

Thinking Topographically: Place, Space, and Geography

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1. Introduction: turning spatially and topographically

It is commonplace to talk of a *spatial* turn having occurred within geographical, and more broadly social theory, over the last thirty or so years. Sometimes this turn towards *space* has also been associated with a turn towards *place* – what might be termed a *topographic* turn, although nowadays topography is often taken, in geographic circles, to refer to something more specific than just the thematization of place.¹ My own work, although originating within philosophy, has also engaged with these broader developments, particularly in its own deployment of the ideas of topography and topology (see especially Malpas, 1999a, 2006, 2012), and so may be thought to be part of this spatial and topographic movement. Indeed, it might be argued that the very concern with the spatial and topographic inevitably moves thinking in the direction of a broader and more interdisciplinary field – space and place (especially the latter) seem, in this regard, to be thoroughly expansive concepts that constantly move one beyond the confines of any narrowly disciplinary horizon. Certainly I would argue that this has been true of my own work, which I would not see as belonging solely within just one discipline, whether philosophy or anything else.

Yet in spite of the apparent rise of spatial and topographic notions in contemporary geographic and social scientific thinking, it also seems that their influence and impact is more often a matter of rhetorical positioning than conceptual substance. The spatial and topographic turn, such as it is, has thus taken the form of a turn towards an increased deployment of spatial and topographic terms and ideas, a proliferation of spatial and topographic figures and tropes, but often without any attempt genuinely to question the nature of those terms and concepts or to attend to their terminological complexity or conceptual structure. This general tendency towards rhetorical proliferation rather than conceptual interrogation has been partly driven, in geography's case especially, by the discipline's own vulnerability to the shifts of intellectual fashion, and especially the fashions of so-called 'theory' – a vulnerability that seems to have increased over the years rather than diminished. Seldom is it the case that the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of contemporary geographic thought arise out of geography's own attempts to think through the concepts that shape and orient its own intellectual field. Instead, geography often draws on ideas developed elsewhere, and so also tends increasingly to become merged with other disciplines and modes of inquiry.

Greater engagement across disciplines is no bad thing, of course, and one can certainly argue that we need more cross-fertilization between disciplines rather than less. Yet real productivity tends to emerge out of difference, and disciplinary difference requires a capacity for disciplines to be able to reflect upon and to engage in articulation of the concepts and modes of thinking that give them their shape and character. Not only does this mean gaining greater clarity on how concepts such as space and place might be understood, but also coming better to understand the way in which such concepts might be approached from within different disciplinary frameworks. One might be forgiven for thinking that across much of contemporary thinking there is little or no sense either of what is actually at issue in ideas of space and place or how these ideas might play out in different disciplinary formations.

Questions about the way space and place are taken up in contemporary thinking, and the associated question concerning disciplinary differences in the way space and place might be approached, are themselves questions that arise within a framework that is already topographic in character. To ask after difference is also to ask after the bounds by means of which difference, and so with it identity, are constituted, and this is already to move within the proper domain of the topographic, of place, of *topos*. My own interest in the way space and place arise within contemporary geography is thus an interest that is itself fundamentally topographic in character, and that therefore derives directly from the topographic focus of my own work. I would argue that if the topographic turn in geography were taken seriously then it ought to lead to a similarly reflexive engagement of geography with its own place, its own *topos*, its own proper bounds. Perhaps what I have to say here can be taken as a challenge to geography, and geographers, to make that reflexive turn, but if so, it is also a challenge to geographers genuinely to make the turn back, not only to space, but also to place.

It is against this background that I want to set out some of the basic elements of my own topographic mode of thinking, and in so doing set out some of the basic elements of what seem to me essential considerations in the thinking of place along with some of the implications of that thinking. My aim is to provide a sketch of the approach I have elsewhere called 'philosophical topography' in both its methodological and its substantive aspects, and, at the same time, to set out some of the broader implications of the approach while also addressing some of the obscurity and confusion that seems to have accumulated around recent and contemporary spatial and topographic thinking.

2. Distinguishing/relating space and place

Perhaps the very first issue that deserves attention here is the distinction between space and place – or rather the question as to whether there is such a distinction. Much of the contemporary talk about a spatial or topographic turn tends already to treat the spatial and topographic as if they amounted to more or less the same thing, as if a turn towards space might also be a turn towards place and vice versa, or as if the one might be somehow included within the other. Similarly, in discussions of space and place, one often finds an uncritical appropriation of these concepts that actually assimilates the one to the other, or that, if it does distinguish them, does so in a way that is so weak as not to be capable of being any significant conceptual weight. Occasionally, one finds a more considered and explicit stand being taken on the distinction between space and place, sometimes one that rejects that distinction – and this is, indeed, characteristic of Doreen Massey's approach (see eg. Massey, 2005), although the grounds on which she bases that rejection seem to derive, not from any consideration of the concepts themselves, but rather the supposed potential for imaginative reconfiguration that might flow from such a rejection (Massey 2005: 6-7).

That there is a distinction between space and place, and that the distinction is an important one, is evident not only from a consideration of the different ways in which the terms themselves are currently deployed in contemporary English, as well as the way similar terms operate in other languages,² but also from the history of the concepts to which they refer. This does not mean, of course, that the distinction between space and place has always been, or always is, clear. Space and place are related notions, and sometimes the closeness of their relationship means that there is no clear explication of their difference. Thus Greek thought seems to have taken place (*topos* or *chora*) as the more basic notion, and only in later thinking did a *sui generis* concept of space emerge, partly through the explication of spatial elements within the concept of place, and partly through the influence of the separate concept of void (*kenon*). Moreover, as the concept of space does indeed take on a clearer and more defined character in Renaissance and Modern thought, so too does place tend to become a more obscure and less significant notion – often being treated as simply derivative of space (see Casey, 1996). The 'rise' of space is thus accompanied, one might say, by the 'decline' of place. Indeed, in much contemporary thought, place often appears either as a subjective overlay on the reality of materialized spatiality (place is space *plus* human value or 'meaning' – see eg. Menin, 2003: 1) or else as merely an arbitrarily designated position within a spatial field.

Notwithstanding the way in which the distinction between place and space has often been overlooked or misunderstood, that distinction is a significant one that can be relatively easily explicated. Space implies openness, expansiveness, or 'room' – It is for this reason that there is such a close conceptual relation between space and void. Space tends towards the homogenous, the regular, and the uniform. One can certainly talk of space being warped or stretched, but such

warping depends on the idea that there is an underlying structure to space that means that it behaves in uniform ways. The homogeneity and uniformity of space implies that space is also quantifiable or measurable, and this is evident in the etymology of the term: 'space' comes, via the Latin *spatium*, and the Greek *spadion* or *stadion* – terms that each carry a sense of a measurable distance or interval. Since space can indeed be understood in terms of such measurable and uniform expansiveness, so it need not carry within it any sense of its own bound – given any space, one can always conceive of its possible expansion; given any spatial interval, one can conceive of another such interval, and so an expansion or extension of that space without any necessary limit. By contrast, place is defined by relation to the notion of bound, limit, or *surface* (which is itself a limit) – *topos*, in the Greek, is a boundary or bounding surface (Hussey, 1983: 28; 212a2-6). Place also appears, in the Greek *chora* (the second of the two key terms for place in Greek), as a ground or matrix (see Cornford 1937: 177-180), and that sense carries over into contemporary ideas of place as a locus of meaning, memory and identity. In this sense, place, as opposed to space, has a content and character that belongs to it – and as such place is essentially qualitative – but the content or character that belongs to place is also such that it encompasses that which is present within it. It is this, one might say, that is at the heart of the commonplace idea of a 'sense of place'. This means, in addition, that there is a fundamental heterogeneity that belongs to place – places contain difference within them, as well as being differentiated from other places (see Malpas, 2012).

The differentiation that belongs to place also bring relationality with it, and one of the features of place is that it is essentially relational, even though this relationality is precisely that which allows places as distinct identities to arise. No place exists except in relation to other places, and every place contains other places that are related within it. The distinctive character of places is thus something that emerges through the interplay of places rather than their absolute separation (which is impossible). I have frequently used the example of old-fashioned topographical surveying to illustrate the point at issue here – and the example is also partly what founds my own use of the term 'topography' (see Malpas, 1999a, 40-41). Prior to aerial surveying, and especially prior to the advent of Google Earth, the mapping of a region, which is essentially a mapping of a portion of the Earth's *surface* (that is, of a certain *limit*), was done by means of the surveyor's bodily engagement with the landscape (with the surface to be mapped), and through repeated triangulations and traverses between landmarks within that landscape. Not only is the mapping of the region developed in this way, but the region itself can be understood as consisting in this same relational structure. Places within the region are the places that they are through their location within the region, and so in relation to other such places.

Both the relational and superficial character of the region, which is itself a place, is indicative of the character of the region, of the place, and of place more generally, as given in its internal (and when one looks to a broader horizon, its external) relationality and so also in its surface. The structure of relations is given in the surface, and the surface is a structure of relations. The mapping of a region thus does not depend on the uncovering of what lies beneath nor (although neither does it rule out bringing to the surface what ordinarily lies beneath the surface). In this sense 'topography' is not only relational and superficial in character, but it is also, therefore, anti-foundationalist (in the sense that it does not seek a deeper foundation for what is given relationally and superficially) and anti-reductionist (*topos*, place, *is* surface as it is also localised relation). In addition, although topography looks to understand the unity of a place through the relational connection of its elements, topography maintains a focus on the plurality through which even the unity of place is constituted. Topography thus understands unity and plurality as standing in an essential not be relation to one another – a relation that cannot be dispensed with and in which neither unity nor plurality can be displaced in favour of the other.

There is one further lesson to be drawn from the example of topographical surveying: such surveying can begin anywhere in the region to be surveyed – there is no one privileged starting point – and yet such surveying also depends on recognising a certain prior constitution of a region as that within which the task of surveying is undertaken. The relationality of the region – what we might call the regionality of the region – must already be given prior to the act of surveying. That is, a region must be understood as a set of places that are already, in some sense, related to one another in such a way that they do indeed constitute a region. It is only on this basis that one can begin to map the region, and so only on that basis that a distinct structure of relations appears. Relationality is itself dependent on regionality – on locality, or place – and there can be no infinite ramification of relations. Moreover, the regionality at issue here is not some arbitrary 'construction', but instead arises out of a prior engagement in landscape that is itself partially determined by the landscape itself. The dependence of relationality on regionality runs against the commonplace assumption that relationality is essentially spatial. Relations are spatial, and space carries a basic relationality with it (even though it cannot be reduced to relationality), but the relationality of space is itself to be understood only on the basis of the regionality of relations.

Space and place are related, not only because of the historical and linguistic connections that obtain between spatial and topographic terms and ideas, but also because place itself carries within it the idea of openness, expansiveness or 'room' that is central to the idea of space. A place is a certain sort of opened space, but it is a space opened within a boundary, and so the space that appears in place is a space that takes on an almost 'felt' quality that is quite distinct from the

smoothed-out, abstracted mode of extension that is 'space' as it is understood apart from place (for instance, within geometry or physical theory). The bounded space of place is also a space inextricably bound to time, since the spatial openness of place, which arises through its boundedness, is essentially dynamic. Indeed, the idea of the boundary is itself dynamic – as is evident in its relation to the ideas of both threshold and horizon – and so the boundedness of place is not some static separation of otherwise identical regions. This is perhaps most clearly evident in the character of place as structured in terms of both inward and outward aspects – there is already, in the very structure of place, an ordering and orientation that is indicative of place as defined in essential relation to forms of movement and activity.

A number of features appear as central to the brief analysis. First, place as bound and ground; second, place as open and dynamic; third, place as relational and superficial. These elements of place are the basis for the idea of philosophical topography. But such topography does not consist merely in a set of claims about place – or space – taken on its own. A key idea is also that place is central to understanding human being, and in fact, to understanding existence or being as such. In this respect, place provides the frame within which we understand any sort of coming to appearance at all. Such a claim has an obvious reference back to the work of Martin Heidegger. Indeed, Heidegger's explicit characterisation of his own thinking's as taking the form of a 'topology of being' (see Heidegger, 2004: 41) is clearly echoed in my own talk of 'philosophical topography'. But the provenance of this mode of thinking is not exclusively Heideggerian. In terms of recent philosophy, it extends to include Donald Davidson's employment of topography in the idea of 'triangulation' (Davidson, 2001; see also Malpas, 2011b), and from within the history of philosophy it stands in an essential relation to Immanuel Kant's critical and transcendental project understood, in his terms, as a 'geography of reason' (Kant, 1998: A767/B 795; see also Malpas and Thiel, 2011a).

3. Deconstructing constructionism

The sort of analysis of the conceptual structure of space and place that I have sketched out above is not common in contemporary geographic and social scientific thinking – not even in thinking that has supposedly taken the spatial or topographic turn. The proliferation of references to space and place in contemporary theory is characterised, in fact, by its lack of attention to these sorts of considerations. Whether one looks to Deleuze and Guattari's account of nomadism, and of smooth and striated space (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), to Castells' 'space of flows' (Castells, 1989), or to Sloterdijk's 'spheres' (Sloterdijk, 2011) – all of which have had or are having an impact on geographic thought – what one finds are ideas that are affixed to the spatial and the topographic, and expressed through them, but no real attention given to the spatial and the topographic as such.

In virtue of what, we may ask, are the smooth and the striated properly modes of space, or better, of spatiality? Exactly what is the spatiality associated with the 'space of flows', and how is it genuinely distinct from other modes of spatiality? In what way do Sloterdijk's 'spheres', in their various forms, actually refer us to different spaces or spatialities? To what extent are they intended to refer to real structural features of the entities and events to which Sloterdijk attaches them? In fact, in all these cases, and in many others besides (one might think also, for instance, of Lefebvre – see Lefebvre, 1991) what is at issue is not the development of forms of analysis grounded in the spatial and topographic, but rather the use of the spatial and topographic as the vehicles for the articulation of what are essentially a set of social and political concerns. Indeed, on these accounts, space and place become functions of the social and the political *and nothing more*.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the widespread and generally unquestioned assumption that both space and place are *socially constructed* phenomena – as assumption that also serves to underpin the neglect of space and place as concepts in their own right. As a general position in geographic and social scientific thinking, social constructionism is based in observations concerning the enormous variability in certain phenomena (most often phenomena that have traditionally been viewed as 'natural', and so as unvarying), taken together with the apparent correlation between such variability and variation in social and political circumstance. In this respect, while constructionism may be viewed as based in an explanatory impulse that looks to uncover the causes of variation in phenomena, constructionist positions have also tended to go hand-in-hand with various forms of 'anti-universalism', 'nominalism' or even 'anti-realism' – positions that involve the denial that there is anything that can be said about a phenomenon beyond the particularities of its formations, social or discursive, or the specific factors that determine those formations. Although sometimes assumed to stand in opposition to idealist or subjectivist positions, this also means that contemporary forms of constructionism themselves take on a strongly idealist or subjectivist character – and in this respect constructionism can be found mixed with other approaches including phenomenology, and various forms of so-called 'non-representationalist' theory (exemplified in Thrift, 2008).

Yet while considerations of the explanation of variation in phenomena do seem to be what underpins constructionist approaches, whether in relation to space or anything else, they are also considerations that, when subjected to closer scrutiny, appear to be relatively weak. The identification of the causal basis for variation in some phenomena, for instance, need not imply anything about the 'constructed' character of the phenomenon in question. The fact that some phenomenon is caused by a set of environmental factors, for instance, does not imply that the phenomenon can be treated as merely environmentally 'constructed' – *being caused by* some thing

is not identical with *being constructed by* that thing. Thus, while the rainbow is a result of the refraction of light through air-borne particles of water, it is not thereby a 'refractive construct'. Moreover, the mere fact of variability in some phenomenon does not imply that there is nothing that can be said about the phenomenon beyond its particular instantiations nor does it imply that the phenomenon is wholly derivative of the other factors that determine it. The fact that practices surrounding death and dying, for example, vary enormously from one society to another does not imply that those practices cannot be conceptualized in a more generalized way that, while it may draw upon specific instances, nevertheless goes beyond any particular such instance. Thus we can talk about the human experience of death and dying, and the practices that surround it, even while acknowledging the variability of those practices. In fact, being able to go beyond any particular instance of some phenomenon is precisely what is involved in having a concept that applies to that phenomenon (see Malpas, in press, which deals with some of these same issues from the perspective of contemporary human rights).

At the heart of social constructionism lies an obvious and unobjectionable truism: every phenomenon, inasmuch as it can enter into a social or discursive world, must be socially or discursively 'formed'. This is no different, however, from the claim that, for instance, for something to be said, it has to be said in language, yet such a claim does not justify any interesting conclusion to the effect that therefore what we say is 'linguistically constructed'.³ Indeed, one might say that constructionism takes the simple and obvious truth that phenomena vary across their instances (even when it is the 'same' phenomenon that is at issue) and elevates it into something like a fundamental ideological principle. In doing so, however, it not only exaggerates and overstates the truth with which it begins, but it almost entirely neglects the fact that the variability of phenomena across their instances is nevertheless also constrained by the character of those very phenomena (it is such constraint that can be taken to underpin the idea that the instances are indeed 'the same'). The variability of phenomena is also taken, on a constructionist approach, to demonstrate the derivative character of the phenomena in question – they are the products or 'constructs' of social and political structures and processes (in this respect, social constructionism is opposed to topography simply in virtue of constructionism's commitment to a form of reductionism) – although the notions of the social and political that are invoked here often remain highly general, relatively under-theorized, and their invocation poorly justified. The widespread application of constructionism – an application that extends from space and place to a huge range of other concepts – also tends to undermine its explanatory usefulness. If almost *every* phenomenon is socially constructed then it means very little to say of *any particular* phenomenon that it is itself socially constructed.

What is perhaps most important about social constructionism, however, at least so far as the present discussion is concerned, is the way in which it allows forms of social scientific discourse to operate autonomously without any need explicitly to address issues of underlying *ontology*. After all, those issues have already been dealt with by the assertion of the socially constructed character of the phenomena to be inquired into – thus there simply are no questions about space and place, for instance, other than questions about their socially constructed character, and so no questions other than those that concern the social or political factors by which space and place are constructed. In this way geographic and social scientific discourse is freed up to focus on the ways in which social construction takes place (which can be treated purely empirically), and so also on the possibility of *different forms* of such construction – thereby allowing for the possibility of an explicitly 'progressive' form of political discourse (social constructionism is thus taken to underpin political progressivism). At the same time, this 'freeing up' of discourse also enables exactly the kind of rhetorical and figurative proliferation that is so characteristic of contemporary geographic and social scientific thought. Even when not explicitly adhered to or invoked, constructionism still functions, as part of the broader intellectual ambiance, to legitimate such a proliferative discourse.

If space and place are nothing other than socially constructed phenomena, then one of the implications that seems to follow from this is that space and place cannot, themselves, play any significant foundational role in the formation of human life and society. The latter may well take on spatial and topographic form, but this is itself a consequence of the constructed character of space and place. Strictly speaking, human existence is not, on this account, bound to space and place in any special way, even though human existence may be spatially and topographically articulated, because space and place have no *sui generis* character, but just are modes of social and political articulation. This point is often obscured in the way space and place appear in contemporary geographic and social scientific thinking, since many writers will deploy spatial and topographic images and figures in ways that appear to give primacy to space and place while their underlying commitment is to space and place as essentially derivative of the social and the political. It is not uncommon to find geographers and social scientists affirming the character of human life and existence, both individual and collective, as always articulated spatially and topographically. Yet here space and place function simply as that in and through which social and political forces are encoded and by means of which they operate. Human identity, for instance, may thus be spatially and topographically instantiated, and yet not shaped *by* space and place. Instead, space and place are simply fields within which the construction of identity itself operates, and so operates also to construct the spatial and topographic articulation of identity.

Such a constructionist conception of the human relation to space and place presents all of the same problems that accompany constructionist positions more generally. But in addition, the constructionist approach to space and place, in particular, faces at least one additional complication. On the one hand social constructionism does indeed seem to suggest that space and place are not themselves significant other than as constructed; on the other hand, however, the very idea of social construction as operating in and through the spatial and the topographic implies that the nature of the spatial and topographic as not exhausted by their socially constructed character. At the very least, social construction depends upon spatial and topographic structures no less than does any other causal or conditional process or relation. Space and place may thus be subject to social construction (which means simply they will reflect the social and political forces that operate in and through them), but, at a more fundamental level, social construction will itself be subject to the spatial and topographic. Consequently, there must indeed be a sense in which space and place underpin the very possibility of construction itself. Yet this is not something that is commonly acknowledged – and it is not acknowledged precisely because of the tendency to ignore questions about the character of space and place independently of their socially constructed or even their ‘imagined’ character.

4. Finding the place of the human

It was precisely the character of space and place, their distinction and relation, that was the primary focus for my discussion in section two above, and that is also the basis for the idea of philosophical topography. In this respect, one of the key points of contrast between my own topographic approach, and the constructionist and associated accounts that are so widespread in contemporary geography, is that the topographic does indeed take place and space to be *sui generis* concepts that cannot be reduced merely to social constructs. On such an approach, it is not social forces that determine space or place; instead, place is the matrix within and out of which the social is itself formed, while space (and with it time) provides its medium and its shape. Moreover, as I noted above, this approach is not one that restricts itself simply to a set of claims merely about place and space. The idea of philosophical topography, which encompasses both a methodology and ontology, extends to a thesis about human life and existence – about the social and political life as well as the personal and experiential.

The argument that forms the basis for such a topography is derived partly from consideration of the concepts at issue here, but also from consideration of a range of considerations, empirical and theoretical, drawn from epistemology, semantics, psychology, anthropology, and elsewhere. Although the characterization of the approach as ‘topographical’ is my own, other

thinkers, notably Edward Casey, have also argued in similar ways – Casey from an explicitly phenomenological perspective (see Casey, 2009). Unlike the constructionist approach, this 'topographical' mode of thinking is based on a set of independent evidential and argumentative grounds concerning the nature of the self and its engagement with the world, and the character of the interdependent structure that encompasses subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and objectivity. Of particular importance to the present discussion is that this approach leads directly, as I intimated above, to the conclusion that human existence – understood as encompassing the social, the political, and the personal – is itself founded *in place*.

It might be thought that focussing on the human here is already problematic. Is not the human one of the categories that in the twenty-first century we have gone beyond? Can contemporary thinking be anything other than post or trans-human – must it not engage with what is other or more than human? It is significant that all such talk occurs only within a specifically human context – the talk that postulates going 'beyond' nevertheless appears to remain firmly 'within'. Indeed, one might argue that the human does not name something we can go beyond at all, but instead refers us to a particular mode of *being* capable of multiple instantiation – thus potentially cutting across categories such as the biological, the artificial, or the cybernetic, rather than fitting within them. It is significant that Heidegger's own critique of 'humanism' – so often taken as a founding source for contemporary forms of post-humanist thinking – does not imply any rejection of the human or a lack of concern with the human. Rather it arises out of Heidegger's demand for a more essential thinking of the human – for a more basic mode of questioning of the human than has been characteristic of the previous tradition (see Heidegger, 1993). That more basic mode is precisely what is opened up by Heidegger's own topological thinking, and so too, I would argue, by the idea of a philosophical topography. It is a mode of thinking that refuses to allow that the human is adequately understood by a focus on one entity as it might be defined biologically or in terms of a particular material constitution.

Although such topology or topography does indeed involve a turn back to the question of the human, it does not do so in a way that assumes any *foundational* conception of the human nor any *substantive* account of the human. Rather it is place, or the fact of placedness, that is the starting point. Moreover, since place itself lacks any substantive character in its own right (one of the reasons for its relative theoretical neglect), so the way place functions as a starting point here, even as a ground, is quite different from the way in which any other concept might so function. The relational and superficial character of place means that place, and even specific places, always retains an open, indeterminate, and dynamic character. Place is, in summary terms, the dynamic opening that occurs within bounds. As such it does not operate as a determinate principle in its own

right, but rather as making possible the determination of that which appears within and in relation to it – including the determination of the human. Thus, whether we look to the human as given in the collectivity of the social or the individuality of the personal, it is only in and through the concrete forms of place, and of space and time, that the human appears. Understanding the human, whether as collective or individual, is a matter of understanding the articulation of modes of life and action as these are worked out only in relation to topographic and spatio-temporal structures and forms, in ways that are also fundamentally constrained by the topographic. This means that the basic features of topographic analysis that were identified in section two – place as bounding and grounding, open and dynamic, relational and superficial – are also directly relevant to the analysis of the human.

At the heart of the notion of the topographic is the idea that entities and events are not to be understood in terms of some already determined internal structure, but are rather essentially relational in character – that is, entities and events are determined as what they are by the way they relate to other entities and events. Topographic thinking is, in this respect, essentially relational or holistic. However, the relationality at issue is, as I noted above, also constrained by regionality. Relations do not ramify infinitely, but only within certain bounds. Holism is thus always constrained by regionalism. If this were not so, then relational entities would lose themselves in the networks of which they are supposedly part, while the networks would become little more than undifferentiated continua (to some extent, the idea of the network is already a particular representational form, and therefore abstracted from that which it represents, and as such it can be misleading if its representational character is not constantly kept in view). Relations, and so also relational networks, depend on the differentiation of that which is related, and differentiation can be understood as precisely what is given through regionality. This is not to privilege that which is related over the relation – or *vice versa* – but rather to recognise their mutuality. Such mutuality is a central concept in any genuinely topographic mode of thinking.

When we look to think the human in topographic terms, then the same mutuality must apply: human identity will be interdependent with the identity of the places in which human lives are embedded, and more than this, the very fabric of human lives – the character and structure of both personal and collective life – will also be interdependent with the character of places and spaces in which that life is played out. Moreover, such relationality is, in topographic terms, always tied to what I have termed 'superficiality', which means that there is no underlying structure to which that relationality can be reduced. It is indeed a relationality of surface, rather than depth. Similarly, there is no deeper structure to the human than is given in and through the structure of place and space. This topographic mode of thinking can actually be seen to underpin the sorts of spatialized analyses that can be found in thinkers such as Foucault and Lefebvre, although in some

ways it also harks back at least to Hume (the non-substantialist conception of the self that it implies is one explored from a different perspective in Malpas, 1999b, as well as in Malpas, 1999a). But notice that on this account that spatialized analysis is based in an account of the nature of place and space as such – it is not merely that the human is articulated topographically and spatially, but that the topographic and the spatial itself determines key elements of the structure and form of the human. Understanding the human topographically means understanding the human as determined *in its being-human* through its relation to place and by means of the relatedness that is articulated in place.

The grounding of the human in place that is envisaged here is thus not a matter of any mere ‘emotional attachment’ of individuals to places – or indeed of human collectivities to places. It is much more basic and more pervading. Instead, the very content and meaning of human life is inextricably bound to the concrete entities and events that constitute the localised environmental contexts in which human lives are lived. In this respect, a topographical understanding of the human implies an externalised conception of content (that is, of the ‘meaning’ of attitudes, utterances, and behaviour) and of identity, both individual and collective (which is to say that the self and subjectivity are shaped by the external circumstances in which they are located and towards which they are oriented) (see eg. Malpas, 1999a; also Malpas, 2010b, 2011b). Central within this topographical structure is *action*, since it is action that brings together, at the same time as it also constitutes, both the agent (the acting subject) and that towards which action is directed (the object acted upon) (Malpas, 1999a).⁴ This structure is not, it should be noted, narrowly individualist, since it applies as much to large-scale social agency as to the agency that is focussed on individual persons, and neither is it subjectivist, since although it is a structure in which the subject is necessarily implicated, it is not a structure grounded *in* the subject, but *in which* the subject is itself grounded (and the same is true, strictly speaking, of the object). It is *place* that takes primacy here as that which unifies and differentiates, and therefore constitutes and determines (see Malpas, 1999a). The externality at issue here means that memory, for instance, cannot be understood as if it were some internal element ‘in the mind’, as if it belonged to some purely ‘subjective’ private realm. Memory, like meaning, is given in and through the world, in its concrete materiality. Thus philosophical topography can be seen as giving rise directly to a form of ‘romantic materialism’ – according to which the romantic *is* material (meaning is given in the concreteness of things) and the material *is* romantic (things are themselves already taken up into the realm of meaning and memory). Such a ‘romantic materialism’ (see Malpas, 2012c) to some extent converges with an increasing focus on the materiality of the human – as developed, for instance, within the broad domain of ‘material culture studies’ (see Hicks and Beaudry, 2010), and which has also figured within the work of many

contemporary geographers — but which has otherwise been derived from rather different sources, often exhibiting some of the same philosophically problematic elements as are evident in many of the positions (those associated with the so-called ‘spatial’ turn) discussed above.

Fundamental to the idea of place, and so to the idea of philosophical topography, is the notion of bound or limit – as I noted above, place is the dynamic opening that occurs *within bounds*. The idea of bound or limit that appears here is one that takes bound or limit to be essentially *productive*, rather than merely *restrictive*. As Heidegger famously puts it “a boundary is not that at which something stops but... that from which something *begins its presencing*” (Heidegger, 1971: 154). Such productivity extends to encompass the notion of place itself: it is precisely the finitude and singularity of place that is the basis for its open and dynamic character – that makes it the proper and only point of entry into the expansiveness of the world. Similarly, understanding the human as inextricably bound to place means understanding the human as grounded in, and so marked by, that same finitude and singularity – the essential ‘placedness’ of our being is not some constraint that makes us less than we might be, but is instead that on the basis of which any and every possibility available to us is opened up. In this respect, there is a curious interplay that occurs between placedness, understood as a form of *determination*, and placedness as the opening up into the *indeterminate*, where indeterminacy is the obtaining of a multiplicity of possibilities – a multiplicity that is essential to the opening up of world. Being in place is thus a matter of both the ‘here’ and the ‘there’; of proximity and distance; of singularity and plurality; of sameness and difference. Indeed, it is only within and with respect to place that any of these notions possess real meaning or significance.

If the dynamic structure of place is characterised by this interplay between the ‘determining’ and the ‘indeterminate’, then neither place itself nor individual places – nor the bounds and limits associated with them – can be understood as capable of being given a unique or absolute determination. In this respect, place and its boundedness exhibits exactly the same character as the horizontality of the visual field – the horizon functions to constitute the field, and so in a sense to determine it, and yet the horizon cannot itself be made fully determinate. Here indeterminacy can be seen to be a consequence of productivity. Moreover, the very character of the boundary as *connecting* at the same time as it also *separates* means that the identity of the place that the boundary defines is also indeterminate, with every place having enfolded in it, and being enfolding within, other places. This does not mean that individual places lack any character that belongs to them, but rather that their character is such as always to admit of other possibilities, other descriptions – is always such as to implicate other places. This same indeterminacy also makes it impossible completely to distinguish human persons from the places and locales in which they live

and in which their lives are articulated, as it makes it impossible completely to separate individual lives from the lives of others, and so reinforces the intertwined character of the human and the placed.

5. Conclusion: place, ethics, and critique

Inasmuch as the concept of place is tied essentially to the notion of bound or limit, as the Greek *topos* would itself indicate, then any genuine turn in thinking towards place – any genuinely ‘topographic’ turn – must be at the very same time a turn in thinking towards bound or limit. Moreover, if space itself can only be understood in its relation to place, and not as separate from it, then so too must the thinking of bound or limit be central to any properly spatial turn. Yet much of contemporary geographic and social scientific thinking is characterised precisely by its neglect, sometimes even its refusal, of such ideas. In this respect, such thinking remains within a clearly modern frame, since one of the characteristic features of modernity, perhaps even its defining feature, has been its opposition to the idea of bound or limit. Modernity, which also includes those varieties of modernity among which must be included the post-modern, can be understood as characterised by the attempt to abolish the limits on the human, to transcend the bounds imposed by place, to open up a realm of unrestricted spatiality – an attempt that can be seen in the concern with constant increase, whether of resources, productivity, wealth, or information, in the preoccupation with speed and immediacy, and in the increasing push towards supposedly globalized systems and perspectives. Oddly, this modern project can be seen to be at work both in contemporary forms of bureaucratized and corporatized capitalism as well as in many forms of contemporary social scientific thinking – including geographic thinking. In this respect, rather than constituting a turn towards space or place, the spatialized rhetoric that now abounds is essentially a mirroring in theoretical terms of the same modernist reframing of the world that has been gathering pace over the last few hundred years. It is thus no accident, for instance, that the language of networks, flows, and connectivity is to be found at the heart of contemporary corporate discourse no less than in current geographic theory. It is the same mode or world-representation that is at issue in both cases, and in each it is a mode of representation (even when declared to be ‘non-representational’) that pays scant heed either to place or to limit (see Malpas, 2012).

The failure to attend properly to bound and to limit – and especially to the bounds and limits within which thinking itself operates – is itself a failure of criticality. Critique is, in this sense, constituted *topographically* – it is an activity, a mode of reflection and action, that depends on attentiveness to bound, to limit, and so also to place. Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in Kant’s construal of his own critical project as a form of ‘rational geography’ (to some extent echoing

Hume's earlier talk of 'mental geography' – Hume, 1999: 1.13) that aimed to found knowledge by mapping its proper bounds – hence Kant's original conception of the first *Critique* as an inquiry into 'the bounds of sensibility and reason' (see Kant, 1999: 132; Malpas and Thiel, 2011a). The topographical nature of critique might also be seen to underpin Heidegger's emphasis on the primacy of questioning – such questioning, and the listening or responsiveness with which it is also intimately connected, is essentially a matter of orientation towards the place out of which questioning emerges and to which it always turns us back (see Malpas, 2012a). Here too the connection between critique, questioning, and *reflection* – the last of these understood as a returning of vision, and so as having an implicitly spatialized character – reinforces the topographic structure at issue.

This topographic structure not only belongs to critique in some general sense, but also to critique as it drives ethical thought and behaviour, and also, I would argue, as it drives a properly democratic politics (such a politics being understood as essentially based in the capacity for public decision-making and debate – see Malpas, 2009, 2010a). This is a particularly important conclusion since all too frequently any thinking that gives salience to place has been assumed to be ethically problematic and politically reactionary, even to the extent that it has been taken to provide the foundation for and impetus towards exclusionary and even violent attitudes and behaviour. The argument here is a simple one: where identity, whether individual or collective, is seen as tied to place, then the protection and preservation of identity becomes a matter of the protection and preservation of that place, and so the maintenance of identity becomes a matter of the maintenance of the borders of the place so as to prevent any intrusion from without. Although seldom made explicit (an exception is Levinas, 1990), this argument can be seen to underpin a widespread suspicion of place across much geographic and social scientific thinking – it is a suspicion seen to be reinforced in an especially powerful way by Nazi politics and its supposed reliance on concepts of place and homeland (including Heidegger's own implication with such politics – See eg. Bambach, 2005), and at a more mundane level, by conservative bigots everywhere who couple their bigotry with declamations of their love of country or of commitment to locality. The idea of an acknowledged connection to place is also seen as linked to forms of romantic nostalgia that are themselves taken to be regressive and reactionary (see eg Trigg, 2006 – for a different account of nostalgia see Malpas, 2012a: 161-176).

The considerations adduced in the preceding pages ought already to cast doubt on the idea that there is a general argument against place, or against any thinking that gives centrality to place, of the sort that appears here. In fact, such arguments typically rely on treating place in a way that actually goes against the character of place itself: they tend to disregard the way place is itself bound

up with both identity and difference as well as with plurality and indeterminacy; they tend to ignore the productive character of place in its relation to the human – and so ignore the ontologically basic character of the relation between place and human being; and as they thereby also overlook the productive character of bound and limit, so they tend also to overlook the necessary foundation of critique in a recognition of bound and limit, and so in a recognition of place. Moreover, even the historical examples that are used to buttress the case for the historically problematic character of place turn out to be rather more equivocal than might seem to be the case at first sight (see eg Malpas, 2006: 17-27; 2012: 137-157), while there is considerable evidence to suggest that the refusal and denial of place, and the human connection to place, has been just as destructive as has any assertion of place-based exclusivity. This might be thought to be most obviously so in respect of the environment, where a disregard for place can be seen as making possible environmental neglect and harm, but such destructiveness is also evident in more immediate human terms. The Highland clearances and the enclosure movement in Britain provide two such instances, but many more are evident in the experiences of indigenous peoples, from Australia to Africa and the Americas to Asia, in the face of colonisation and ‘modernisation’. Moreover, displacement and the destruction of place have often been employed against individuals and communities from ancient times until the present as deliberate techniques of war and oppression. Thus the destruction of places, and the material culture associated with them, has been a widespread tactic in times of conflict across the twentieth century from Lhasa to Sarajevo (see especially Bevan, 2006). The Nazi destruction of Jewish identity and culture in the Holocaust itself operated through forms of displacement and dispossession in a way that has had a continued and powerful effect on survivors (see Améry, 1966; also Vansart, 2001).

There is no question that place, and topographic notions more generally, can figure in problematic forms of action and discourse – just as other key ideas, whether of the good, the just, the virtuous, or the democratic, are similarly not immune from being drawn upon within what we may otherwise regard as ethically suspect or politically reactionary usages. That a concept is deployed to problematic ends does not imply that the concept is itself problematic – although it may well tell us something about the importance or centrality of that concept to human life and thought. If we attend to the character of place itself, rather than merely to the rhetoric that often surrounds it, then place not only appears as a central structure in the very constitution of things, and so also in the constitution of the human, but place also turns out to be foundational to the very possibility of the ethical and political. It does so in part through its connection to the notion of critique that I sketched above, but also through the way in which the human is itself constituted *as human* through its being given over to an essential placedness, an essential finitude, an essential limitation – an

essential *fragility* (see Malpas, 1999a, 2012d). Turning back to place is a turning back to the human, but to the human understood as always in relation, always in place, always in question. In this respect, far from taking us away from the human, as Levinas claims, the turn to place brings us back into genuine proximity to the human, to ourselves as well as others, and so into proximity to the real ground of ethical obligation, ethical responsibility and ethical responsiveness.

Geography still awaits a genuinely topographic turn – a turn back to place – just as it still awaits a genuine turn back to space. But given the interconnection between place and bound, and so between place and critique, so one might argue that geography also awaits a genuinely critical turn – and this in spite of geography’s contemporary claims for just such criticality. Such a critical turn would require a much closer attentiveness to place and to space, but also to geography’s own bounds and limits – to geography’s own place or *topos*. Only through the closer engagement with place can geography arrive at a closer engagement with what geography itself is and might be – and do so in a way that is relevant, I would argue, to both cultural *and* physical geography. For there to be such a topographic turn, however, geography may well need to turn back to some basic conceptual matters and relinquish some of its current tendency towards polemical and rhetorical excess. The turn back to place, understood as a turn back to a sense of bound and limit, is thus also a turn back to a certain sort of intellectual caution and modesty. It also a turn back to our own selves and to a fundamental mode of self-questioning and self-critique. It is just this that is at stake in the idea of philosophical topography.

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Notes

¹ There is a widespread distinction that has developed in geographic circles between topography and topology according to which topology is typically associated with modes of analysis that prioritise flows and networks across what might otherwise be taken to be a flat surface while topography emphasises depth and contour (see, for example, Rose and Wylie, 2006). This distinction often seems taken for granted in contemporary geographic thought without much attention being paid to the ways in which these two terms appear elsewhere or the longer history that attaches to them. Thus, although allusions are often made that purport to connect the idea of 'topology' as used in this way with notions of topology as deployed within mathematics, the connection is a fairly loose one. At the same time, the use of topography that contrasts it with topology often operates in a way disconnected from the older sense of topography as a geographical concept that extends back to Ptolemy (see Lukermann, 1961).

² Although not every language marks the distinction in the same way as does English. French, for instance, tends not to separate out space and place linguistically, and a term such as *lieu* (which might be thought the most literal translation) lacks the connotations that attach to the English 'place' (so, as is sometimes pointed out, Pierre Nora's, *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (see Nora and Kritzman, 1996-1998) is more about *sites* of memory, than about its *places*), while *espace* is often used in ways that cut across the senses of both 'space' and 'place', so that Bachelard's *La Poétique de l'Éspace* (Bachelard, 1994) is clearly a poetics of *place* as much as of *space* (on some of the difficulties associated with the language of space and place in relation to French geographic thinking, see Berdoulay, 1989).

³ Although there is a version of 'constructionism', namely that of John Searle, in which one might be inclined to talk of construction in something like this fashion (see Searle, 1995, 2010). Searle's version of constructionism

is rather different, however, from that which is usually evident in the social scientific literature: first, because it is essentially a defence of a form of philosophical naturalism that depends on a sharp distinction between different levels of description; second, because it is also an extension of Searle's own speech-act theory of language to the domain of human activity in general – for something to be constructed for Searle is thus for it to be dependent on collectively agreed rules or conventions. From my own perspective, one of the problems with Searle's position is both the way it deals with the different levels of description that are at issue here and its assumption of the idea that social life can indeed be founded in rules or conventions.

⁴ As with the emphasis on materiality discussed briefly below, the focus on action may be seen to be convergent with other approaches that have become current within contemporary geography and social science, including non-representationalist theory. However, as with the emphasis on materiality, the way action figures in the sort of philosophical topography outlined here diverges at a number of crucial points from such approaches. It is an approach embedded in an more explicitly ontological framework, one that is grounded more strongly in a philosophical analysis of the phenomena at issue (rather than in a set of figurative tropes or associations), that eschews the simplistic assumptions of constructionism, and does not give priority to political over other sorts of consideration (which is not to say that it ignores the political either).