

A Phenomenology of Human Place



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Place structures human existence. It is an intrinsic and essential element of human life. The meaning of our lives is necessarily "placey."

Such statements strike us as rather questionable since the whole tradition of western thought from the time of Aristotle understands place as a rather unimportant aspect of human life. In his philosophy Aristotle emphasized independent, permanent beings (substances). These beings always have places but these places are extrinsic to them. Any change in place on the part of a being does not change that being in an essential way. The Socrates, for example, who walks in the agora is basically the same as the Socrates who sits in his home. His change of place is only an "accidental" modification of his substance.

We find in this approach of Aristotle a cosmological viewpoint which conceives what is real to be a matter of beings which are there in the cosmos. In this present article we will have to go beyond this cosmological viewpoint in order to be sensitive to human place. We do this by employing a type of phenomenological epoche which steps back from this viewpoint and tries to be open to what is there in human experience and human life. This approach reveals place as a basic part of the structure of human existence, that human existence can not be imagined without place. To be a human being is to be somewhere, to be caught up in place in some way.

There are a variety of contributions that place makes to human life. First of all, it gives a distinctive character to our human lives. This is shown by our experience that our lives change as we move from one place to another. At our place of work our lives take on one form. In a church our lives take on a quite different form. In a place of recreation those lives assume another distinctive style. Even within our homes we

find that we change our style of living as we move from living room to kitchen to bedroom.

A second contribution that place makes is that of giving bases or centers to human existence. Our human lives are not spread out evenly over a wide expanse of space but are centered and organized around certain special places which have importance in our lives: a home, a place of work, a place of worship, a place of recreation. When we live we always have a sense of "where we are," a sense that is not a matter of a point on a map but our relationship to one of these centers. These are the places where human life is focused.

Human life changes depending on whether it is lived in a central place or somewhere at a distance from a central place. In the first case it is a matter of being "at home" in a place, in the second it is a matter of being a "stranger". There is a particular style and tone in our lives when we are "at home" and a quite different style and tone when we are a stranger. Sometimes this difference is described as the difference between either "belonging" or "not belonging." when life is lived "at home" it seems to be rather rich and full while the life of a "stranger" seems to be lacking something. We naturally seek to live most of our lives in these central places. To "be at home" or "to belong" is a human way to live.

It is not clear precisely how these central places come into our lives. Sometimes, such as in the case of our original home or hometown, we were simply given them. From the beginning our human existence was "placey." But there are other occasions in our lives when we seem to create a place that is central. A student, for example, goes away to college and lives in a dormitory. For a while she is homesick, experiencing a painful separation from a central place in her life. Later, she gradually begins to feel at home in school and stops being homesick. In this process of creating a new place in life seems to require a period of time, a period of adjustment. It also seems to be something that we human beings perform naturally without any conscious thought. "Nest making" is an instinctive part of human life.

Movement in our human lives is usually understood as a passage away from one of these centers or toward one of them. We are "going to work" or we are "coming from work." We are "going to school" or "coming from school." We are "leaving home" or "going home." It is only subsequently that we think of our movements in a geographical way as we go from one point to another on a map.

Similarly, our human sense of "near" and "far" is computed in terms of how accessible a place is to one of those centers. Someone lives near me if I can easily go from my home to his home. It may happen that with the building of a new highway a place which was previously experienced as far away is now experienced as near. All of this shows that human space and place is quite different from the space and place that is given us on a map. A map has no centers; its spaciality is not organized. Because of this, no place on a map is by itself near or far. The relationship between places on a map is computed in terms of an abstract norm such as miles or kilometres and is not organized around a human center.

This tendency to set up central places in human space is found not only in individual existence but also in communal existence. Politically, every modern state tends to set up a city which is its capital, a city which is the center of the political life of that state. Human religions also tend to have a place which is conceived to be the center of their lives. Frequently this place is known as a "holy city." Human clans and families also tend to set up central places. There is usually a sense of a home town which is understood to be the center of the clan's life or a special home where the clan gathers on special occasions.

The importance of central places in human existence can be seen in those human lives where such a place is lacking. The life of a refugee, for instance, lacks a prominent central place, a home as he wanders without any place to come home to. Such a homeless life strikes us as clearly inhuman and we instinctively make efforts to help such people find homes. Such an example reveals that there is a basic need in human life not only for food and clothing but also for a central place, a home.

Place and the Human Future

The phenomenon of place is present in human life in very many different ways. As a framework for our reflection on place we will take the basic temporal dimensions of human life (future, present and past) and consider the distinctive way that place shows itself in each of these dimensions.

One form that human place takes is the place that we "are going to," a future place. Human life is largely a matter of moving forward. We are people on a journey who have left "where we are from" and who

now reach out for something that lies in the future. This future of human existence is "placey"; it is not a pure spiritual state that floats in an undefined world of mind. Our human lives are constituted in such a way that we are always going somewhere.

This future place can take many different forms. When we are young this place might be conceived as a home that we hope to set up one day. Or we may be intent upon achieving "success", a goal that always suggests some type of place. (Success may mean a home in an upper middle class or upper class neighborhood. It may mean having a well-appointed office in a prestigious office building. It may mean having one's own factory.) If our future is conceived as basically a matter of relationships then there is always a sense of the place of those relationships (a happy home, a prosperous community, a classless society, the kingdom of God). If our future is understood as a career involvement then there is a sense of the place where that involvement is to be realized (a classroom, a medical clinic, a stage, a workshop). When we are older this future place might be conceived as a retirement home. Even when our future is conceived in terms of physical breakdown and death then there is a sense of those places connected with those events (a hospital, a sickbed, a grave).

What is significant is that this future place defines our lives. We have a sense of identity in terms of this future place. We are people who are going somewhere and that somewhere makes our lives what they are. The many different meanings that our human lives take on arise from the amazing variety of forms that this future place takes. Our lives, for instance, can either be characterized by hope or by despair depending on the place that we are moving toward. There is a spirit of hope in the life that is "going home" while there is an atmosphere of despair in the life that is pointed toward the grave.

It is obvious that this place that we are going to is not a matter of an actual spot that can be located on a map. The place, for instance, of a future career is there in our lives even when there is no particular actual place where we are living out our career involvement. We may be reaching out in our human future for a "happy home" even when there is no actual home for us to go to. We may be moving forward toward the grave even when we do not have a particular actual grave to go to. In these cases our human lives are formed by a future place that is there in the human world and not by a place in the actual world. Because of

this the human "place that we are going to" never possesses the precision and definiteness of a place in the actual world.

We experience that we are never in full possession of this place that we are going to. We may want at times to say: "Now I have arrived." but we discover that such a statement is presumptuous. That is not the way that human life is structured. Our future place is always something that we reach out for but never possess. In our lives we are "going home" but we never fully reach that "home." We may acquire ownership of a particular place in the actual world but such ownership is impossible when dealing with the "place we are going to" in the human world.

Sometimes this "place that we are going to" can become extremely vague in human life. Although we know that our life is going somewhere we may have the experience that we do not have any real sense of where that "somewhere" is. In such an experience we see our life as a matter of aimless wandering without any definite goal. All of our many human concerns, involvements and relationships never fully give us the full direction we seek. They do not give us that place which we have been looking for. We are reduced to a state of "waiting," holding ourselves in readiness for "something more," without any clear sense of what that more is.

Place and the Human Present

When we reflect on the present dimension of human place we discover several phenomena. First of all we discover that the "place that we are in" is often not clear. Often we seem to be in a number of places. I may be caught up in many different activities and in the confusion that results I ask the question: "Where am I?" I sense the need at such times to focus my life on one activity and the place of that activity. Other activities and their place must be set aside. This situation may occur in a discussion where many topics are brought up and the direction of the discussion becomes confused. At such a moment there is need to limit the discussion to one topic. That is "where" we want to be.

Another phenomenon of present place is the contrast between what we might call a macro place and a micro place. When we ask "Where am I?" we can answer first of all in terms of a certain broad context (a macro place) in which my life is found. For instance, my life may find its place in an involvement such as a career, or in a relationship such as

a family, or in a major concern such as a care for beauty or in a basic insight such as an encounter with nothingness. On the other hand I may find my place in a limited practical task (a micro place). On such an occasion I find that the place of my life is "narrowed." Absorbed in such a task I tend to focus my life on one small place and to ignore the broader dimensions of my life. If I am a computer technician, for instance, I may focus my attention on a particular problem of a computer and tend to ignore the deeper meanings and values of a computerized world. If I am an official in a governmental office I may be caught up in certain procedures and have little awareness of the total world of government. Practical tasks tend to draw our lives into a narrow place.

Another phenomenon of present place is the spaciality of present processes. I can ask, for instance, where am I as I write this article on place? I could give a general answer by saying that I am in the world of philosophy, and, more precisely, in the world of phenomenology. But beyond this general place of my life I recognize that I have a more precise place as I write this article. It is the place of the process of writing this article. I am absorbed here in this process of writing. We can say that I am lost in this process in the sense that I have pulled myself away from all the other places of my life. (Such an expression of being lost in an activity may seem to be a metaphor but it is really an expression of what is basic in human life.) A process type of place has the quality of being in motion as I move from the beginning of this article toward its completion. It is not static.

There is an ambiguity found in such a "process" type of place. On the other hand my place is the total process, encompassing its beginning, middle and end. My "where" is found in the total activity of writing this article. On the other hand my place is also found in a particular segment of that process. There is a particular aspect of that article which I am presently focusing on and "working through" as I gradually come to understand place and to express that understanding. Such a limited place is interwoven confusedly with segments that I have worked through previously as well as with segments that are yet to be worked through. In all of this we see that my place is interwoven with a temporal process. Human space and human time are intrinsically connected.

The place of my writing of this article this reveals itself to be highly complex. My writing has a place in the overall context of my involve-

ment in philosophy, a place in the total process of writing this article as well as a place in the particular segment of this article that is being worked through.

When we reflect on such a type of place for human life (caught up in a process) we see how our human spaciality is intrinsic to our lives. This process of writing this article is my life and I find my identity in it. As I live this process of writing (my present place) I am myself. Precisely as a task the process of writing this article seems to be spread out from a beginning to an end. So it is that as I write this article my life is spread out over this total process or task.

A further phenomenon of being in a present place are the varying degrees to which we find ourselves "fitting in" to the places of our lives. There are certain situations in life where we feel "at home," we have a sense of belonging to a place, to be "in tune" with it. In such a situation our personal identity is linked up with that particular place, we find ourselves there. If this place is a particular type of work we have the sense that this work suits us. If this place is a particular style of worshipping God we have the experiencing of being at home in such worship. If this place is a particular form of social inter-action we have the sense that this is the way that we "naturally" relate to people. If this place is a life focused on certain concerns such as success, money or power then we feel that we tend to share these concerns. If this place happens to be a home or a home town then we feel that we belong to this home or home town. This where we have our roots.

On the other hand there are times when we feel "out of place," when we do not really fit in. In such a case we experience that we are in a place which does not resonate with our own personal vibrations. The people around us are marching to a drummer that is different from the one that we are marching to. Sometimes this experience is given the name of alienation when we sense that we are something of a stranger in the particular place we are in. The style of work that we are engaged in does not suit us. We do not feel at home in the particular style of worshipping God that we are caught up in. We feel that we are expected to relate to people in a way which we find stilted and artificial. We do not share the values and concerns of the people around us.

This experience of either fitting in or not fitting in to place reveals that the process of "fitting in" to place is very basic in human life. This is something in human life which is rather instinctive as well as myste-

rious. Such a process seems to contain several elements. To begin with, there is in such a "fitting in" the experience that the place plays an active role. First of all, the place draws us to itself as it invites us to put down roots there. We see this in the way that the "stage" tends to attract a potential actor and the "bar" invites a potential lawyer. Conversely, a particular place may tend to repel us and push us away. For instance, a particular style of being religious may seem attractive or a particular form of urban living may be repulsive.

This activity of the place goes beyond mere attraction. There comes a time when a place takes possession of us, it 'owns' us. This is the common human experiencing of 'belonging' somewhere. It is an experience where we are not the ones who 'have' a career or a religion or a home but it is that career or religion or home which 'has' us. In various ways such places control our lives. If I belong, for instance, to a home then that home with its hold on me tends to keep me from going away from it.

There are also a variety of ways that human beings initially "fit in" to a place. There can be a type of activity in which we "put down roots" in a place. We can, for instance, engage in various activities in a community and gradually come to belong to that community. It becomes our place through this gradual process of becoming involved. Conversely, people can pull back from place. We can stand at a distance and just observe various human involvements around us. Acting as a spectator, we refuse to be caught up in such activities, holding ourselves aloof from those places.

In fitting in to a place we change it. By making our home in a place we put our own particular stamp on that place and it becomes imbued with our personality. This type of activity is very obvious in the human process of transforming a house into a home as we furnish it and decorate it. But it is also subtly present in the other places that we live in. We go into a particular career and we transform it into an expression of our personality. We enter into a relationship and we creatively give it our own unique style.

A further activity in this process of "fitting in" to place is the way that the place, in turn, changes us. It puts a stamp on us and gives a character to our existence. In our lives we become different people because of the places that we have fitted into. As we may settle into a small

town and its way of living we are changed. Similarly, we are moulded by our careers and our relationships.

Place and the Human Past

A third type of human place comprises past places, all the places that "we are from." We live as people who have pasts, pasts that include places as integral elements. Just as our identity is constituted to a large extent by our past so it is constituted by these past places. This manifests itself in the ordinary human practice of introducing ourselves by describing where we have come from. Similarly, when we are interested in getting to know someone we usually ask where they are from. We instinctively feel that a knowledge of that place gives us a certain understanding of that person. This importance of past places shows itself in the biographies that are written about people. Invariably they include a great deal of description of the places that were part of those people's lives.

This identity that arises from places in our pasts is enduring and can never be completely erased. ("You can take the boy off the farm but you can't take the farm off the boy.") It seems that as we travel forward in life we carry in a packsack on our back all the places that we have come from. Of course, other people may fail to be aware of these past places in our lives and they may tend to understand us merely in terms of certain present situations. In doing so they miss us, they don't realize "where we are coming from."

This dimension of our existence ("where we are coming from") is quite complex, including an amazing multiplicity of elements. Our past places include: 1) the places that are connected to our human thrownness, 2) the places that arise from our cultural background as well as 3) the places of the significant events of our pasts which have endured. There is need to consider each of these types of past place.

1) Human thrownness constitutes an important part of our human past, being responsible for much of what our lives are. As we live our lives we live as people who have been thrown into a particular family, a particular society and a particular era. What is significant for our present study is that all of these elements of thrownness have all been embodied in various places and things.

My thrownness into my family is inseparably connected with the place of our home. I live as someone who is from a particular home. That home is somehow always with me, giving a character of my life and influencing the way that I fit into any new home of my life. My thrownness into a particular society is inseparably connected with places such as schools, churches, parks, markets, business and recreational centers. As I entered into my society all of these places became a part of my life. The result is that I now live as someone "from" a particular school, from a particular church, from a particular neighborhood and from a particular town or city with all of its places. These past places are still with me, guiding the way that I live today. This is shown by the fact that to a great extent I tend to "fit in" to various places today in the same way that I fitted in to those original places of my life. Often the present places of my life have a different character from my original places and I experience the necessity of adapting, of fitting in differently. When this adaptation is not completely successful I find myself "out of place." I do not feel "at home" in the present situation. What is significant here is that this difficulty of present adaptation is due to the strong presence of a past place which is still with me.

My thrownness into a particular era shows itself in the way that my life is embodied in certain things. I was thrown into a life which had certain means of transportation (cars, buses, trains, planes), certain means of communication (telephone, fax, e-mail), certain news media (radio, TV, newspapers), certain general forms of entertainment (TV, movies, VHF), certain ways of writing (pens, typewriters, computers), certain types of clothing. My life was structured by these things that I was thrown into. What results from this embodiment in past things is that I sometimes find it awkward to adapt to the things of my present existence because I still tend to live in terms of the things that I originally was thrown into.

2) Another significant part of our past is the culture that we have been thrown into. This culture plays a large role in our lives. Because of our culture we tend to work and play in a certain way. We tend to relate to people in a certain way. We tend to celebrate in a particular way. We tend to express ourselves in a particular way. There are certain cultural norms concerning etiquette and morality which guide our lives. What is significant here is that these ways of living arising from

our culture are not pure Platonic ideas but are embodied in various human places and things.

This is shown in the way that culture, when it guides the way that we relate to other people, does so in terms of its sense of place. We are led to relate to people in a restaurant in one way and to people in a factory in another way. The relationship of a businessman to his customers is structured by the peculiar character of his place of business. (A banker, for instance, deals with people differently from a vendor in the market.) People are guided to relate in one way in a home town and in another way in a strange city.

Similarly, culture dictates that there is a type of thinking which is appropriate for each particular place we are in. The place of a business establishment guides us into a practical way of thinking. The place of a church, on the other hand, guides us into a more reflective mode of thought. A place of recreation moves us into a new attitude of mind. Our rootedness in our culture leads us to think differently in different places.

This reflection shows us how three elements of human life are interwoven: relationships, identity and place. Any change of relationships means that my self changes, my personal identity changes. My identity shifts from being businessman to being a friend, from being a home town boy to being a stranger. Behind all these changes of relationship and identity are changes of place. A place of business guides me to relate one way and, in so doing, makes me one sort of person. A club guides me to relate in another way and, in so doing, makes me another sort of person. My home town makes me one type of a person, a foreign city makes me another. By controlling the form that relationships take place controls personal identity.

3) An essential part of human historicity are the surprising changes which enter into human life and which endure. Human life is not fixed from the beginning into one set pattern, it changes. Sometimes these changes are surprising and radical. We choose to call these radical changes by the name of events. These past events which guide our lives and give them a distinctive character take various forms: basic involvements, fundamental relationships, major concerns and profound insights.

What is relevant to our present topic is that each one of these involvements, relationships, concerns and insights is connected in a concrete way to a certain human place. The events of life are always embodied, an embodiment that is largely a matter of place. They do not float aimlessly in some vague world of pure spirituality.

A) We find the presence of place, for instance, in career involvements. If one's life is caught up in the career of a doctor, a craftsman or a teacher then there is a certain place (clinic, workshop or classroom) where that career is embodied. The result of this is that one's life is structured by the place of one's career involvement. To be a doctor, craftsman or teacher is to live a life in a clinic, in a workshop or in a classroom. It should be noted that this place of a human involvement generally is an entire spatial situation and not one little point. The place of a career involvement balloons out, so to speak, to fill a total context. If I am a doctor the place of my life is examining room, clinic hospital and the whole 'world' of education. The 'Where' of my existence is that whole world. (It is interesting how human place in these cases takes a form quite different from geographical place.)

B) Our human existence is also closely bound up with certain past events in our lives that had to do with the establishment of relationships with other persons. Our lives are largely structured by such important happenings. Some people may have happened to enter my life. I may have happened to enter into other people's lives. I may have established a personal relationship with God. All of these happenings have shaped my personal identity.

What is interesting about these relationships is the important role that place plays in these relationships. It was in the place of school that I entered into basic relationships with my teachers, my classmates and, later, my students. The character of those relationships was largely shaped by that place. (This is shown by the way that alumni try to return to the place of their educational experiences for a fully meaningful class reunion.) It was in the place of home that I entered into relationships with mother, father, brothers and sisters. (We notice how members of a family try to preserve an old family home because they sense that such a home plays an important part in making their family

life real.) We may find that a relationship with a colleague which is very real in a place of work doesn't seem to be as real outside that place.

The role of place in human relationships shows itself in the political history of a nation. In the Arc de Triomphe in Paris are inscribed the names of the military victories of Napoleon. That monument and those places of victory play an important role in the sense of national pride and unity among Frenchmen. They are united in that monument and in those places. Part of the life of any patriotic citizen is the need to visit periodically a place or a monument that has historical significance for his nation. Through such a visit to a place or monument the citizen is inspired to renew his own dedication to the welfare of his country. The place enables him to rediscover his unity with the other citizens of his nation.

C) Our human past is filled with the eventful appearance of various concerns, concerns which have given a permanent form to our lives. What is interesting is that these concerns are rooted in past human places. For example, there may be a strong concern for religion in our lives, a concern that arose mysteriously at some point in the past. Such a concern for religion is usually intrinsically connected with a certain religious place such as a shrine or a church. For it was there that religion took on the importance that it possesses in our lives. This place-centeredness of a religious concern is shown in a very obvious way in a pilgrimage. A Moslem, for instance, will seek to make a pilgrimage to Mecca and that pilgrimage will be an event which gives a distinctive character to his religious life. By visiting that place he becomes a Moslem in a full way.

It may be that a concern for beauty may have assumed a major position in one's life. Such a concern for beauty arises out of an eventful experience of beauty in one's past. I may have glimpsed a beautiful vista from a mountain top, I may have heard beautiful music in a symphony hall, I may have been deeply moved by paintings in an art museum. The importance that beauty now plays in my life is rooted in those past events and in the places of those events. Those events and places are permanently with me, enriching my life and giving me dreams of beauty.

D) Our human past, finally, is made up to a great extent by certain basic insights that have come into our lives and have given them a particular character. Our lives are unique and different because of these surprise insights. We may possess, for instance, a profound sense of our cultural and historical past. Or, a vivid sense of the reality of death may be present in our lives. Or, we may have a deep appreciation of the great creative potential that is found in human beings. Such insights came into our lives at some mysterious moment in the past and continue to swirl around in the background of our experience, giving a certain tone and understanding to our lives. What is significant is that each of these insights is "rooted" in places that are there in the pasts of our lives. Human understanding is always concretized, it never stands isolated in a purely Platonic world of spiritual forms.

We gave the example above of a strong sense of our cultural and historical past. Such an insight into human history is usually connected with certain places and monuments which embody that historical or cultural history. In the ancient Roman forum I appreciate the dynamism of Roman civilization. Standing on the sandy shore of the sea of Galilee I have a sense of the humanness of Jesus of Nazareth whose feet left footprints on the same sand. Touching the solid stones of the walled city of Manila I have a sense of the style of life of the people who lived there some centuries ago. Our contemporary efforts to set aside and to preserve historical places and monuments arise from a desire to have a living awareness of our cultural past.

Similarly, a strong sense of the reality of death may often arise from an experience of a place such as a cemetery or a funeral home. Such places provoke a living awareness of limitedness of human existence.

Finally, we may have a deep sense of the greatness of the potentialities that lie within human beings and shout with Sophocles: "How wonderful is man!" Such a sense of human greatness usually arises from the experience of an object or place which represents a great human achievement. A statue of Michelangelo or a beautiful cathedral reveal the great things that human beings are capable of achieving. We live with that sense of human greatness because we live with those things and places.

Most of human life is routine. In our lives we move through many experiences and many places which pass by without leaving a mark. It

is only rarely that an event occurs and something radically new enters our lives: a new involvement, a new relationship, a new concern, a new insight. As these events come into our lives they bring with them new places. There is an enrichment here as the event brings not only a new way of living but also a new place. The person who lives a full human life "has been somewhere."

Reflection on these Past Places

When we reflect on these places of our past involvements, relationships, concerns and insights we discover that these places constitute who we are. They give structure and meaning to the life that we are living right now. We are the persons we are because of these past places of our lives. The war veteran continues to live in terms of that place of war. Married people carry with them the place of their marriage ceremony. The place of an eventful encounter with education stays with a person. A person is always a UP graduate or an Ateneo graduate.

One interesting point that arises from our reflection is that past places seem to play a more prominent role in human life than present places. They are the places that give life its distinctive character. We live human life as people who have a past, as people who come from somewhere. Present place only becomes important in human life when we are in the rare situation of entering into a new event in life and the place of that new event. We then experience "fitting in" to a new place.

It needs to be pointed out that it would be a mistake to understand these "places that we are from" as memory images of places in our past. We may remember places that we experienced long ago but those remembered places are not the places of the human past. We can point three basic ways in which these two types of places differ. First of all, a memory image of a place from our past is present in an objective way. It is an object that we imagine, something in front of our minds, something that we think about. The human place "that we are from," on the other hand, is something that is present subjectively in our experience. It is not in front of us but lies in the back of our minds. Secondly, memory images are only there in our minds in those moments when we happen to recall them or choose to recall them. Otherwise they are absent from our awareness. By contrast, the human place that "we come from" is always there in our subjectivity. We live as people from

somewhere even when we don't think about that somewhere. Thirdly, a memory image is something that is limited to our thinking and is not apart of our human living. When, for instance, I recall the house that I lived in as a child I am engaged in a mental exercise which involves a stepping back from the concrete life that I am presently involved in. Such remembering of a childhood house is a mild form of "escapism" since that remembered house is somehow extrinsic to my life. By contrast, the "place that we are from" is something that is lived. I live right now as someone from somewhere. This place that I am from shapes the way that I live my life.

From this it becomes clear that the place "we are from" is not an actual place, a spot that can be located on a map or which can be seen and touched. There is a difference between the human world and the world of actuality. The actual house where we lived in the past, the actual neighborhood streets that we walked on in the past do not constitute human place. They may be real in the realm of actuality but they are not real in the realm of meaningful human life. This is shown by the fact that even if the actual house of our youth were destroyed or the actual neighborhood of our youth were altered beyond recognition we would still have a place that we are from.

An experience of this distinction between an actual place and a human place might be found in the experience of Christians who travel to Jerusalem in order to visit the place where Jesus died. In this pilgrimage people are in search of a "place where they are from" as members of the Christian community. When they reach Jerusalem they are shown a church in the middle of a crowded city and told that this at one time was the hill of Golgotha or Calvary. They may be puzzled that this place does not look like a hill nor is it outside the city as described by the Christian scriptures. In their reading they may encounter a further problem when they discover that it is historically questionable whether this church is actually in the precise place where Jesus died.

Such problems concerning actuality may seem serious but they do not interfere with the piety of Christian pilgrims. They are seeking to re-vivify an event in their religious past and they have come to find the place of that past event. In Jerusalem, in this religious "place where they are from," they are given the grace to re-discover this event and its place. In this human rediscovery of the past the question of the actuality of the hill of Calvary is rather irrelevant.

Another example. As an individual, part of the "place where I am from" is my family. In my desire to re-vivify this familial part of my life I went recently to the graves of my parents. I re-discovered there my roots, and, in a new and more vital way, I entered into my life as a member of that family. It is obvious that the place where the bodies of my parents are presently found (a grave) is not the actual place where my family lived in the past. But that was not relevant for me. I was not concerned about re-discovering the actual place where my family lived. What was important was that there in the cemetery I re-discovered the "place where I was from," my family, and I lived in a more real way as a person from that place, from that particular family.

There is a certain strange ambiguity to this place where "we are from." Although this place is in one sense close and never leaves us, it is also rather distant, always remaining something which we can never take full possession of. This why our all our efforts to recapture our "roots" are doomed to be largely frustrated. Our human lives are always lived facing forward, caught up with involvements and concerns that pull us forward; we can never completely return to the past, we can never completely go home again. We cannot hold on to the home of our childhood, we must engage ourselves in the task of building further homes. We cannot remain on the hill of Calvary, we must push forward toward the heavenly Jerusalem. ☞