Interview with Jeff Malpas

Dr. Malpas was interviewed by Laureano Ralón. April 24th, 2010.

Jeff Malpas is an Australian philosopher, currently Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tasmania in Hobart, Australia. Known for his work across the analytic, and continental, traditions, Malpas has also been at the forefront of contemporary philosophical research on the concept of place. While Malpas draws on phenomenological and hermeneutic resources, his work in what he has termed 'philosophical topography' is also heavily indebted to analytic approaches in philosophy of mind and language. Malpas's topographical approach has been developed in two volumes, Place and Experience (1999) and Heidegger's Topology (2006) – the latter providing an analysis of the thought of German philosopher Martin Heidegger that is centred on the ideas of place and 'topology' (Heidegger himself talks of his thinking as a 'topology of being'). Malpas has devoted considerable attention to the idea of the transcendental, particularly as it connects with hermeneutic themes, with special emphasis on notions of ground and limit. He sees the transcendental as providing an important point of connection between philosophers such as Donald Davidson, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Heidegger, while the focus on the transcendental also connects with Malpas's methodological development of the idea of philosophical topography.

How did you decide to become a university professor? Was it a conscious choice?

Actually, when I finished my Master's degree at the University of Auckland, I made a conscious decision *not* to go on in academia, and applied for positions as a primary school teacher, a museum curator, and a public servant. I was seen as being over-qualified for the first two, and in the end decided against the third, having been persuaded by Krister Segerberg, who was Professor in Auckland at the time (he later went to the Chair in Uppsala) and also my Master's supervisor, to think again about an academic career. Krister offered me a Junior Lectureship at Auckland which I held for a year before going on to take up a PhD scholarship at the Australian National University. What did he say that made me change my mind? Partly it was his persistence, partly it was his offer of a job, and partly it was a realization that maybe the public service – which in New Zealand also meant Wellington – was not really where I wanted to be.

In your experience, how did the role of university professor evolve since you were an undergraduate student?

I began my university study in the late seventies. At the time Australian and New Zealand Universities had not yet been 'reformed' in the way they have now: universities were still primarily oriented towards teaching and research; they were much less bureaucratized; their management and direction was largely determined by the academics themselves; and there was also a higher standard of work expected from students as well as a more open style of teaching and learning. At the same time, there was a much richer university life and more opportunity to engage in a range of activities both within the formal curriculum and outside of it. Academics had more time to engage with students, and more control over what they taught, while students had more time for just about everything (there were no fees in New Zealand at that time, and a reasonable if minimal level of student support. Since then, universities have lost any sense of their place other than as they

contribute to goals of social equalization and national production, other than as sites for the manufacture of graduates and *commercializable* research fitted to the demands of industry. Academics have become the workers within this system of industrialised 'education' (i.e., training) and 'knowledge' (i.e., information and technique). Universities have thus ceased to be places that support and sustain genuine teaching and research; academics struggle to maintain a commitment to the ideals that continue to underpin real academic practice and yet are inconsistent with the framework within which academia now operates. The shift in the character of universities has not only affected the character of academic work itself, but it has also been tied to the neutralisation of universities as places of cultural or political creativity. Perhaps the web has become the new site for such activity, but if so, then it is a very different sort of activity, whose direction and character still remains uncertain and unknown.

What makes a good teacher today? How do you manage to command attention in an age of interruption characterized by fractured attention and information overload?

In the end, the only way a truly good teacher commands attention is in the same way as the past: through being passionate about what they teach, through demonstrating their knowledge of their subject, and through being able to communicate that passion and knowledge (unfortunately it now seems to be possible to command the attention of those who reward teaching without doing any of these things). In places like Australasia and the UK, however, the shift in higher education from an 'elite' to a 'mass' system, and the consequent expansion of the higher education sector, means that one of the biggest problems for any teacher, especially in an area like philosophy, is that one can no longer assume a basic level of education – even basic skills of reading and writing – on the part of one's students. How does one command the attention of students when many have difficulty reading and comprehending a newspaper article and when a passage from Aristotle is completely beyond them (as if it were in a foreign language)? When many no longer know what it is to construct a basic argument or who have only the vaguest knowledge (if any) of what occurred in the world prior to their own adolescence? The problem is thus not one of attention deficit or information overflow, but at a much more basic level: a lack of literacy, not only in relation to the written or spoken word, not only in relation to the practice of criticism, but also in relation to our own cultural heritage. Here the effects of digital media only compounds what is already an underlying problem – a problem that arises at the very foundations of our culture and society, and might be described as an increasing loss of the ability genuinely to question and to think, an inability genuinely to engage with who and what we are.

What advice would you give to young graduate students and aspiring university professors?

Given the difficulties that beset contemporary universities, the temptation is to advise them not to look somewhere else entirely! Yet if one is committed to the intellectual life – in philosophy or elsewhere – then, without access to independent means, there is nowhere other than in the university environment, difficult though it is, that such a life can be pursued. My advice is twofold: one has to learn how to survive and profit within the system (and to do that one has to be both an inspiring teacher and a productive researcher – in other words, teach well and publish – and one also has to learn how to use and negotiate the administrative systems in which one is enmeshed), and yet one has to do so while at the same time looking for ways to resist the system and perhaps even find ways to get around it, undermine it, question it. Part of the reason that higher education is in

such a parlous state is the compliance of academics in the destruction and dismantling of the frameworks that support academic practice. One might argue that things have gone too far and that it is too late to stop the process. My own view is that, contrary to what we may be told, resistance is never futile, but sometimes we have to find new ways to resist!

Let's move on. As an undergrad in communication, I read the post-modernists/post-structuralists – Baudrillard, Derrida, Barthes, Lyotard – with great interest; however, by the time I became a graduate student, I soon discovered that I could not really understand the late Baudrillard without understanding McLuhan first; that I could not make full sense of Derrida without mastering Heidegger, and so on. **It seems to me that "originality" is a myth; that people don't "have" ideas, but ideas "incarnate" in people; that we are in the midst of an ongoing dialogue that is "always already." What do you make of this appreciation?**

I certainly agree that there is very little (if anything) that appears in the world of ideas that has absolutely no precedent in what has gone before. The task of thinking is thus not about novelty, but more to do with appropriation and retrieval. This is why I think Heidegger's idea of thinking as a form of remembrance is very powerful. Memory and dialogue are both key ideas in my understanding, not just of philosophy or thinking, but also in the way I understand our mode of being in the world. Dialogue (or conversation) captures the essential *responsivity* of thought and of being. But dialogue is itself always guided by memory – by a sense of that to which we are already given over, to which we already belong, to which we are already oriented. In this way, dialogue (or conversation) and responsivity themselves reflect the topographical/topological character of thought and being – in Heidegger this is elaborated in terms of the idea of thinking as not only remembrance, but also as homecoming (although a homecoming that is always 'uncanny'). These are issues that I have discussed in a number of places – to some extent in *Heidegger's Topology*, but also in many of my essays, including those in the new book, *Heidegger and the Place of Thinking*.

The following question was drafted by Professor Dermot Moran: *"What made you shift from analytic philosophy to hermeneutics and Heidegger?"*

Did I shift? I thought I had been doing much the same thing all along. I never saw myself as just doing 'analytic philosophy'. I started off reading Nietzsche when I was a teenager, and then discovered Wittgenstein, and also Kant (the latter two being probably the first really major influences on my thinking). A lot of my work as an undergraduate and into my Masters was spread across history as well as philosophy, and for that reason I was also reading a lot of material in hermeneutics and philosophy of history from Donagan and Dray (on the more analytic side) through to Dilthey and Gadamer. The main piece of work I did for my Masters was on historical explanation, it focussed on the practical inference schema and combined Davidson, Taylor and Von Wright with Aristotle, Kant, and Gadamer. By the time I embarked on my PhD, I had become primarily focussed on hermeneutics, and my initial PhD proposal was based around Dilthey's idea of a Critique of Historical Reason. I was offered a place at the ANU, but they were concerned that they couldn't really supervise me in relation to Dilthey, and Stanley Benn (who was initially my supervisor at the ANU together with Jack Smart) asked whether I would be willing to adjust my topic to fit their expertise. As a result, I put a proposal for a project on Davidson that would also encompass Rorty, Gadamer and Heidegger (my interest was in connecting Davidson's account of interpretation with

Gadamer's, and showing how both provided an antidote to relativism – the thesis ended up being supervised by Jack Smart along with Philip Pettit and, for a time, Richard Campbell). So it really is the case that from my perspective, I have never made any real shift from analytic philosophy to hermeneutics and Heidegger – that is just where I have always been. What has shifted, however, has my faith in the possibility of getting philosophers from the 'analytic' side to engage more openly and productively with those working in the European traditions. I guess I have also lost patience with the way academic philosophy, especially in its 'analytic' forms, but often in its 'continental' mode as well, seems to have become more and more removed from any genuine engagement with what Heidegger called 'the task of thinking'. This is one reason why my work has itself shifted more and more towards engagements outside philosophy – with artists, writers, architects, historians, and geographers. Of course, this is also tied up with the shift that has also occurred in my thinking (or perhaps it is better understood as a clarification of what was always present) towards a more direct engagement with issues of place and *placedness* (and connected with these, of memory, identity, difference, and belonging). I take this engagement to lie at the heart of thinking, and so also at the heart of philosophy. However, place and *placedness* is not something to which most philosophers, of any stripe, pay much attention.

One of your recent books is entitled *Heidegger's Topology* (2006). What is your thesis in a nutshell?

That Heidegger's thought cannot be understood except as a thinking of place. In Heidegger's own terms, his thinking is a saying of the place of being – a 'topology of being'. My claim is that such a topology underpins Heidegger's thought almost from beginning to end. My further claim is that such a thinking of place is, as I note above, at the heart of philosophy as it is also at the heart of any attempt to think our own being, to think the being of the human, to think the being of the world. Because I give priority to the thinking of place in Heidegger, so I also given priority to the later thinking over the earlier. Consequently *Being and Time* is not, for me, the most important of Heidegger's works (and neither is the*Contributions*) – instead it is the post-war writings that take precedence.

I see a parallel between Heidegger's notion of existential space, founded as it is in being-in as involvement, and McLuhan's notion of acoustic space, which, as opposed to Euclidian (visual/abstract) space, has "no center and no margins." McLuhan believed that acoustic space was characteristic of tribal societies, but would be restored under electronic conditions and speed-up; he argued that, when things move very quickly, the detached point of view of the neutral observer collapses in favour of pattern recognition, all-at-onceness, and integral awareness. Do you think McLuhan's notion of acoustic space accurately describes the electronic environments we dwell in? What kind of spaces characterize this age of information?

I would have to say that although I can see the point behind McLuhan's contrast, I don't think it is adequate to the phenomena at issue, nor do I think McLuhan's analysis is correct as regards contemporary electronic or digital 'environments'. This is a big topic, and it is one that I have touched on elsewhere, but there are a few points on which it may be worth commenting. I take the view that no-one sensory modality comes with a space that belongs to it alone, although the proprioceptive (the sense of one's body and of bodily agency) is undoubtedly the most fundamental

for any form of spatial awareness (this can be seen partly to derive from Gibsonian considerations – sensory awareness is an active rather than passive capacity). So there simply isn't a purely visual or purely acoustic space. Moreover, space cannot itself be understood independently of time, while both depend fundamentally on place (occasionally I will put the latter point in provocative fashion by saying that space and time do not exist other than as given in and through place). The emphasis on place (*topos*) is also to be found in Heidegger, especially late Heidegger, and the idea of 'involvement' that appears in the earlier writing itself points toward a topological conception. But this idea of place, and Heidegger's own account of existential space, is only a partial fit (if at all) with McLuhan's notion of acoustic space. In addition, although I think there are aspects of the visual, as opposed to other sensory modalities (although not to the acoustic alone), that are associated with more "abstracted" modes of spatial awareness and experience, the immersed and involved character of the visual itself should not be overlooked. So what about contemporary "electronic environments"? First of all, I would not say that we "dwell" in these environments (certainly not in any Heideggerian sense of "dwell"), and I am not even sure to what extent it is appropriate to describe them as "environments" (*Umwelten*). For all that contemporary digital technology now suffuses our lives, it has not altered the underlying ontological conditions of human existence. Indeed, it is those conditions that themselves shape the manner in which digital technology operates – in this respect, we can only understand the being of the digital if we first understand the being of the human (but the dominance of the digital itself obscures any such understanding). McLuhan is correct, however, in thinking that electronic or digital technology is associated with a distinctive mode of spatial ordering, but it is closer to the mode of ordering that Heidegger claims underlies technological modernity as such – what Heidegger calls *Gestell* – than to the any pre-modern mode of space or place. The topological reading that I give of Heidegger, and that reflects my own topographical analysis of our contemporary situation, takes *Gestell* to be essentially spatialized and spatializing. The spatiality that belongs with *Gestell* is the spatiality of the measureable, the quantifiable, the homogenous, and the extended – it is much the same mode of spatiality that triumphs over place in the account of the history of place advanced by Ed Casey in *The Fate of Place*. In this respect, it is a mode of spatiality that obscures the essential and ineliminable placedness of things, at the same time as it also obscures its own character, and so its own connection to place.

Toward the end of his life, Marshall McLuhan declared: *"Phenomenology [is] that which I have been presenting for many years in non-technical terms."* Can phenomenology and communication studies reinforce each other in this age of information and digital interactive media?

I am very sympathetic with the idea that phenomenology can both learn from and contribute to, the study of communication (I think Joshua Meyrowitz's work, perhaps even more so than McLuhan's, is a particularly good instance of this). But it also seems to me that much of the contemporary work in communication (and sometimes also in phenomenology) has itself become subject to the blinding effects of the very technology into which it aims to inquire. Contemporary digital technology, and the ideas of globalised interconnection with which it is associated, seems to have an intoxicating effect of many of those who engage with it. As a result, we over-estimate its own transformative capacities (sometimes because of our own desire for those very transformations and for the enhanced power and control they seem to bring), we overlook the extent to which the underlying topography/topology of human existence remains the same (and the extent the fundamental questions, along with our own essential finitude and*placedness*, have not changed), and we fail to recognise the way in which

contemporary technology is part of a larger system of world-ordering (one inextricable from globalised capital) to which we ourselves are subject, and in which we are, therefore, not so much freed from limitation, as ever more constrained by new systems of control.

What are you currently working on?

I have two edited collections about to appear with MIT Press, one of which is entitled *Dialogues with Davidson* and the other *The Place of Landscape*. As I indicated earlier, a collection of my own essays, revised and expanded, and titled*Heidegger and the Place of Thinking*, is also on the way – it is scheduled to appear with MIT in January 2012. I have a few other books that I have been working on, but are progressing rather more slowly than I had hoped, one of which will be on a topographic reading of Davidson and the other on the ethics and politics of place. After those, I have a volume to finish that will draw together some of my work on hermeneutics, a volume of essays that will engage with aspects of art, literature, film and music, and a book more directly focussed on issues of ethics and contemporary society (something that has been preoccupying me for quite some time). Finally, I have a number of other ongoing projects that involve me variously with artists, architects, and geographers, and , as I said earlier, it in that direction that I think a lot of my work is moving – although right now it is not moving as quickly in that direction as I would like, mainly because I keep being dragged back to more conventional philosophical projects!

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