

# Spring-Source



Standing in the Shadow of  
Nothingness:  
The place of place  
in learning to dwell

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The Spring-Source Seminar Series

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# **Standing in the Shadow of Nothingness: The place of place in learning to dwell**

Randolph J K Ellis

*Standing in the Shadow of Nothingness was first presented on 16 November 2017 at the St Mary's Centre Annual Symposium in Practical Theology and Religious Education. The paper is an exploration of place as a primary pre-given of what it is to be human and ways in which that pre-given condition may be undermined.*

About thirty years ago I was walking on a rocky peninsula and looking down from the cliffs above to the sea below. I had walked along this path many times before but on this particular occasion a large flat rock of great complexity revealed itself in a half-submerged state. It was there and not there as the sea covered and uncovered it. I was fascinated by its existence and over the last three decades I have been drawn to it and visited and revisited it and brought it to mind many times. Sometimes it has intruded upon my wakefulness in a completely unbidden way and at other times I have actively sought it out as a dynamic memory. But what immediately impinged upon me, when I first saw it, was its otherness as a thing in itself and I have never moved beyond that apprehension during all these years. Its otherness for me was not simply alienation, a sense of foreignness, but more as something that could not be drained, dissipated or used up by anything I, or anyone else, might say or think about it. Instead, its inexhaustibility was something I returned to as a witness to

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its constantly unfolding complexity.

Over the years I have particularly enjoyed my absence from it. Not because it has caused me pain or distress but because I have valued my absence as a definite mode of instruction. When I look down upon this rock from the cliffs above, it is more my absence than my presence that impinges upon me. My absence, my not being there during its continuing existence through all the nights and all the days both now and in centuries before and in centuries to come, tutor me into approaching it with extreme self-effacement. I do not yet know what it has to teach but I am assured that whatever it has to teach is not necessary to its existence. Yet I am still there, looking down from the cliffs above, and I sense that I am no less than *it* in its place upon the earth and that I am somehow bound to it as a stark mortal.

And there it lies in all its complexity, gathering together all the myriad ways that relationships occur around it; the rise and fall of the tides and all the different ways that the water strikes it and leaves it every second; and then the rain, the sun and the sky and the myriad creatures that live and have lived upon its surface and within it (and all this going on when I'm there and when I'm not). There are stark questions that arise here, ones that have arisen explicitly (but mostly implicitly) over the centuries: 'what do the things in themselves do to each other when humans are not looking? Are there really no relations between these things apart from us?'<sup>1</sup>

Mostly, considerations regarding the independent reality of things have been in relation to that which is deemed to be 'merely a residue unreachable by humans.'<sup>2</sup> The human has been the silent measure of whatever is real and it has been assumed 'that philosophy has nothing to say about the relations between things when no humans are there to see it. The problem is thrown to the natural sciences, which invariably treats it in materialist fashion.'<sup>3</sup> The challenge around the title of this paper; 'standing in the shadow of nothingness: the place of place in learning to dwell', points towards an exploration of the nature of what it is to dwell. Human beings are always somewhere, they are never not anywhere and they are always being-there in their very existence. Wherever they are is of the greatest importance to them for where they are is always the place of their existence.

Place for humans is never simply a location, a site, a space that has definite

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boundaries. Nor is place something whose primary definition arises from mere geometric proportions. Rather, human ‘experience is “grounded” in place and... what we might take to be a fundamental experience all humans share, is subject to the contingent conditions of particular places of living... Experience is not only grounded in but also *by* place in its particularity.’<sup>4</sup> Human beings, by always being there quite specifically in place, are involved in a whole landscape of engagement in which people, meanings, objects, intersect in a manner outside the usual picture of a private individual enclosed in an ‘internal, subjective realm typically envisaged by philosophers of mind.’<sup>5</sup>

The challenge inherent in the title of this paper, ‘learning to dwell’ raises the possibility that dwelling may not be the same as bare existence, or any kind of marginal living, but that it involves being in a place where human beings *belong*, where they can be at home, where they can abide. Human beings cannot avoid being-there specifically, it is a primary given of their existence; ‘but it is one thing to be at a place and another to belong there.’<sup>6</sup>

Place and human being are always together. Human being is never simply ‘in’ a location, never simply ‘in’ a place and, whatever place is for human being it is never simply a human affair, never simply an anthropological space or area. Place is never something that merely gathers around human being, as if the human being is somehow a convener of space.<sup>7</sup> Nor is place simply a pre-set location that human being moves into and moves out of; ‘what first appears is just the appearing of a place that is a certain definite region, *bounded* and yet also thereby *gathered*, in which we and the things around us are given *together*.’<sup>8</sup> Bounded, gathered, given together, these are the elements of place, of placedness for human being.

To dwell as a human being is to live as a mortal. To live as a mortal authentically is to be bound up in our own existence as something that is of issue for us, ‘we now call mortals mortals – not because their earthly life comes to an end, but because they are capable of death as death.’<sup>9</sup> This capability, this capacity allows human beings to authentically engage with who they are and to live in the light of that authentic engagement. This engagement is not premised on a morbid preoccupation with final annihilation but rather as coloured by death in such a way that what is bounded, gathered and given in place is ‘not what is eternal and abstract, but of that which is concrete, particular, and also

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transitory, this person, this community, this place, these things, perhaps even this particular feeling, glimpse, or moment.<sup>10 11</sup> Human beings are those who are thrown into existence as mortal (and mortality<sup>12</sup> is always a *given* of who they are). To live in the light of who they are, as genuinely mortal, is to maturely acknowledge the way in which they 'are already given over to the world.'<sup>13</sup> To be given over to the world is always to be in place, to be always where their being is disclosed.<sup>14</sup>

Humans are always in place and it is in place that their being is disclosed. But what if humans find themselves where they could never belong, where they could never be at home, where they could neither dwell nor abide? 'If... place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.'<sup>15</sup> This notion of non-place is largely metaphorical but it does point towards that which is 'not only diametrically opposed to what constitutes a genuine, authentic mode of dwelling, but also threatens the very existence of place.'<sup>16</sup>

Earlier it was said that human beings, by always being there quite specifically in place, are involved in a whole landscape of engagement in which people, meanings, objects, intersect in a manner outside the usual picture of a private individual enclosed in an 'internal, subjective realm typically envisaged by philosophers of mind.'<sup>17</sup> But being in place is never simply human life as between one location and another or one bygone era and another but is rather a fundamental mode of what it is to be human.<sup>18</sup> This fundamental mode is never one of plain occupancy where someone is "in" place in the same sense that coffee is "in" a cup. This fundamental mode is one of dwelling, abiding, being at home, of having a sense of closeness, a sense of intimacy, of being near.

But what if all this is undermined by a simulacrum of what it is to dwell? What do we make of a situation in which; 'man now reaches overnight, by plane, places which formerly took weeks and months of travel. He now receives instant information... of events which he formerly learned about only years later, if at all'?<sup>19</sup> What do we make of a situation in which 'all distances in time and space are shrinking'<sup>20</sup> and where 'the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness; for nearness does not consist in shortness of distance'?<sup>21</sup> What do we make of a situation in which shortness of distance is actually conflated

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with being near?

What is being generated here is a sort of distanceless proximity in which the possibility of having a rooted perspective is abolished in favour of an immediate availability. This immediacy turns things into resources which are standing by waiting to be accessed. This standing by undermines the thingness of things in themselves, by transforming them into anthropological assets. They are not allowed to “be” in all their inexhaustible complexity but collapse into something that is simply brought forth. In this bringing forth, place becomes more of a site of intense anthropological subjectivity within which the virtual and the real dissolve into ambiguity.

It is now a matter of common apprehension that humans cannot move an inch or a mile without bumping into technological hardware: multitudinous models of cars, computers, bridges and motorways, plus every variety of clothes and food from all over the world. All the hardware of technology is presented and re-presented through the persistent presence of advertising and humans cannot easily withdraw from all this (nor perhaps would be able to do so). It is easy to conflate the ‘technical’ with the ‘technological’, but this ‘technical’ hardware though captivating and enthralling in itself is not the proper focus of attention.

The picture of contemporary humans surrounded by sophisticated machine technicity, as a mere 21<sup>st</sup> century upgrade of primitive forebears, is as deceiving as it is inaccurate. Rather, no longer are human beings master/mistress of the hammer that is grasped, the spear that is thrown, the chisel that incises, the car that is driven and the keyboard that is pressed. Humans find themselves subsumed within the generality of calculation and the calculative stance in much the same way as the machine technicity and raw material supposedly at human being’s disposal and for its usage. The startling element in this argument is that human being is no longer in control of the technological, but is mastered by it. Furthermore, the method of the calculative stance, premised as it is as the guarantee of predicted outcome, includes human being itself as raw material for its accounting.

The all-pervasive dominance of this paradigm (the technological paradigm) conceals itself through the certainty of its procedures and the myriad variety and volume of its products. This concealment is further intensified by the



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diminishment of the object itself to something that is no longer simply instrumentally useful, but as that which stands by as simply available. By such modes, place, as a primary pre-given of what it is to be human, is invisibly undermined.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Harman, G. (2016). The future of continental realism: Heidegger's fourfold. *Chiasma: A Site For Thought*, 3 (1), p.92.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.92.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.92.

<sup>4</sup> Olivier, A. (2017). Understanding place. In B.B. Janz (Ed.) *Place, space and hermeneutics*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, p.18.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.20.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.21.

<sup>7</sup> But see: Tuan, Yi-Fu (1977). *Space and place: The perspective of experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 61, for an anthropological interpretation of place: 'Place can be defined in a variety of ways. Among them is this: place is whatever stable object captures our attention. As we look at a panoramic scene our eyes pause at points of interest. Each pause is time enough to create an image of place that looms large momentarily in our view.'

<sup>8</sup> Malpas, J. (2017). *Heidegger and the thinking of place*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, p.45.

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger, M. (1971a). The Thing. In A. Hofstadter (Ed.). *Poetry, language, thought*. New York: Harper Colphon Books, p.178.

<sup>10</sup> Malpas, J. (2006). *Heidegger's topology*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, p.272.

<sup>11</sup> See also: Heidegger, M. (1999). *Ontology: The hermeneutics of facticity*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, p.79: 'the authentic mode of "being" in a world is caring in the sense of producing, putting in place, directing ourselves to tasks, taking into possession, preventing, protecting against loss, et cetera.' Also, 'to be "in" the world does not mean occurring among other things, but rather: all the while being concerned about and attending to it, tarrying awhile, "at home in" the round-about of the world being encountered.'

<sup>12</sup> See also: Heidegger, M. (1971b). What Are Poets For? In A. Hofstadter (Ed.). *Poetry, language, thought*. New York: Harper Colphon Books, p. 96: 'the time remains destitute not only because God is dead, but because mortals are hardly aware and capable even of their

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own mortality. Mortals have not yet come into ownership of their own nature. Death withdraws into the enigmatic. The mystery of pain remains veiled. Love has not been learned. But the mortals *are*.’

<sup>13</sup> Malpas, J. (2006). *Heidegger's topology*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, p.273.

<sup>14</sup> NB: It must be admitted that there exists a tension between an understanding of place identified as primarily originary and an understanding of place identified as subjectively apprehended, in particular the notion of place/object existing in its own right (as that which can never be drained of its meaning). This argument cannot adequately be aired here but simply an acknowledgement made of its lurking presence.

<sup>15</sup> Augé, M. (2008). *Non-places*. London: Verso, p.63.

<sup>16</sup> Trigg, D. (2017). Place and non-place: A phenomenological perspective. In B.B. Janz (Ed.). *Place, Space and Hermeneutics*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, p.129.

<sup>17</sup> Olivier, A. (2017). Understanding place. In B.B. Janz (Ed.) *Place, space and hermeneutics*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, p.20.

<sup>18</sup> See Crowell, S. (2011). Is transcendental topology phenomenological?. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 19 (2), pp. 269-270 for a contrary position: ‘Traditional transcendental philosophy, including phenomenology, holds that place itself must be understood with reference to experience. If I begin with a phenomenological stance towards things’ ‘being what they are’ or ‘standing in relation to other things’, I can ask how oceans, tides, imploding stars, and bodies are constituted as the things they are in my experience to them. In this way I can distinguish between a ‘situation’ (or place) – something that entails a kind of intelligible order – and a mere collection of things, and I can show how it is possible for them to show up in this way. But if transcendental topology is not phenomenological – if my experience, my subjectivity, is supposed to be just another of the things and relations *made possible* by place, just another element situated by place – then we must ask what it is about place that provides the *kind* of order that distinguishes the philosophical from, say, the causal.’

<sup>19</sup> Heidegger, M. (1971a), The Thing. In A. Hofstadter (Ed.). *Poetry, language, thought*. New York: Harper Colphon Books, p.165.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.165.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.165.

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