

## Chapter 4

# Human Dwelling: A Philosophical Question Concerning Place and Space\*

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The lack of consideration given to spatiality in dealing with human reality is neither a contemporary failing nor the product of globalization or the spread of new forms of virtual reality. We often fail to acknowledge that human beings, and therefore their actions and thoughts, relate to each other and to their surrounding environments within the “medium” of space: this means that we are always localized.<sup>1</sup> We shall use the terms space and place interchangeably in this article, although we do not regard them as synonyms. A place is a marked space, a space that is qualitatively defined, that possesses an imprint, a character, a limit, and a history.

Phone calls, instant messaging, and video-conferencing seem to make the “here” extremely fluid and more indefinable than the “when.” This is unsurprising, as nowadays when we make a phone call we are more likely to ask, “Where are you” rather than, “Who’s calling?” because the caller’s name usually appears on our contacts’ list, whereas their location is unspecified (in the absence of a tracking device). However, the “where” is clearly not a matter of indifference to us, given the ever-growing demand for such devices.

Yet, on closer inspection human beings seem to be more familiar with space than with time. We often see people wearing a watch but we rarely see people with a compass. We always need to know the time but we never ask ourselves where we are because we think we know. The question “Where am I?” denotes a situation of discomfort: either a recovery from a situation in which someone is not in full possession of his/her faculties (due to physiological causes or external constraints) or an expression of disappointment at being somewhere

one does not want to be. We use devices such as GPS only to locate the places and routes that are unfamiliar to us, while we make regular use of tools that indicate time on a daily and continuous basis.

Moreover, in order to explain who we are, today we often say where we come from, we tell people that we are from Europe, or from Italy, or from a little town over there: it depends on how far we are from that place and how far the interlocutor is perceived to be from us. The expression "I'm from . . .," unlike saying "I come from," suggests that one's origin is experienced as belonging. Even if nowadays, in one lifetime, there are several places where we may live, there is always a particular place with which there is a stronger bond. Today one's origin might not be revealed by religion or skin color, but rather in the accent characterized by a residual dialect inflection, by the imagination full of images of sea or land, of lions and giraffes or ibexes, or by the metaphors inhabited by different figures.

Even though individuals and entire peoples move from one place to another, so that our "roots" have been replaced by anchors, to use Bauman's words, and even though the media offers us a shared world to inhabit, we were born and we live somewhere. Whether this "somewhere" can be defined as a cosmos, a world, an earth, a place or so on, existence always takes place in a "where." For this reason it is important to take spatiality into consideration when it comes to the philosophy of experience, ethics, and politics. It is an essential issue for anthropology and, therefore, for any human discussion.

Spatiality's importance is signaled by a dialogical interrelationship between its components: each responding to the other. The relationship between ethics and the experience of spatiality initiates the dialogue, as one considers the importance of this dimension for human life, and one wonders how to treat space in an ethical way and to look for ethical implications in the field of architecture, urban design, and environmental management. But should we not also pose to ourselves the opposite question: If human life is always transcendently localized, how might it inform the creation of ethics for human beings? There also seems to be a direct connection with politics. In this instance too there is a dialogical movement of thought. Spatiality has to be considered both as the relevant dimension for living together and also as the horizon against which political thinking is shaped.

### **Space and Corporeality**

If human existence happens in and through place, it is because it is essentially a life in and through the body. A human being is an embodied

consciousness. This means that corporeality and consciousness exist as distinct but inextricably interconnected realities. The objectification of physicality is, therefore, always crossed by the subjective intentionality, and this, in turn, can only exist when it is objectified.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, space is both the medium in which the perception of objects can take place and also the medium in which one can move and act. And since we are able to move and act, we have to assume a certain grasp on space, thanks to which we can orientate and localize ourselves.

Being able to orientate and localize ourselves requires a certain knowledge of the context and in particular a knowledge of ourselves within such a particular context. While we orientate ourselves, the certainty of our position creates the dizzying possibility of being somewhere else: this causes an awareness that this place is only “one” place among many others. This place, no matter how much we bond to it, does not coincide with ourselves. It is not only the uneasiness we sometimes experience in a place that constantly reminds us that there is something outside us. Even when we feel comfortable in a place, we are guests of this place, we perceive it as something different from us, something from which we are separated, while we still struggle to enjoy it, to find protection and concentration in it, to become familiar with it.<sup>3</sup> We are “here” but we do not coincide with our “here.” We can leave this place and move somewhere else, and our “here” can become the “here” of other people.

### Talking about Space

Talking about space is a difficult task. First of all, it is something that we experience. We act within it in a pre-reflexive way, without asking ourselves what we think about it, without being aware of it, on the basis of a familiarity that is more ancient than thought.<sup>4</sup>

The structure of space is complex, it resists easy categorizations or characterizations and it includes subjective and objective elements. Cassirer's *An Essay on Man* is often quoted with respect to his distinction of fundamentally different types of spatial and temporal experiences that cannot be put at the same level.<sup>5</sup> The lower level is defined as organic space and time. If we think about ants or bees, or the ability of chicks to orientate themselves and peck grains on the ground, we realize that a representation and an idea of space are not necessary to act in a place, and as a matter of fact these animals do not have a sense of spatial relationships. Organic space is also defined as “action space,” where actions are usually determined by practical needs and

interests. On the contrary, “perceptive space” is not an immediate fact given by senses, but it includes several experiential aspects, such as optical, acoustic, tactile, and kinesthetic elements. Perceptive space is the field of investigation of those who are interested in understanding the origins of perceptions. However, as Cassirer points out, from the point of view of a general theory of knowledge and of philosophical anthropology, rather than investigating the origin and development of perceptive space, it is necessary to analyze “symbolic space,” which will lead us towards the boundary between the human and animal world. Cassirer points out that having a representation of something is completely different from just dealing with it. Knowing how to use something for practical purposes is not enough in order to achieve its representation. We also need to have a general idea of it and to consider it from different points of view, in order to discover its relationships with other objects. It is also necessary to localize it and define its place within a general system. You can be familiar with some aspects of experience without having a representation of them: you can know an area very well and be able to move around very easily, without being able to trace a map of it. In the history of culture, for instance, we had to acquire a high degree of generalization to achieve the conception of an ordered outer space. Therefore, space for Cassirer has an organic dimension, a perceptive dimension, and a symbolic dimension. In each case, space is the medium where we establish relationships with the world and with the plurality that inhabits the world. “Our space,” “our place” is always somewhere where we get in touch with what is other from ourselves.

We can also try to distinguish between subjective and objective space. Subjective space is the grasp on space that is inseparable from a creature’s sensory and cognitive capacities and motor skills, from its body and environmental awareness and from its ability to interact with the environment itself. In other words, it is the perspective of an active involvement. It is an experiential space that is also an activity space, structured and focused on the corporeality of the subject and varying according to the subject’s motor, sensory, and cognitive abilities. Subjective space is the space of behavior and does not depend on a theory of space.

In contrast to commonly received opinion, Heidegger argues that we cannot derive the concept of objective space simply from the idea of subjective space, nor from mere connections between subjective spaces. The idea of such connections implies the idea of objective space as the space where we can have this localization regardless of the particularity of experience. We cannot even speak about objective space

by eliminating the perspective elements, since we can eliminate the perspective elements only if we already possess the idea of an objective space, independent of subjective experiences.

As a consequence, we cannot derive objective space from subjective space. In the same way, subjective space cannot be derived from objective space: the idea of an experiential point of view is what constitutes the subjective space and is exactly what is missing in the idea of objective space.

The fact that we cannot derive one space from the other does not mean that they are not interconnected. Even though they are conceptually different, we cannot understand one without having an idea of the other. They are correlative: thinking in a radical way about one type of space implies possessing the idea of the other. The idea of subjective space requires a perspective within which this space is apprehended. Similarly, the idea of being in a perspective implies a transcendence that is made possible by the awareness of a wider context in which our point of view exists. And yet, such awareness always occurs within a subjective grasp.

We experience reality as localization in a subjective way. However, the place we occupy does not become private because it does not coincide with ourselves, but it remains persistently common and it can be experienced from other perspectives in different ways.

### **Dwelling and Subverting**

It has been said that human existence is the existence of an embodied consciousness that lives in a place. We also say that things have their own place, that they are somewhere. However, human beings and things live in places in two different ways. As a matter of fact, human beings always live among the things that inhabit their lives, even when they withdraw into their inner world.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, we say that human beings dwell, they relate intrinsically to the place where they live, while things just stay in it. People dwell in places through a process of familiarization (by hanging pictures on the walls, putting photos on their desks, planting trees in their garden or a hedge to establish a boundary, etc.) and orientation: in this way existence always possesses some coordinates and its logic is always a topological one.

This “being in” a place is being in a “here,” within a structure that has its mode of being as a horizon. Every “here” is placed in a fundamental connection with every “there,” be they understood as earth or world (leaving aside the debate about Heidegger’s use of the two terms). We enter the world from “here” and the world defines “here”

in relation to “there,” preventing “here” from closing into its tamed finiteness,<sup>7</sup> into its fictive self-sufficiency.

The point of view of place that coincides with the practice of familiarization equates to a point of view on the world that subverts every possible appropriation: because the world itself represents the inappropriable. As a consequence, we can define dwelling—which is the mode of existence of human beings—as a practice of familiarization with what, from time to time, is our place, within a world in which we remain strangers, since, as we said, no “where” coincides with the self.

If we think about our home, we realize that it is characterized by a complex dynamic. Even if it represents the most intimate and cozy place for a human being, we cannot simply remove what cannot be assimilated. Or better, succeeding in such an aim would result in the transformation of the house into a prison.<sup>8</sup> On closer inspection, the dynamics of familiar and foreign, private and common seem to constitute the logic of the space itself.

It is the dynamic itself that enables the existence of a sacred space (the use of the term “sacred” is not intended to sacralize the space as if it were the bearer of a divine quality, but it is used to indicate what pertains to the religious experience), where the restless tension can open up another level of experience, inverting the spatial dynamic of a house.

In this context the tension turns out to be on another level: it is not the world of the inappropriable and the inextricable that can in some way become more and more familiar and knowable. Instead, it can be defined as “outside the world.” Sacred space is something that we or our ancestors have built, but that we inhabit only occasionally: that is when we let our time be the *kairos* in which we face God rather than the *chronos* that measures our existence in the world.<sup>9</sup> A sacred space is true when it causes a thrill of anticipation to arise in the visitor, and she or he perceives an indefinite and powerful force that orders: “Be silent, because this place is full of overflowing presence.” Even though at first sight it can be compared to any other place, it possesses many peculiarities. A sacred space shows its power by overlapping the connection between the world and the borderland. It is a peculiar experience: only the relationship with the Absolute enables the possibility of being “on the border.”

A sacred space can be so named only when it is not experienced as a shelter to protect yourself, with the guarantee of the Absolute, from the concerns of a world that fails to become your homeland. A sacred space is not meant to offer a permanent residence and its threshold

does not divide the troubles of history from the happiness of the *eschaton*. On the contrary, it is the place of a fragile anticipation.<sup>10</sup>

In this experience, the fact of being in that specific place becomes secondary. Some places, such as secluded and pilgrimage places, have always been an example of such experience, with different nuances. This does not mean that the location loses its meaning. The possibility of subverting the topological feature suggests a redefinition of place: it is not only considered as a place where you are “in” but also “through-towards,” in a tension towards a fulfillment. The inherency within the place shows the traits of the dynamic relationship.

From this comes an interesting consideration: the subversion of place discloses the truth of the place. The subversive loyalty to our “here” tells us the right way of dwelling: first of all as a contrast with all the possible “theres,” and secondly as the relationship with what the “here” cannot encompass.

### The Symbolic Dimension

Sacred space seems to guard and reveal, suggesting the mystery of topology. As a limit-situation, it is a hermeneutical place that shows the symbolic nature of all places. Such a symbolic nature is the necessary condition for the “fidelity of subversion.” Places are physical elements that have a metaphysical reference, the world’s sense of being. They carry out the re-cognition of the cross-reference in terms of allusion and memory. The symbol creates an increase of reality through a displacement of meaning that can be defined as semantic impertinence.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the meaning of a sentence arises from the failure of the literal interpretation of the statement. The symbol is the constant interference, the bewilderment, the calculated error, the disorder of the ordinary world that produces a thrill towards new possibilities. It addresses the whole human being, not only his or her intelligence.<sup>12</sup> The symbols communicate their messages even if our rationality is not aware of them. The word symbol comes from the Greek *sym-bállein*, which means to put or throw together. The symbol is not a sign whose referent is fully knowable by the senses or conceivable by the mind, because for the mind the signifier and the signified are in the same level of reality, in the field of experience of phenomenal reality. The symbol has a multipurpose semantic ability; it has different levels of reference, that is, an essential meaning and some reflected meanings, which are in some way grasped through the senses. The crucial rule is the heterotopic break.<sup>13</sup> Take for example the advertisement of a famous Italian company: everything focuses around a piece of pasta, a

fusillo, that does not only represent the pasta (first meaning), but also recalls the symbolic universe of family relationships (second meaning), when the piece of pasta is subjected to the heterotopic semantic impertinence and it is found not in a pot, but in the father's jacket who is abroad and far from home. Obviously, the transition from the first to the second meaning does not imply the destruction of the level of signs. It should be noted, in fact, that the transition is possible only if the sign, the piece of pasta in this case, remains the same. In the case of sacred space or symbolic religious space, its sacrality (second meaning) does not exist unless there is a secular, ordinary space (first meaning), typical of every culture and age. In turn, in the ordinary place, which is the objectification of a need, we may also find an orientation in the overall horizon of reflected meanings.

The sacred place clearly expresses and, at the same time, opens up an understanding of what is missing, as the condition of what is possible, and this is precisely the path of symbolic consciousness. Symbolic consciousness lies in the particular, but it also reads the universal aspect, holding together difference and identity. Steps, for example, act as the access point to a sacred place and, at the same time, effect a defamiliarization with the surrounding space. They seem to tell us "Take off your shoes, this is sacred ground."<sup>14</sup> The sacred place has a clear performative function: to free what has been forgotten, to awaken the concern that our homeland is elsewhere. The traditional architectural elements that inscribe this symbolic directrix are, among others, orientation, size, and the inscription of the square (world) in the circle of the whole structure or dome (God). Therefore, while establishing a relationship, it underlines the difference and the disproportion. From this perspective, the logic of waste, of monumentality, of the unnecessarily audacious structure of worship buildings acquire a meaning: they must express the impossible on the basis of functionality; they bring with them the mad task of seeing the invisible.

If sacred space is an explicit declaration of semantic impertinence, every place implies in some way a symbolic dimension, that is, it consists first of all in what it is and, secondly, in both the act of referring and in the set of references to which it refers. In this the utopian element is inscribed: a totalizing intention (not totalitarian), which lies in the ability to highlight what is missing, in an open tension never closed-in on itself. In this respect we can quote two interpretations that must be read with concern as the risks of what utopia might become. The first one is Carl Schmitt's reading, who claimed the nihilistic and deterritorialized character of utopia,<sup>15</sup> and interpreted Thomas More's essay as the manifestation of the possibility of a massive denial of all



the locations on which the old *nomos* of the earth was based. He also interpreted the meaning of the word Utopia not simply as the non-place, *nowhere*, but also as the *u-topos* par excellence, a denial compared to which even the *a-topos* has a bond, albeit negative, with the *topos*. The second one is Françoise Choay, who recognized in Utopia the same root of abstract and calculating representation that characterizes modernity.<sup>16</sup> Utopia is neither the neutralization of the individual concreteness of places and landscapes, stories and time, nor the transformation of the land in an undifferentiated space. Instead, it emerges both from the limit and from the openness of such individuality, precisely from the symbolic imprint that every place contains within its borders. Utopia tells us about the possible fulfillment toward which a place tends, that is the possibility of a place to transgress itself, to leave its own stasis in order to aim toward a good condition that still is not, an adaptation to a greater accomplishment. The Utopian consciousness lives on a truly symbolic imagination and does not claim to fill up the gap between determinacy and the whole horizon of meaning in which it stands.<sup>17</sup> For this reason it is authentic and it is different from the anti-utopias and the dystopias, as well as from ideology.

Therefore, if the symbolic dimension characterizes the meaning of places, the art of shaping the built environment, what we call architecture, does not only express solidity, usefulness, and beauty, but also the overall meanings of the sense of being in the world. These meanings even determine the composition, orientation, geometry, proportion, and decoration. They express themselves, for example, in the expansion of space starting from a center, in the organization according to a vertical axis that is combined with the two axes of the horizontal plane forming the cross of the six directions (the four cardinal points, zenith and nadir), and in the relationship between the circle (and sphere), the most dynamic and least differentiated geometric shape, and the square (and cube), the most static shape.<sup>18</sup> We build because we dwell, as Heidegger states, subverting the platitude according to which we usually think about the art of building and cultivating.<sup>19</sup>

### The Question of Identity

Places are historical-geographical configurations. They express history, character, and long-standing structures. They also give life to physiognomic identities (types) and to territorial individualities, which convey what we defined as the second meaning, the symbolic dimension. For this reason, if we interpret spaces only from a purely functional point of view, we will not be able to understand them fully. What is also

necessary, therefore, is a description of the identity that considers the natural and sociohistorical elements, the aesthetic-perceptual dimension, the archives of knowledge, traditions, memory, and potential projects that are their heritage. The question is to grasp the texture between persistence and referrals, which hint, at first, at other times and other places, and ultimately point to a whole world of sense and fullness of being.

Dwelling in places is the way in which we stay in this constellation and we look after it. It is a practical relationship that also involves knowledge and affection, because places are texts that are constantly read, written, rewritten, and interpreted. The “consciousness of place” is the dizziness deriving from that concrete objectivity that cannot be reduced to objectification. It has been defined as the awareness—acquired through a process of cultural transformation of the inhabitants—of the territorial heritage, that is to say, the value of common goods (material and relational) as essential elements for the reproduction of individual and collective, biological and cultural life. In this awareness, the path from individual to collective connotes the elements that characterize the reconstruction of communitarian elements as open, relational, and supportive forms.<sup>20</sup> The reappropriation of the consciousness of place is therefore understood as the necessary condition for individual and collective construction in the forms of territoriality and self-sustainability.

The question of identity arises when we imagine an established community and a place with a specific, physical, economic, and cultural connotation. Even though we are considering it here in a nonclosed and nontribal way, there are also very different conceptualizations of the relationship between a place and its inhabitants. In fact, a place is often read—as though it were self-evident—as a safe haven, as a partly consistent space from the cultural point of view, as a detached area. This reading has the downside of interpreting the contemporary processes of transformation as disarticulations, as the rise of a “space of flux” that replaces the meaning of “space of places.”<sup>21</sup>

However, places cannot be interpreted as coherent, stable, and detached realities. And this was true in the past as much as today. When it comes to the identity of places, they can only be interpreted as the result of a long history of relationships with other places. Therefore, they must be read as particular interrelationships in a broader field, and thus may leave open the possibility both to appreciate their local originality and to recognize wider ties.<sup>22</sup> They must be interpreted as essentially open and permeable, as the product of ties and connections, rather than closed, separate, and exclusive

elements. In these intersections place acquires both its uniqueness and its interdependence on other places. The same can be said for human beings. Personal and group identities cannot be understood according to an essentialist-naturalistic paradigm, because they are neither an immutable heritage, nor a simple and accomplished reality, with no deficiencies.

If the search for purified identities produces a geography of rejection, the idea of an open and interactive identity means the possibility of creating a geography of reception,<sup>23</sup> which corresponds more truly to the reality and to the life of places and human beings.

### **On Ethics and Politics**

Understanding the human condition as transcendently allocated and interpreting place as a symbolic reality and a nexus of intersections in a functional, aesthetic, affective, cognitive, and meaningful relationship with those who inhabit it brings about some significant implications for ethical and political reflection.

First of all, considering localization as the constitutive mode of human existence can offer an important perspective for ethical thinking in order to understand the connections between the dimensions that we call particular, relative, objective, and common. Moreover, in spatial experience we can interpret the essential relationships between self and other, familiar and alien, between what is private and what is inappropriable. This confirms what we can call “human amphiboly.” Being localized means being divided from others: every human being exists in a “here,” according to which others are “there.” Relationships with others are defined by such separation and the familiarity always takes place at a distance. Being localized implies an essential relationship with our “here,” that is the place “outside us” that hosts us.

Being localized means that we orientate ourselves in the world starting from “our world,” according to a “subjective where” that is neither private nor one that we own together, something that is nonexcludable but rival, such as common goods. At first sight, the possibility of emancipating oneself from a “here” seems to be a positive feature. For example, it is believed that real knowledge can be achieved only if it is detached from a “here.” This claim is intriguing for thought and speculation. But if we really take into consideration human spatiality, we find out that real emancipation from our localization cannot be attained by merely neglecting to acknowledge the fact that we are always located in a space. Moreover, it may be exactly the attention to locality that leads us towards a human correlation

between the relative and the universal. The relationship between the relative and the universal is revealed in the concrete experience of the “here” within a horizon with which it does not coincide, in its correlation with many other “theres” that represent the “here” of other people, and in the concrete experience of boundaries that are subverted in the effort to establish them.

However, the movement of thought has to be retraced in the opposite direction as well: ethical reflection can affect the practices that have to do with space. It is interesting to investigate what ethical theory concerned with human localization has to say about dwelling and about the building of places for human life. As a matter of fact inhabited places are often constructed places. However, there are also constructed places that are not meant for dwelling, as sacred places demonstrate, and we can live in places that are not built. We have to consider the ways of dealing with the places of human experience, that is to say, to investigate what distinguishes not only place, building, territory, house, city, and sacred space but also countryside, desert, and mountain.

This investigation deals with ethics but also has a considerable relevance for collective life, be it intended as politics, which is related to the dynamics of acquisition of power, or as policy, related to laws that manage public affairs, or as polity, which is related to the dynamics of social cohesion. The transcendental allocation of human life brings about issues related to place not only in relation to a communitarian approach, but also if we consider the practice of public life as the art of *being together among strangers*.

Here it becomes relevant that places are always interpreted by particular positions and reasons, and that the sense of place is conveyed not only by different media, such as novels, films, advertisements, paintings, but also by landscapes and by the decisions of domestic and foreign policy. A place can also refer to multiple geographic scales and involve different groups of people in different ways, that is to say, the same place can acquire different meanings for different people. These different meanings of place involve not only a consideration of past history, but also a vision of the future, and they may contradict each other and become sources of conflict.

We must not ignore the fact that interpretations are also carriers of social relationships, in a way that cannot be predetermined and that not only reflect but also affect relationships of power, which are sometimes latent. We can neither refer to the identity of place as a support for any form of conservatism (in the style of *Blut-und-Boden*),

nor interpret it as an a priori factor to recognize the positive value of difference. It is very difficult to claim that the local inhabitants have some sort of exclusive right to control or even interpret certain parts of the earth, simply because it is not so easy to define who the local inhabitants are. And this is precisely one of the issues at stake. It may occur that those who “came before” are most ready to understand local value as mere resources, tools of wealth, without taking into consideration the risks to human health, landscape, soil fertility, and social cohesion.

Today the question of the meaning of places is no less important than in previous eras, due to the greater and faster displacements of individuals and populations. In fact, the common belief that states that at the time of globalization places are no longer important in their peculiarities does not seem true. Rather, these places are “put to work” on the basis of what constitutes their specific heritage or weakness in the present structure of unequal development. The uniqueness of places may also mean interconnected inequalities.

The question is to highlight, from time to time, the geography of power and the specific connection between social and spatial space as inescapable factors of the strategic scenario according to which we want to build our future.

### Notes

\*This original contribution has been translated into English by Elisa Piovesana.

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