



the fate of place

a philosophical history

EDWARD S. CASEY

The Fate of Place

**A Philosophical
History**

Edward S. Casey

University of California Press
Berkeley / Los Angeles / London

The publisher wishes to thank Bernard Tschumi Architects for permission to reproduce three images in this volume (all appear in this volume's chapter 12).

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press
London, England

First Paperback Printing 1998

Copyright © 1997 by The Regents of the University of California

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Casey, Edward S.

The fate of place : a philosophical history / Edward S. Casey.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-520-27603-1 (pbk : alk. paper)

1. Place (Philosophy) 2. Space and time. I. Title.

B105.P53C36 1997

114—dc20

96-6411

CIP

Printed in the United States of America

16 15 14 13

4 3 2 1

The paper used in this publication is both acid-free and totally chlorine-free (TCF). It meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (R 1997) (*Permanence of Paper*). ∞

The Fate of Place



A CENTENNIAL BOOK

One hundred books
published between 1990 and 1995
bear this special imprint of
the University of California Press.
We have chosen each Centennial Book
as an example of the Press's finest
publishing and bookmaking traditions
as we celebrate the beginning of
our second century.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

Founded in 1893

In Living Memory of Three Extraordinary Mentors

*Mikel Dufrenne (1910–1995), William Earle (1919–1988),
John Niemeyer Findlay (1903–1987)*

*Whose Exemplary Practice, in Speech
and Writing, Taught Me the Force and Value
of Taking Philosophical History Seriously*

Preface: Disappearing Places

The power of place will be remarkable.

—Aristotle, *Physics*

No man therefore can conceive anything, but he must conceive it in some place.

—Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*

The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. . . . The anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time.

—Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces"

I

Whatever is true for space and time, this much is true for place: we are immersed in it and could not do without it. To be at all—to exist in any way—is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place. Place is as requisite as the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand, the bodies we have. We are surrounded by places. We walk over and through them. We live in places, relate to others in them, die in them. Nothing we do is unplaced. How could it be otherwise? How could we fail to recognize this primal fact?

Aristotle recognized it. He made "where" one of the ten indispensable categories of every substance, and he gave a sustained and perspicacious account of place in his *Physics*. His discussion set off a debate that has lasted until the present day. Heidegger, for example, contends with Aristotle as to what being *in* a place signifies for "being-in-the-world." More recently still, Irigaray has returned to Aristotle's idea of place as essential to an ethics of sexual

difference. Between Aristotle and Irigaray stretch more than two millennia of thought and teaching and writing about place—a period that includes such diverse debating partners as Iamblichus and Plotinus, Cusa and Bruno, Descartes and Locke, Newton and Leibniz, Bachelard and Foucault.

Yet the history of this continuing concern with place is virtually unknown. Unknown in that it has been hidden from view. Not deliberately or for the sake of being obscure, much less to mislead: unlike the unconscious, place is not so controversial or so intrusive or embarrassing as to require repression. On the contrary, just because place is so much with us, and we with it, it has been taken for granted, deemed not worthy of separate treatment. Also taken for granted is the fact that we are implaced beings to begin with, that place is an *a priori* of our existence on earth. Just because we cannot choose in the matter, we believe we do not have to think about this basic facticity very much, if at all. Except when we are disoriented or lost—or contesting Aristotle's *Physics*—we presume that the question is settled, that there is nothing more to say on the subject.

But there is a great deal to say, even if quite a lot has been said already by previous thinkers. Yet this rich tradition of place-talk has been bypassed or forgotten for the most part, mainly because place has been subordinated to other terms taken as putative absolutes: most notably, Space and Time. Beginning with Philoponus in the sixth century A.D. and reaching an apogee in fourteenth-century theology and above all in seventeenth-century physics, place has been assimilated to space. The latter, regarded as infinite extension, has become a cosmic and extracosmic Moloch that consumes every corpuscle of place to be found within its greedy reach. As a result, place came to be considered a mere “modification” of space (in Locke's revealing term)—a modification that aptly can be called “site,” that is, leveled-down, monotonous *space for* building and other human enterprises. To make matters worse, in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries place was also made subject to time, regarded as chronometric and universal, indeed as “the formal *a priori* condition of all appearances whatsoever,” in Kant's commanding phrase.¹ Even space, as the form of “outer sense,” became subject to temporal determination. Place, reduced to locations between which movements of physical bodies occur, vanished from view almost altogether in the era of temporocentrism (i.e., a belief in the hegemony of time) that has dominated the last two hundred years of philosophy in the wake of Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard, Darwin, Bergson, and William James.

I say that place disappeared “almost altogether.” It never went entirely out of sight. Part of its very hiddenness—as Heidegger would insist—includes being at least partially unhidden. In bringing out the concealed history of place, I shall show that place has continued to possess considerable significance despite its discontinuous acknowledgment. Thus Plato's *Timaeus*, though stressing space as *chōra*, ends with the creation of determinate places

for material things. Philoponus, taken with the idea of empty dimensions, maintains nonetheless that three-dimensional space is always in fact filled with places. Descartes finds room for place as volume and position within the world of extended space. Even Kant accords to place a special privilege in the constitution of what he calls “cosmic regions,” thanks to the role of the body in orientation—a role that, a century and a half later, will provide a key to twentieth-century conceptions of place in the work of Whitehead, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Irigaray. But in every such case (and in still others to be discussed in this book) it is a matter of drawing place out of its latent position in the manifest texts of Western philosophy, retrieving it from its textual tomb, bringing it back alive.

The aim of *The Fate of Place* is to thrust the very idea of place, so deeply dormant in modern Western thinking, once more into the daylight of philosophical discourse. This will be done in four parts. In Part I, I shall first examine mythical and religious narratives of creation—with an eye to discerning the primordially of place at the beginning of things. I will then focus on Plato’s quasi-mythical cosmology in the *Timaeus*, as well as on Aristotle’s detailed treatment of place in the *Physics*. In Part II I follow the sinuous but fascinating thread that leads from Hellenistic and Neoplatonic thought to medieval and Renaissance consideration, and in Part III I take a close look at early modern theories of place and space, ranging from Gassendi to Kant. This sets the stage for the final part, which explores a recrudescence of concern with place—no longer subordinate to Space or Time—in an array of late modern and postmodern thinkers.

An earlier volume of mine, *Getting Back into Place*, described concrete, multiplex, experiential aspects of the place-world.² The present book carries forward the project of regaining recognition of the power of place. But it does so in a very different way: by delineating doctrines of place as these have emerged at critical moments of Western rumination as to the nature of place and space. My purpose here is to set forth what these doctrines actually say—and, just as often, do not say. I shall trace out, not the history of place per se, that is, its ingrediency in the actualities of art or architecture, geography or world history, but the story of how human beings (mainly philosophers) have regarded place as a concept or idea. This is an essay, therefore, in intellectual history and, more specifically, in the history of philosophical thinking about place. Merely to realize how much intelligent and insightful thought has been accorded to place in the course of Western philosophy is to begin to reappraise its unsuspected importance as well as its fuller compass.

II

The present historical moment is a propitious one for assessing the fate of place. This is so even though there is precious little talk of place in

philosophy—or, for that matter, in psychology or sociology, literary theory or religious studies. It is true that in architecture, anthropology, and ecology there is a burgeoning interest in place, but this interest leaves place itself an unclarified notion. This is an extraordinary circumstance, one that combines magnitude of promise with dearth of realization. As this book will amply demonstrate, place has shown itself capable of inspiring complicated and variegated discussions. Even if it is by no means univocal, “place” is not an incoherent concept that falls apart on close analysis, nor is it flawed in some fundamental manner, easily reducible to some other term, or merely trivial in its consequences. And yet in our own time we have come to pass over place as a thought-worthy notion. In part, this has to do with the ascendancy of site-specific models of space stemming from the early modern era. It also reflects the continuing miasma of temporocentrism that draws much of the complex and subtle structure of place into its nebulous embrace.

At work as well in the obscuration of place is the universalism inherent in Western culture from the beginning. This universalism is most starkly evident in the search for ideas, usually labeled “essences,” that obtain *everywhere* and for which a particular *somewhere*, a given place, is presumably irrelevant. Is it accidental that the obsession with space as something infinite and ubiquitous coincided with the spread of Christianity, a religion with universalist aspirations? Philoponus, a committed Christian, was arguably the first philosopher in the West to entertain the idea of an absolute space that is not merely a void. Thomas Bradwardine, Archbishop of Canterbury, was a leading theorist of such space in the fourteenth century: for him, God’s immensity is coextensive not only with the known universe but also with the infinite empty space in which it is set. By the next century, the Age of Exploration had begun, an era in which the domination of native peoples was accomplished by their deplaciation: the systematic destruction of regional landscapes that served as the concrete settings for local culture.

In our own century, investigations of ethics and politics continue to be universalist in aspiration—to the detriment of place, considered merely parochial in scope. Treatments of logic and language often are still more place-blind, as if speaking and thinking were wholly unaffected by the locality in which they occur. On the eve of World War I, Russell and Whitehead composed *Principia Mathematica*, which explored the universal logical foundations of pure mathematics with unmistakable allusion to Newton’s *Philosophiæ naturalis principia mathematica*. Whitehead and Russell’s epoch-making book appeared during the very years when de Saussure was lecturing on a systematic “general linguistics” that sought to provide synchronic principles for all known languages irrespective of their diachronic and local differences. Herder and Humboldt, early-nineteenth-century philosophers of language, knew better; but the success of de Saussure, followed by that of Jakobson and the Prague school, and later (in a quite different vein) by Chomskian linguistics, reinstalled a formalist universalism at the heart of the theory of language.

Other reasons for the shunning of place as a crucial concept are less pointedly logical or linguistic, yet even more momentous. These include the cataclysmic events of world wars, which have acted to undermine any secure sense of abiding place (in fact, to destroy it altogether in the case of a radical anti-place such as Auschwitz); the forced migrations of entire peoples, along with continual drifting on the part of many individuals, suggesting that the world is nothing but a scene of endless displacement; the massive spread of electronic technology, which makes irrelevant *where you are* so long as you can link up with other users of the same technology. Each of these phenomena is truly “cosmic,” that is, literally worldwide, and each exhibits a *dromocentrism* that amounts to temporocentrism writ large: not just time but speeded-up time (*dromos* connotes “running,” “race,” “racecourse”) is of the essence of the era.³ It is as if the acceleration discovered by Galileo to be inherent in falling bodies has come to pervade the earth (conceived as a single scene of communication), rendering the planet a “global village” not in a positive sense but as a placeless place indeed.

In view of these various theoretical, cultural, and historical tendencies, the prospects for a renewed interest in place might appear to be bleak indeed. And yet something is afoot that calls for a return to reflective thought about place. One sign of this auspicious stirring is found in the fact that Bergson, James, and Husserl, all apostles of temporocentrism, accorded careful attention to space and place in lesser-known but important writings that were overshadowed by their own more celebrated analyses of lived time. Similarly, Heidegger, an outspoken temporocentrist in his early work, affirmed the significance of place when he pondered the destiny of modern technological culture.

Still more saliently, certain devastating phenomena of this century bring with them, by aftershock as it were, a revitalized sensitivity to place. Precisely in its capacity to eliminate all perceptible places from a given region, the prospect of nuclear annihilation heightens awareness of the unreplaceability of these places, their singular configuration and unrepeatable history. Much the same is true for any disruptive event that disturbs the placidity of cities and neighborhoods. Perhaps most crucially, the encroachment of an indifferent sameness-of-place on a global scale—to the point where at times you cannot be sure which city you are in, given the overwhelming architectural and commercial uniformity of many cities—makes the human subject long for a diversity of places, that is, difference-of-place, that has been lost in a worldwide monoculture based on Western (and, more specifically, American) economic and political paradigms. This is not just a matter of nostalgia. An active desire for the particularity of place—for what is truly “local” or “regional”—is aroused by such increasingly common experiences. Place brings with it the very elements sheared off in the planiformity of site: identity, character, nuance, history.

Even our embroilment in technology brings with it an unsuspected return to place. Granting that the literal locus of the technologically engaged person

is a matter of comparative indifference, this locus is still *not nowhere*. As I watch television or correspond by e-mail, my immediate surroundings may not matter greatly to the extent that I am drawn into the drama I am watching or into the words I am typing or reading. But a new sense of place emerges from this very circumstance: “virtual place,” as it can be called, in keeping with current discussions of “virtual reality.” In inhabiting a virtual place, I have the distinct impression that the persons with whom I am communicating or the figures I am watching, though not physically present, nevertheless present themselves to me in a quasi face-to-face interaction. They are accessible to me and I to them (at least in the case of e-mail or call-in radio shows): I seem to share the “same space” with others who are in fact stationed elsewhere on the planet. This virtual coimplacement can occur in image or word, or in both. The comparative coziness and discreteness of such compresence—its sense of having boundaries if not definite limits—makes it a genuine, if still not fully understood, phenomenon of place.⁴

As for the philosophical scene—which is most explicitly at stake in this book—even within the most rebarbative purlieu there lurk more than echoes and ghosts of place. Both “politics” and “ethics” go back to Greek words that signify place: *polis* and *ēthea*, “city-state” and “habitats,” respectively. The very word “society” stems from *socius*, signifying “sharing”—and sharing is done in a common place. More than the history of words is at issue here. Almost every major ethical and political thinker of the century has been concerned, directly or indirectly, with the question of *community*. As Victor Turner has emphasized, a *communitas* is not just a matter of banding together but of *bonding together* through rituals that actively communalize people—and that require particular places in which to be enacted.⁵ When Hannah Arendt proclaims—or, rather, reclaims—the *polis* as an arena of overt contestation, she invokes a bounded and institutionally sanctioned *place* as the basis for “the public sphere of appearance.”⁶ John Rawls’s idea of “the objective circumstances of justice” in human society entails (even if his discussion does not spell out) the concrete specificities of implacement.⁷ More surprising still, certain developments in language and logic are promising from a placial point of view. I am thinking of investigations into the structure of informal argumentation, a structure likely to reflect local custom and culture; a renewed interest in rhetoric, alike among epigones of Leo Strauss as well as followers of Jacques Derrida and Paul DeMan; not to mention the notion of family resemblance first introduced by Wittgenstein, a notion that implies (even though it does not espouse) the special pertinence of locality and region to basic issues in epistemology and philosophy of language and mind.

And yet “place,” despite these auspicious directions in contemporary thought, is rarely named as such—and even more rarely discussed seriously. Place is still concealed, “still veiled,” as Heidegger says specifically of space.⁸ To ponder the fate of place at this moment thus assumes a new urgency and

points to a new promise. The question is, can we bring place out of hiding and expose it to renewed scrutiny? A good place to start is by a consideration of its own complex history. To become familiar with this history is to be in a better position to attest to the pervasiveness of place in our lives: in our language and logic as in our ethics and politics, in our bodily bearing and in our personal relations. To uncover the hidden history of place is to find a way back into the place-world—a way to savor the renascence of place even on the most recalcitrant terrain.

Acknowledgments

The most direct inspiration for this book stems from a graduate seminar I taught at Emory University in the spring of 1992, held under the auspices of the philosophy department and at the instigation of its chairman, David Carr. The intense interest in the history of place that was palpable in that seminar—animated by the keen questioning of the remarkably responsive students who were present—brought home to me the need for a book on the subject. The story of philosophical accounts of place has not yet been told, and I decided (in the wake of my earlier descriptive efforts to discern place more accurately) to tell this story in a comprehensive format. Other graduate seminars substantially aided my efforts: one at the New School for Social Research (1993) and one at the State University of Stony Brook (1994). In each case, my tentative formulations were increasingly refined, thanks to the intense scrutiny of my students. I also presented my views at a week-long seminar on “The Senses of Place” at the School of American Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where a number of anthropologists gave me renewed direction and purpose; I especially wish to thank Keith Basso and Steven Feld for their hosting of this event and for the guidance of their pioneering work. I was the beneficiary as well of public audiences when I lectured on the topic, most notably at Vanderbilt University, SUNY at Binghamton, New School for Social Research, Duquesne University, and Yale University.

A number of individuals made essential contributions to my ongoing research into the hidden history of place. Janet Gyatso read many parts of the manuscript and offered invaluable advice, particularly with regard to clarity of argumentation, substance, and style. Without her congenial and warm encouragement, the book might not ever have seen the light of day. The entire manuscript profited from Kurt Wildermuth’s discerning and disciplined look.

I also benefited from exchanges with Robert Gooding-Williams, Iris Young, Tom Flynn, David Michael Levin, Elizabeth Behnke, Henry Tylbor, Bruce Wilshire, Glen Mazis, and, especially, Elizabeth Grosz.

My colleagues at Stony Brook were generous in their assistance. Tom Altizer discussed with me my fledgling formulations of mythical accounts of place, and Peter Manchester led me to reconsider my interpretation of the *Timaeus*. Irene Klaver was of immense help in my treatment of Plato, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Irigaray. I learned a great deal from Lee Miller's comments on my treatment of medieval figures (especially Nicholas of Cusa), Walter Watson's close reading of my treatment of Aristotle, Robert Crease's remarks on my treatment of Leibniz, David Allison's perusal of the chapter on Descartes, François Raffoul's and Jeffrey Edwards's sagacious insights into Kant, and Mary Rawlinson's rectifying of my discussion of Irigaray. I thank Celian Schoenbach for diligently typing in final changes to the manuscript, and Ann Cahill for preparing the index.

I am grateful to Brenda Casey for help on a number of perplexing points that were evading me even at the end. Constance Casey was an important presence throughout. Consulted at critical moments was Eric Casey, whose knowledge of the languages and cultures of the ancient world proved indispensable to the completion of this book.

James Hillman urged me to pursue place into its most recondite corners so as to convey its story fully and effectively. Conversations with him on aspects of place—particularly its neglected importance in our own time—have been of continuing inspiration. I was fortunate to be so effectively supported in this project by the intelligent, sensitive efforts of Edward Dimendberg, philosophy editor at the University of California Press. He asked me to put this book together in the first place, and he gave me sound direction at every point. To Michelle Nordon of the same institution I am indebted for her caring and responsive supervision of the entire publication process.

Contents

Preface: Disappearing Places	ix
Acknowledgments	xvii

Part One From Void to Vessel

- | | | |
|----------|--|-----------|
| 1 | Avoiding the Void: Primeval Patterns | 3 |
| 2 | Mastering the Matrix: The <i>Enuma Elish</i> and Plato's <i>Timaeus</i> | 23 |
| 3 | Place as Container: Aristotle's <i>Physics</i> | 50 |

Part Two From Place to Space

- | | | |
|----------|--|------------|
| | Interlude | 75 |
| 4 | The Emergence of Space in Hellenistic and Neoplatonic Thought | 79 |
| 5 | The Ascent of Infinite Space: Medieval and Renaissance Speculations | 103 |

Part Three The Supremacy of Space

- | | | |
|--|----------------|------------|
| | Interim | 133 |
|--|----------------|------------|

- 6 Modern Space as Absolute: Gassendi and Newton** 137
- 7 Modern Space as Extensive: Descartes** 151
- 8 Modern Space as Relative: Locke and Leibniz** 162
- 9 Modern Space as Site and Point: Position, Panopticon, and Pure Form** 180

Part Four The Reappearance of Place

- Transition** 197
- 10 By Way of Body: Kant, Whitehead, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty** 202
- 11 Proceeding to Place by Indirection: Heidegger** 243
- 12 Giving a Face to Place in the Present: Bachelard, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Irigaray** 285

Postface: Places Rediscovered 331

- Notes 343
- Index 479