

REVIEW ARTICLE

Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology*
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This is a book about place, and about the place we ought to attribute to place. It is also, and above all, a book about the place we ought to attribute to place in the thought of Martin Heidegger. Written with passion and clarity, and informed by a deep knowledge of Heidegger's texts, it is a book that should be read and discussed not only by Heideggerians, but also, and perhaps above all, by those who wonder about the difference between place and space, or between ontological locality and physical location.

As the author emphasizes, by raising the question of being from the point of view of its meaning, then of its truth, and, finally, of its *topos*, Heidegger's work provides great, indeed unsurpassable, resources for those wishing philosophically to think through the nature of place: "I take Heidegger to have attempted a thinking of being that is centrally oriented to the concept of place as such... Indeed, I would argue that Heidegger's work provides us with perhaps the most important sustained inquiry into place to be found in the history of Western thought" (3). Malpas' distinct approach to the question consists in a "reading" in the strong sense of the term: his aim is "to bring to the fore an issue that is otherwise not always directly apparent in Heidegger's thinking" and so to "recover" from Heidegger's thinking something that "perhaps he could not have himself fully articulated" (2). The aim, therefore, is to think with Heidegger, but also beyond Heidegger. Specifically, Malpas' reading takes its clue from Heidegger's later thought, and specifically from his claim that being be understood as disclosedness and clearing, and that the question of the meaning or the truth of being, initially understood as temporality, be now formulated as the question concerning the place of be-ing. With this clue or thread in hand, Malpas shows, most convincingly in my view, that the question of being is best formulated, and from the start, as a question of place, as the question, that is, concerning the way in which being is "there" or manifests itself. What Heidegger calls *Dasein*, and which Malpas insists we translate as being-there, is precisely an attempt to address the question of being from the point of view of its *there*, its locality or situation. Before it designates anything like a specific being, and this being that we are, *Dasein* names a problem, namely, being in the way in which it takes place, or happens (*ereignet*). And so, when, starting in the mid-1930s, Heidegger reformulates the question of the there of being (*Dasein*) in terms of the event or eventfulness of being (*Ereignis*), he remains entirely faithful to his original intuition, and actually comes closer to expressing it adequately.¹ In the end, then, Malpas' reading is perhaps best described as *reductive*, but in the strongest, and most positive sense of the term: insofar as its aim is to arrive at the core or the essence of Heidegger's thought, and of the question of being itself, the reading in question consists in a reduction in a phenomenological and hermeneutical sense.

With this strong thesis and approach firmly in place, Malpas rereads the whole of Heidegger's trajectory. Often, this means going against the grain of traditional interpretations of Heidegger, and of Heidegger's own statements. But it is precisely in those moments that Malpas is at his best. Let me give just two examples of Malpas' approach, from the fourth and third chapters of the book, respectively. In the fourth chapter of the book (155-157), entitled "The Turning of Thought: Truth and World," Malpas claims that the turning of Heidegger's thought in the 1930s was not a function of Heidegger's desire to shift the emphasis of his analysis away from Dasein, as designating the *being* of the human being, and towards the *truth* of being itself (albeit as implicating the human being in a distinct way). Rather, the turning in question was a function of *Being and Time*'s "failure" to "articulate the spatial and the topological as such" (153). In other words, Heidegger's work from the 1930s, and especially the work that emerges from the *Beiträge* (1936-1938), was born of the need to address the question of being more adequately, and this means in terms of place, or *topologically*. Let me now turn to the second example. In the rich and detailed analysis of the question of space and spatiality in *Being and Time* that he develops in the third chapter of his book, entitled "The Ontology of Existence: Meaning and Temporality," Malpas disputes the privilege that is given to temporality as the "ground" and "meaning" of being-in-the-world. In fact, Malpas questions and deconstructs the order of grounding and ontological priority that Heidegger establishes throughout his work, such as the relation of derivation and hierarchical dependence between the ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand, or the equipmental and the objective, between the practical and the theoretical, as well as between time and space, which underlies them all. Such a structure of derivation and dependence, Malpas argues, stems from Heidegger's inability to think through the nature of embodiment, the spatiality of the phenomenological body, as well as from his desire to retain the transcendental problematic of ground and condition. Heidegger's *magnum opus*, Malpas claims, remains too transcendental, too caught up in the problematic of foundation and ground, inherited from Kant. "Meaning" is a transcendental term that designates the horizon from, or on the basis of which, beings become manifest, and its association with the temporality of existence renders Heidegger unable to think the nature of embodiment, and the role of the body in the happening or the "worlding" of the world. In pages that are amongst the finest of the book, Malpas goes as far as to argue that the body and its spatiality are such as to "disrupt the supposed priority of temporality" (126). In the end, Malpas claims, it is a matter of understanding not how "place is to be derived from temporality," but how "temporality has to be itself understood in relation to the temporalizing/spatializing of the happening/gathering that is place" (63; reformulated on 144). There is no relation of grounding between space and time, but one of mutual dependence. This is a crucial insight, and one that, I believe, does justice to Heidegger's own path of thinking, whilst also going against the letter of what he claims in *Being and Time*.

Yet I would want to suggest that, having recognized place as always involving time in one way or another, Malpas ignores or, better said perhaps, brackets this crucial connection in the rest of his book, choosing instead to privilege the connection between place and space. If I have one reservation with respect to Jeff Malpas' otherwise insightful, lucid, and at times brilliant book, it has to do with the way in which, in its desire to rehabilitate the question of place—a desire that, once gain, I understand and share—it ends up downplaying the question of time, specifically in its historical dimension. It is as if, taking issue with a Heideggerian *doxa*, if not the Heideggerian orthodoxy, according to which the question of being is fundamentally a question of time, Malpas had gone too far in the opposite direction, minimizing at crucial moments the role played by time in Heidegger's analysis, and forgetting the—in my view correct—claim that Heidegger, especially after *Being and Time*, conceived of the truth or there of being as a mutual dependence between space and time. Now this wouldn't be a problem (after all, Malpas is explicit about the need to rectify Heidegger's thought where he believed it had gone astray), were it not for the fact that, in much, if not the whole, of what Malpas says, time is presupposed.

Let me try to make this clear, by turning to two examples. The first will take us to the fifth, and by far the longest, chapter, entitled "The Poetry that thinks: Place and 'Event.'" The second example will raise the question of the status of place and space in and around the *Beiträge*, which Malpas turns to in his fourth chapter.

As a way into the first example, I suggest we wonder about the very place from which Malpas wrote his book, the place, that is, from which the author himself feels compelled, for the second time as it were, and after the publication of *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography*, to engage with the problem of place.² On several occasions throughout the book, and in other texts, Malpas refers explicitly to actual places, landscapes, and environments, which have informed his thought about place. His fundamental claim—that the question of being is first and foremost a question of place, a question, that is, of how being is or unfolds *there*—stems not only from a close and compelling reading of Heidegger’s entire thought, but from a deep sense of the connection between the being of the human being, and actual, concrete places, be they Tasmania, New Zealand, or any other place.³ Yet there is another and perhaps more decisive sense of place that permeates the book. It is a place that the book shares not just with Malpas’ work of the last ten years, but with a growing community of thinkers, with which Malpas finds himself in dialogue, whether explicitly (Casey, Elden, Lefebvre, Massey, Relph, Tuan, Young) or implicitly (Haar, Sallis, Toadvine, Zimmerman). The community in question is, or overlaps with, that of ecophenomenology, of the philosophy of the earth and of nature. It is no mere coincidence that another, equally significant book, entitled *Topographies*, was also published in 2006.⁴ In fact, books and articles are being devoted to that question every year, and with an increasing sense of urgency, thus raising the question of how and why the question of place is given such priority today. And this is the point at which the question of place, and of the reasons behind its necessary resurgence, becomes indistinguishable from the question of time – not as the spatialized time of physics, nor even as the ecstatic temporality of existence, but as *our* specific historical time. I want to suggest that Malpas’ book is a response to the place or the situation in which we find ourselves today, a situation that is indistinguishable from the time in which we live. I want to claim that, in his new book and in a number of articles, Jeff Malpas is being Heideggerian not only by virtue of the fact that he writes on and with Heidegger, but most of all as a result of having understood and experienced what Heidegger himself calls the need and urgency of the time in which we live, and from which thought itself ought to unfold. The place from which he, along with a number of other contemporary thinkers, addresses the question of place as essentially distinct from that of space is born of the essential placelessness or homelessness in which, for the most part, we find ourselves today. The need for a return to place, and for thought as a thinking of place, is formulated from the experience of a fundamental lack of place, which coincides with the advent of the technological age: “one might even argue that the character of technology is such that, within its frame [the word that Malpas retains to translate the German *Gestell*], place no longer has any significance” (292). This place or source, from which the book unfolds, comes across most clearly towards the end of the book. This makes sense, as the book is roughly chronological, and follows the question of place from the early analysis of what it means for existence to be “there,” to the late considerations regarding *Ort*, *Ortschaft*, and *topos*. But it informs the book from the start, and constitutes what I would call its impetus or motivation. But if I am correct in my assessment—if, that is, Malpas’ turn to place, and his close reading of Heidegger’s complex treatment of that question throughout his life, stems from a profound affinity with Heidegger’s claim that our technological age is characterized by the systematic elimination of place, and a planetary homelessness, such that the task of thinking would coincide with the task of rethinking the fate of place—the question of place will have from the start been a question of time, or of history, understood as the history of being. In other words, the question of place, and the need to rehabilitate it, not just from within Heidegger’s own thought, but as one of the most pressing issues facing us today, makes sense only in the context of a historically defined moment.

To be sure, Malpas recognizes that the essential “homelessness,” “uniform distancelessness,” loss of nearness, and so also of “place,” are a function of technology. In fact, technology appears as the systematic “spatialization” of the world, once experienced as the site of an encounter in which the human being, as mortal, found itself between sky and earth, and in relation to the gods. This site or place, which a thing such as a jug, or a bridge, can still reveal, yet with increasing difficulty, is what Heidegger calls the *Geviert* (or “fourfold”). Malpas also acknowledges that technology is but the culmination and the final stage of a metaphysical process, which Heidegger equates with the “forgetfulness of being” (279). Interestingly, though, Malpas does not follow Heidegger all the way here. For Heidegger insists that the spatialization of the world, and technology itself, is a historical, or, better said perhaps, destinal process. In other words, the concealing and erasure of place is a function of the historical and temporal unfolding (*Wesen* and *Anwesenung*) of being, and so is itself a mode of

revealing. Whilst Malpas recognizes that technology is a mode of revealing, and thus a mode of truth (in which, to be sure, the essence of truth is most concealed), he does not recognize history—a history which, according to Heidegger, is not just that of the forgetfulness of being (*Seinsvergessenheit*), but first and foremost that of the structural or necessary abandonment of being (*Seinsverlassenheit*)—as the manner of that revealing. What I want to suggest, therefore, is that Heidegger never dissociated space from time, or place from history, even when the emphasis was on being as *topos*.

This mutual dependence which, once again, Malpas recognizes explicitly but without, in my view, integrating it in the substance of his book, is more obvious still in Heidegger's treatment of place in the *Beiträge*. Malpas is right to emphasize that, in that book, Heidegger hyphenates Da-sein, thus justifying further Malpas' own translation of the word as "being-there." It is now explicitly a matter of articulating being according to its there, or its place. Crucially, though, Heidegger goes on to articulate it in terms of the reciprocal belonging and mutual dependence of space and time, which he characterizes as "time-space" (*Zeit-Raum*). And he defines the unity of time and space, or their articulation, as *die Augenblickstätte*, or the site of the moment.⁵ Now if *Stätte* does evoke place and space—a connection that Malpas emphasizes—*Augenblick* evokes time. The point, here, is that space and time turn out to be inseparable. Yet they signal very different, and in fact opposed, tendencies: time is associated with "rapture" (*Entrückung*), and with the world as clearing, whilst space is associated with "captivation" (*Berückung*), and the self-withdrawal, self-concealing of earth. The first tendency is associated with a risk of dispersion and dissemination (*Zerstreuung*), the second with a risk of self-enclosure and alienation. It is only in their interaction that they can counter-balance one another, and open up a specific historical configuration – to the point that, somewhat enigmatically, Heidegger completes his analysis of time-space by saying that "time spatializes" and "space temporalizes"⁶. The "there" of being unfolds between, and differently according to the various epochs of history, clearing and concealing, world and earth, rapture and captivation. The Event (*Ereignis*), or what Heidegger calls History, is precisely the play of time and space thus understood, the "where" and "when" of being. Time-space, as an event, always refers to a site—the site of a specific and concrete strife (*Streit*) between world and earth and en-counter (*Ent-gegnung*) between men and gods, the site of a singular historical configuration.

Once again, this mutual dependence is one that Malpas recognizes and expresses, doubly as it were: explicitly, first of all, by emphasizing that the "there" or the *topos* of being involves space and time; but also implicitly, and at a more fundamental level, by thinking and writing from our historical configuration, one that is characterized by a singular form of placelessness and homelessness, by the systematic domination of rapture and dissemination over captivation and self-enclosure. Yet, throughout, for reasons that are essential, and by that I mean historical, Malpas chooses to emphasize the connection between place and space, and the need to return from dissemination and dispersion, or from placelessness and homelessness, to the self-concealing of earth, and the captivation of space. *Heidegger's Topology* emerges from the depths and the distress of our time, from the singular place in which we find ourselves, and the place to which we need to return. In his own way, and by thinking through the issue of place, Malpas is attempting to enact a move from the contemporary form of gathering (the *Ge-stell*, or the "frame," as the essence of technology) to this untimely, and perhaps futural form of gathering, which Heidegger, following Eckhart, called *Ge-lassenheit* ("releasement"). In following his invitation—for that is what we should do—we need to be careful not to turn the gathering of place into a process of (re)territorialization and altogether lose sight of the temporal, the horizontal, and the rapturous.

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NOTES

1 I have made a very similar claim in *The New Heidegger*. London: Continuum, 2005, Chapter 3 (“Of Space and Time”); *Truth and Genesis: Philosophy as Differential Ontology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004, Chapter 3 (“Eventful Being: On Ereignis”) and Chapter 4 (“Abyssal Being: On Time-Space”).

2 See Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

3 This connection comes across most clearly in J. Malpas, “The Forms of Water: In the Land and In the Soul,” *Transforming Cultures eJournal* 1 (2006) <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/TIC>.

4 John Sallis, *Topographies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.

5 Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, Gesamtausgabe Band 65. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1989, 30.

6 Heidegger, *Beiträge*, 385. This, of course, is a significant shift from *Being and Time*, where Heidegger spoke of the “temporalizing of temporality” and the “spatializing of space.”