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EXCHANGE

J.E. Malpas's *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge University Press, 1999) Converging and diverging in/on place

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I am delighted to comment on Jeff Malpas's *Place and Experience*, clearly the most important recent book on the question of place—likely, the most important book ever on this elusive subject. Malpas himself prefers to call place "opaque" or "obscure": and if this is so, he is the one who, after so many centuries of neglect and misunderstanding, has cast the most light into its darkest corners. In particular, he has opened a dialogue on place which extends across entire continents and channels of philosophy—and between philosophy and literature and psychology—in deft and decisive ways. For place-o-philes such as myself, he has opened an entire realm of discourse about this difficult topic.

I

I shall begin by indicating certain areas in which Malpas and I certainly, or at least very probably, agree—before entering into areas of controversy between us. Let me apologize in advance for this blatantly self-referential strategy; it is the result of my having spent an invaluable week with the author at the Humanities Research Institute at UC, Irvine, this past fall—during which time we were in continual dialogue concerning our respective work on place.

(i) First of all, each of us is leery of regarding "place" as a social or political construct even though neither of us denies cultural and historical dimensions of place. Like Ian Hacking in his recent book on the subject, we would together pose the skeptical question: "the social construction of *what*?" For his part, Malpas writes: "Embedded in the physical landscape is a landscape of personal and cultural history, of social ordering and symbolism."[1] But this intimate bonding between place and culture does not mean that place is a simple product of cultural configurations any more than it is of social structure or political power. Similarly, the fact that we can effect changes of (and in) place as well as be affected by the place we are in (PE, 1) is not tantamount to saying

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that individually or collectively we create places. On the contrary, what Malpas calls "Proust's Principle" argues for "the place-bound identity of persons" (PE, 14; cf. also 182–5). In other words, who we are very much reflects where we are.

Both Malpas and myself insist that much more is at stake in matters of place than what is identifiably human—thus *a fortiori* what is cultural or social or historical. I like to talk of entire "place-worlds" that contain other-than-human as well as human elements, and Malpas says expressly that "the very possibility of the appearance of things—of objects, of self, and of others—is possible only within the all-embracing compass of place. It is, indeed, in and through place that the world presents itself" (PE, 15; cf. also 189). The world, in short, is more than a purely human world, and the places in terms of which it occurs cannot be altogether socially constructed, even if they bear the marks of the social deeply inscribed upon their flesh: "the land," says Malpas, "carries on its face, in pathways, monuments and sites, a cultural memory and storehouse of ideas" (PE, 186).

(ii) For this reason, Malpas calls his investigation "ontological" (PE, 15)—hence anterior to the social/cultural/political—in contrast with what he considers my own "strongly phenomenological" approach (PE, 20 n.). But here phenomenology and ontology conjoin in our common claim that Heideggerian "being-in-the-world" is indeed being in a *place*-world: place is "that in which …'being-in-the-world' is grounded" (PE, 15). At stake here is not just the convergence of ontology and phenomenology in post-Heideggerian thought but a larger claim in which we also concur: namely, that much of what is traditionally discussed as "time" and "space" is to be understood ultimately in terms of place: time and space meet in place, through whose needle's eye they are densely threaded together and at once. "Space and time," affirms Malpas, "combine within the single structure that is place" (PE, 17). And if this is so, then once again place cannot be limited to its social or political parameters, since whatever we mean by them time and space exceed the particular cultural or historical contents which they embrace and support. Malpas and I converge on this Kantian point, with both of us wishing to replace time and space as forms for intuition with place as what one could call a material condition of possibility. But where Kant considered ether to be a privileged such condition for the physical world, we would advocate place instead.[2]

(iii) From ether to place is not such a conceptual leap as one might imagine. Even if it makes no claim to be a universal medium, place possesses some of the essential amorphousness of ether. Here, too, Malpas and I enjoy a meeting of minds. Just as I have refused ever to give a definitive list of predicates of place—singling out for mention only those called for by the context (e.g., those terms that help to differentiate place from what I call "site")—so my partner in place avers that for him, too, "place" is an "open region within which a variety of elements are brought to light through their mutual interrelation and juxtaposition within that region" (PE, 18). This makes place into what Husserl termed a "regional essence." In contrast with a formal essence such as "object in general," this kind of essence is open-ended and is defined in terms of its content: it is "*sachhaltiges*" or contentful, a word that can also be translated as "material," though not in any strictly physicalistic sense.

So we have now come full circle: "place" is material not as an instance of sheer "physical landscape" (in Malpas's term) but as a material condition of possibility: not just of human experience (as Kant and Husserl would doubtless say) but of all kinds of appearance in any kind of life-world. As these appearances—or better, "appearings"—vary from life-world to life-world (including life-worlds with no actual life in them: e.g.,

the lunar landscape), so their collocation into particular places differs in content and quality and bearing.

II

Let me move to differences between Jeff Malpas and myself on the question of place. First of all, a difference of emphasis. Where his stress is on place as a transcendental (albeit material) condition of possibility, mine is on the concrete description of place. In this regard, he is the truer Kantian (and even, perhaps, Husserlian), arguing for the primacy of place as necessary to all appearances—whereas I proceed from the ground up, from infimae species and least noticeable differences to genera and regions. I go from appearances to place, he from place to appearances. Otherwise put, where he argues for possibility conditions, I describe the phenomena that these conditions make possible. I trust, perhaps naively, that a detailed and comprehensive description will detect pervasive (though never exhaustive) traits of place: traits which for Malpas serve as conditions of possibility for any appearance whatsoever.

In other words, my interest in the bare particularity of place gives way in Malpas to place as a necessary frame for experience.[3] And yet we are both talking about place—plain old place: place as material if not literally physical, place as a porous concept or regional essence, place as at once supervisory (of discrete locales) and immanent (to the things and thoughts, people and events it supervises by virtue of its regionalizing powers). Once again, as in the case of being-in-the-world, we meet in the middle: between phenomenology and ontology, the experiential and the transcendental. If I pursue description to the last capillary, he seeks the telltale heart, the ontological center, of any such description. And if we meet precisely—or rather, inherently imprecisely—in place, this is only because place itself is the term in which these otherwise divergent approaches find common ground and make common cause. The term: not the word or concept but the limit of description as of the possibility of appearance and experience. Place is for me the *terminus ad quem* of phenomenological analysis; for Malpas it is the *terminus ab quo* of any and all appearance and experience, as also of its description and specification. But place remains the mediatrix of our shared concerns, as well as the source of our express differences.

III

Finally, I shall single out several more particular differences between our accounts with an eye to their instructive value.

(i) Malpas is much more struck with the "fragility of place" than I am. (Cf. PE, 185, 191, 193). While I emphasize the perduringness of place—doubtless as a result of having come to the topic itself from an earlier treatment of "place memory"—he focuses on the way in which places always change and I, the place-subject, with them. I am more struck by the way in which place stays there to greet us—or threaten us—after we have been away from it for a while. Place keeps coming back to mind (i.e., in recollection) or in body (e.g., as we again find our way about in a place we once knew by means of habitual body memory). Also, a place often presents itself as fully constituted: as when I once entered a Hopi plaza dance, the whole scene alive and complete before me. I am not certain whether this obduracy of place is actually there—the "there that is there"—or whether I need to have it there, thus surreptitiously import it into any given place. Either

way, however, places come across as comparatively persistent in the order of things: certainly not eternal, but also not merely momentary either.[4]

Malpas, more concerned about personal identity than with identity of place *per se*,[5] is more impressed at how places change over time—not because of changing mores or values but because the self who experiences place itself alters over time: "to seek an escape from the transience and fragility of place is to seek an escape from place itself" (PE, 191). The self, at least the human self, is not perduring; it does not exhibit that *stabilitas loci* enamored by the Romans. For Malpas, it is just insofar as the self is precarious and not perduring that places are not either: "the fragility of … places is indicative of a corresponding fragility in our own lives and identities" (PE, 190).

True, by Proust's Principle, the self mirrors the places it inhabits: "our lives would themselves seem to be inseparably and intricately bound to the places and spaces in which we find ourselves" (PE, 190). But Malpas is far more interested in how the self, with its changing interests and experiences, is an active agent who alters the situations it is in, as when he states that "the grasp of space, and so of place, is tied to activity" (PE, 168). Despite his wish to de-anthropomorphize the study of place, Malpas is finally committed to an agent-based model of place. And this model signifies that as the agent modulates so must the place that reflects this same agent. Not the self "altering [who] alters not" (as in Shakespeare) but the self who, always altering, alters place. In contrast, my own view is that places, comparatively unaltered or perduring, accommodate an ever-altering self. We agree on the fragility of the subject but not on the fragility of the place in which that subject acts and thinks.

(ii) This is not to say that Malpas gives to us a subjectivist view of place, as if it were the mere creature of the actions of the human subject. He avoids such a reductive view in two ways. First, he admits expressly that the scope of "action" includes "the capacity to be affected by one's surroundings" (PE, 171); action entails reaction, proneness "to be acted upon" (ibid.). So we are not talking about any sheer spontaneity of the subject acting in undelimited freedom but a sensitivity to place and its own givenness: "affectivity" as he calls it on the first page of his book. Second, Malpas holds that the very apprehension of place requires a grasp both of subjective and objective space. It is not, as Heidegger seems to hold on occasion, that space is derived by abstraction from place but that the very concept of place entails an understanding of space from the start. Not only does this important move—set forth in chapter two of *Place and Experience*—undermine any obdurate dichotomy between place and space (a dichotomy on which I all too often trade myself) but it ensures that no place is merely the expression of the concerns of any given subject or group of subjects: giving us in effect still another reason for rejecting the wholesale culturalist thesis. This is not to say that Malpas, like virtually everyone who has written on the subject, does not succumb to the abstractionist temptation at times: "In general, the move to more encompassing places is also a move to greater abstractness … a move that takes us away from place and towards an increasingly abstracted sense of space" (ibid.). In fact, the way to keep place concrete is by re-affirming its link to action: "any concrete sense of place is most closely tied to concrete capacities to act" (ibid.). Thus action entails less the subjectivity of place than its concreteness in our experience of it. I would say much the same for body, the indispensable basis of action.

When he is not demonstrating the importance of action to place, Malpas's more mellow position is that of "interdependency." This is not only a matter of the mutual influence between person and place—that is the minimalist reading with which the book begins and to which it occasionally returns—but a more complex interrelationship

between place, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and objectivity. As Malpas puts it in his most complete statement on this topic: "The dependence of place on subjectivity, and on objectivity and intersubjectivity, is a dependence (properly an interdependence) that results from the character of place as a structure that necessarily encompasses all of these elements and within which the elements are themselves constituted" (PE, 185).

(iii) The mention of "structure" in this last statement is revealing. Given the nature of place as a (somewhat loose) assemblage of diverse elements, the only thing that can prevent place from being refulgently chaotic is, for Malpas, its possession of a structure that holds these elements together. Indeed, place is itself a structure: commenting on the fact that his doctrine of interdependence does not make place something subjective, he says that "place remains a structure that cannot be grounded in the existence of an independent subject" (PE, 185). Here I would raise a Heideggerian objection: does the notion of assemblage—or, in my language, of "event"[6]—really require or entail a structure? Is this not unduly formal and restrictive? Here the transcendentalism of Malpas's whole stance becomes still more evident, since "structure" smacks of a formal *a priori* condition or possibility. My question would be this: does not the assemblage at stake in place—a loose gathering of interdependent traits which we can take as equivalent to Heidegger's *Versammlung*—take care of itself without any need to invoke a supervenient structure? If place is truly regional in status, then it is characterized by porous boundaries and indeterminate content in keeping with my earlier discussion and with Malpas's own term "open region" (itself quite Heideggerian in resonance). Here I would remind Malpas of his apt phrase "open and bounded" as applied several times to place.[7] Or let us say that a place is more like a room than a cell—where "room" implies the openness which place exhibits.[8] Structure is either misapplied or redundant when it comes to matters of place. In my view, the phrase "unitary structure"[9] as applied to place is pleonastic: places are always more or less roomy and unitary (or else they could not have the effects they do; nor would they have any boundaries) but their unitary roomfulness is not structural in status.

This is not to deny that places have certain inherent structures of their own. Malpas is skillful in detecting several of these: above all, the situation of place as in the middle of an encompassing scale of things. A place cannot be too enormous or it ceases to be a place (i.e., it becomes a "region" in the usual sense of this term as signifying a large stretch of space), nor can it be too tiny (then it becomes a mere "spot"): it is scaled to the lived body, I would insist. Moreover, places often nest inside each other in a coherently expanding series: e.g., the plaza in the neighborhood in the city in the county. And a given place can be said to be contained within its own frame, i.e., as self-presenting. Further, a place folds outward to link up with other places, just as it folds inward to reveal its own content and character.[10] But these microstructures of place, so well depicted in Malpas's discerning descriptions (wherein he shows himself to be an excellent phenomenologist when he wishes to be), are themselves incorporated within what he calls the "complex but unitary" (PE, 157) continuation of any given place. This more capacious unity, however, is said to be only another structure, as in the claim that all particular traits of place have "to be understood as embedded within the more encompassing structure of place" (PE, 137). Structures of place are operative within place; they are indeed its infrastructures; but I am convinced that place itself is not an "overarching structure" (PE, 185) but a region, a room, an assemblage, and finally an event.

(iv) This leads me to a last brief concern: narration: a concern that is closely related to my critique of structure. In fact, Malpas considers narrative of place to be structural

in status: narrative, he says, "can be seen as structuring … both memory and self-identity, as well as the places, the landscapes in which self-identity is itself worked out and established" (PE, 185). I would rather regard narratives not as providing structures to places and persons but ingredient in them—immanent parts of their identity but not delineators of that identity itself. Here the recourse to Proust, welcome as it in many regards, may mislead. It is striking that Proust re-enters the argument at a late and quite definitive point in *Place and Experience*, namely, in chapter eight, which is entitled "Place, Past, and Person." No mere literary analogy, Proust's *Recherche* is given paradigmatic status for its rich descriptions of place. Rich and suggestive these are, but not because of their narrativity. Narration cannot help but favor the temporal dimension of human experience, as is evidenced in Malpas's reliance here on Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative.* Even though it certainly does include allusions to space throughout, a given narrative cannot privilege these allusions—or else it will cease to be narrational, i.e., a recounting of happenings.

The promotion of narration into such prominence in Malpas's account of place is not accidental. It might have been predicted. It fits well with his proclivity to underline the importance of agency and personal identity—both often at stake in literary narrative—as well as with his commitment to the fragility and contingency of place itself. And as manifesting, or at least adumbrating, a formal structure in its "narratological" dimension (a dimension never far from written or even spoken narrative), the narrativity of place reinforces the view that place itself is ultimately structural. And it is this view that I am here resisting. Just as place is not an experience, so it is not a structure. We do have experiences of it, and it contains structures within it. But in itself—if it is an "in itself"—it is more like a comprehensive glance into space than a narrative in time, more like matter than form, region than territory, landscape than garden, event than entity. A place is more like a room with windows than an airless antechamber. It is aerated in its own bounds and on its own terms.

Above all, a place perdures—in perception, in memory, in thought. Indeed, it perdures as the topic—the common *topos*—that binds human beings together on particular occasions, just as its exact conception divides them. Most of all, its residual opacity continues to challenge philosophers to think it through more adequately. Jeff Malpas's remarkable book has taken up this challenge with verve and force, and if I cannot agree with every part of his response, I am impressed and moved by its immensely truthful tenor.

Notes

1. Jeffrey Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 187. Hereafter "PE."
2. I am indebted to discussions with my colleague Jeffrey Edwards, who finds in Kant's Third Analogy and in his *Opus postumum* ether (or its equivalent) as a material condition of the human experience of space. See Edwards, *Substance, Force, and the Possibility of Knowledge: On Kant's Philosophy of Material Nature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
3. On the importance of "frame," see PE, 172–3, where frame is contrasted with "ground."
4. Malpas is certainly right to deny eternity to place: "The idea of a place immune to change, immune to decay and disintegration, is the idea of a 'place' in which nothing at all can appear—neither self nor others, neither the things of the world nor even the place itself" (PE, 191–2). But the choice is not merely two-fold: i.e., between contingency and eternity; there is also, as Plato makes clear in the *Timaeus*, the "perduring" (*aidios*). I hold that this latter, third temporal character is most appropriate for place.
5. Malpas does not deny identity of place: thus he speaks of "the character of places as unitary structures possessed of a certain identity and particularity of their own" (PE, 185). But he is much more impressed