken to be, in an important sense, prior to the human, to thought, even to the acting body.

The problem that begins to emerge here is, to some extent, one that is widespread across almost every inquiry, and especially every *philosophical* inquiry. Situational concepts and ideas, and spatial and topological notions related to these, abound in all thinking – we

think situationally, spatiality, topologically, and so in terms of distance and nearness, reach and grasp, direction and orientation, inner and outer, entry and surround, openness and closure, narrowness and breadth, extension and limit, field and horizon (see Malpas 2016b: 143-44). The commonplace assumption – though seldom explicitly voiced – is that these terms have a literal meaning that belongs to their use in reference to some presupposed physical domain, and that elsewhere we deploy these terms ‘metaphorically’ or figuratively. So when we talk of the ‘situation’ in which human being finds itself, we do not mean to refer to any ‘actual’ place or placing. But then, to what exactly do we mean to refer in this ‘non-literal’ fashion? If we are speaking non-literally, then we do not really mean to refer to a place, or perhaps even to a situation at all – the hallmark of a metaphor, of a non-literal use of language, is that the words we use do not mean what on the face of it they seem to mean. Yet we may well wonder what it does mean to use any of these terms literally *or* non-literally – and we may also wonder whether there can be any absolute distinction here that would warrant being able to make a clear distinction between all uses of these or any other terms with the literal on one side and the non-literal on the other.

Yet although this problem can be seen to be an absolutely ubiquitous one, it takes on a special character in the present context, since the ‘situation’ that is at issue here – the ‘human situation’ – is itself such a central and fundamental one. When we move from the problem of the *human*, as Heschel indicates, to the human *situation*, then we also move to the problem of how the notion of situation is itself to be understood, or to what I have elsewhere talked about as simply the problem of *place* – of *topos* or *chora*, *Ort* or *Ortschaft*, *ma* (間) or *basho* (場所), or as it might be referred to by any number of other terms. This problem underlies the problem of the human, and of the human situation, is in a certain sense identical with it, even as it is also, in another sense, distinct from it. To say that the problem of the human cannot be addressed without addressing the problem of place need not be taken to go against Heschel’s insistence on the need to address the human *in human terms* – there is no reduction or elimination of the human implied here. Instead, the way the problem of the human leads on to the problem of place is indicative of the way the human is itself constituted situationally or topologically – which also means relationally (see Malpas 2015b) – and so, as Heschel himself emphasises, in terms of that which belongs to others and to the world as well as to the self. The way the problem of the human moves in the direction of the problem of place is evident, not only in Heschel, or in thinkers such as

Plessner who explicitly adopt a philosophical anthropological perspective, but in almost every thinker who addresses the problem of the human *in its distinctness* – which is to say also, *in its strangeness and uncanniness*. Kant is himself a significant example here, not only because of his focus on bound and critique as this is connected with his central role in the development of philosophical anthropology, but also the way in which his anthropological interests are themselves tied to his founding work within academic geography. If Kant is not always sufficiently clear about this understanding of his project (although he is almost certainly clearer about it than Heidegger often allows), then perhaps it is because he lacks sufficient clarity about the notion of place that is at issue here – and does indeed seem to view it, in some sense, ‘metaphorically’. In this respect, Kant is important both for bringing place to the fore and yet also, to some extent, overlooking it (something that could well be taken to connect with Heidegger’s charge concerning Kant’s failure to be clear on the centrality of the problem of finitude).

The problem of the human, which leads us to ask after the situation of the human, both as that out of which the problem arises and towards which it tends, turns us back to the problem of situation as such, to the problem, as it can most simply be put, *of place*. Heschel emphasizes the importance of thinking the human in human terms, and certainly if we try to think of the human in terms only of animality or physicality, then we leave the human out of account. But to think of the human *as human* itself leads us, if we are careful in following the direction marked out, to that which also goes beyond the human. For Heschel, of course, this is ultimately in the direction that leads towards God and the divine – and although such a further movement is not ruled out, it is not obviously required either (or at least is not required in a way that is likely to be convincing to those who are not already committed in this respect). More broadly, the direction in which we are lead when we ask after the situation of the human is to the being of the human *in the world*, and so to the being of the human as always a being *in place*, which also means a being *in relation*, and so a being that is essentially open to that which is apart from it. The turn back to place, and so to the being of the human in place, is not a turn towards any abstraction from the human, just as it is a not a turn towards the human taken alone or separately from the world or from all that is in the world. It is also not a turn towards some form of ontology apart from ethics. The place that is at issue here also appears as the *ethos* that is proper to the human, and in which human being finds itself with others and as tasked with acting in a

way proper to that *ethos*. It is to place, and so also to 'ethics', in just this sense that Heidegger draws our attention in his comments towards the end of the 'Letter on "Humanism"': "*Ethos* means abode, dwelling place. The word names the open region in which the human being dwells. The open region of his abode allows what pertains to the essence of human being, and what in thus arriving resides in nearness to him, to appear" (Heidegger 1998: 269)

Heschel emphasises the way the problem of the human is both an old problem and yet also a new one. The newness of the problem, as was evident above, is to be found in the way in which the problem of the human now appears – in its pressing character as well as its seeming disappearance and obscuration. Yet the way the problem of the human, and even the human itself, in its distinctness, seems to be covered over itself reflects the covering over and seeming obliteration of situation and of place. This is not just a mundane phenomenon to be seen in the disappearance of local characteristics and forms of life in the face of globalization. The very organisation of the contemporary world takes the form of a levelling out of difference and distinction that includes the levelling out of the differences that allows human being to appear as a distinctive mode of being – as indeed a being that appears as strange and uncanny. This is not to say that the strangeness and the uncanny has itself disappeared – they remain always as a ghostly and unsettling presence – but that the world itself is now rendered in a way such that it no longer allows in it there is no place for the human other than as quantifiable, manipulable, and manageable.

In the Old Testament, the first question God asks of Adam is '*where are you?*' (Genesis 3:9).⁴ It is a question that Martin Buber takes as the *leitmotif* for his discussion in *The Way of Man* – a discussion that ends with an emphasis on Judaism's distinctive concern with the here and now of life as opposed to the hereafter. Writes Buber:

There is something that can only be found in one place. It is a great treasure, which may be called the fulfillment of existence. The place where this treasure can be found is the place on which one stands. Most of the environment which I feel to be the natural one, the situation which has been assigned to me as my fate, the things that happen to me day after day, the things that claim me day after day – these contain my essential task and such fulfilment of existence as is open to me (Buber, 2002: 30).

Human being is the being that is given to the human here, in this place – which is why Heidegger can say that the being of the human is indeed the being of “the there [*das Da*]” (Heidegger, 1959: 160). The ‘problem’ of the human is thus properly addressed only by looking to the situation of the human, which is to say, by looking to the *place* of the human, and also, therefore, to place itself. Thus *anthropology*, if it is indeed to be *philosophical*, comes to its own genuine fulfilment in philosophical *topology* – the problem of the human is the problem of place.

Bibliography

- Aristotle. 1983. *Physics: Books III and IV*. Trans. Edward Hussey. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Martin Buber. 1978. *Between Man and Man*. Trans. Ronald Gregor Smith. New York: Macmillan.
- Martin Buber. 2002. *The way of man, according to the teaching of Hasidism*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Alexander Even-Chen and Ephraim Meir. 2012. *Between Heschel and Buber: A Comparative Study*. Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press.
- Marjorie Grene. 1966. ‘Positionality in the Philosophy of Helmuth Plessner’. *The Review of Metaphysics*, 20: 250 - 277.
- Martin Heidegger. 1962. *Heidegger, Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row.
- Martin Heidegger. 1959. *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Trans. Ralph Manheim. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Martin Heidegger. 1999. *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*. Trans John van Buren. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Martin Heidegger. 2000. *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Martin Heidegger. 1997. *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. Trans Richard Taft. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 5th edn.
- Martin Heidegger. 1998. *Pathmarks*. Ed. William McNeill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Martin Heidegger. 2004. 'Seminar in Le Thor 1969'. In *Four Seminars*. Trans. Andrew Mitchell and François Raffoul. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Abraham J. Heschel. 1965. *Who is Man?* Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Rudolf Makkreel. 2015. *Orientation and Judgment in Hermeneutics*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Jeff Malpas and Karsten Thiel. 2011. 'Kant's Geography of Reason'. In *Kant's Geography*. Ed. Stuart Elden and Eduardo Mendieta. New York: SUNY Press.
- Jeff Malpas. 2006. *Heidegger's Topology*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Jeff Malpas. 2015a. 'Place and Situation'. In *Routledge Companion to Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Ed. Jeff Malpas and Hans-Helmuth Gander. London: Routledge.
- Jeff Malpas. 2015b. 'Self, Other, Thing: Triangulation and Topography in Post-Kantian Philosophy'. *Philosophy Today*, 59: 103–126.
- Jeff Malpas. 2016a. 'The Beckoning of Language: Heidegger's Hermeneutic Transformation of Thinking'. In *Hermeneutical Heidegger*. Ed. Michael Bowler and Ingo Farin. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Jeff Malpas. 2016b. 'Place and Hermeneutics: Towards a Topology of Understanding'. In *Inheriting Gadamer: New Directions in Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Ed. Georgia Warnke. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press: 143-144.
- Jeff Malpas. In press. 'Five theses on place (and some associated remarks): a reply to Peter Gratton'. *Il Cannocchiale*, 1.
- Jos de Mul. 2014. 'Artificial by Nature: An Introduction to Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology'. In *Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology: Perspectives and Prospects*. Ed. Jos de Mol. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press: 11-40.
- Helmut Plessner. 1980-1985. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Ed. Günter Dux et al. 10 vols. *Volume IV: Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie*.
- Max Scheler. 2009. *The Human Place in the Cosmos*. Trans. Manfred Frings. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Sophocles. 1912. *Sophocles Vol. 1: Oedipus the King / Oedipus at Colonus / Antigone*. Trans. F. Storr. Harvard, Harvard University Press
- Sophocles. 1984. *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone; Oedipus the King; Oedipus at Colonus*. Trans Robert Fagles. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

¹ In the newer translation of Heidegger's work by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, the line is rendered as "Manifold is the uncanny, yet nothing uncannier than man" (Heidegger, 2000: 156). The line is variously translated in editions of the *Antigone* itself. The Loeb Classical Library edition has simply "There are many wonders, but none such as man" (Sophocles 1912), whereas in the Penguin Modern Classics edition Robert Fagles gives the line as "Numberless wonders/terrible wonders walk the world but none the match for man" (Sophocles, 1984).

² Immediately preceding this, Heschel comments: "The fundamental problem of ethics has been expressed as the question: 'What ought I do?' The weakness of this formulation is in separating doing from the sheer being of the 'I', as if the ethical problem were a special and added aspect of a person's existence. However, the moral issue is deeper and more intimately related to the self than doing. The very question: What ought I to do? is a moral act".

³ As in the title of Max Scheler's 1928 contribution to philosophical anthropology: *The Human Place [Die Stellung des Menschen] in the Cosmos* (Scheler 2009).

⁴ *Genesis* 3:9: "And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, *Where art thou?*" (*King James Version*). In Hebrew, the question itself occurs as one word, *Ayeka?* [אֵיכָּה].

The project of which this paper is a part is supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant. I would like to thank Andrew Benjamin and Ingo Farin for their helpful comments on earlier versions.