



Environment, Space, and Kinship: A Phenomenological Approach to Environmental Ethics

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Abstract: One of the main tasks of environmental philosophy, or environmental ethics, is to figure out in what ways our attitudes about the world and our place in it have been shaped by underlying metaphysical assumptions. In this paper, I discuss our usual conception of space and show how this causes serious problems when we think about the world and our relationship with it. When space is viewed in purely mathematical terms, certain consequences arise. Within mathematical space, natural objects are perceived as mere generic objects that occupy a certain location, and have little meaning except in their utility. When human beings are conditioned to view space in this way, it becomes easier to damage the environment. In order to protect the environment, we need to get into the habit of viewing space phenomenologically—that is, by noting how the spaces around us, together with the objects within them, are intimately connected with our human concerns and projects. One way of encouraging this view of space is by knowing the specific names of the natural objects around us, by giving them proper names whenever possible, and then adopting them. By so doing, we begin to imbue a particular set of significations to the natural objects around us and start seeing them as part of a shared home.

Key Words: Environmental ethics; phenomenology; phenomenological space

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main tasks of environmental philosophy, or environmental ethics, is to figure out in what ways our attitudes about the world and our place in it have been shaped by underlying metaphysical assumptions. If these underlying metaphysical assumptions are wrong or misplaced, and they cause undue harm, then it would be the task of philosophers to figure out exactly what these underlying assumptions are and how to correct them. Some say that the mechanistic viewpoint is to blame for our lack of respect for the natural world; some would locate the blame in Cartesian dualism; others still would blame the Christian notion of dominion over the world (Hourdequin, 2015; James 2015). In this paper, I aim to show that one of the major culprits lies in

the manner in which we think about space itself. I shall refer to Heidegger's distinction between mathematical space and phenomenological space (Heidegger, 1962) and show how thinking of space in mathematical terms causes serious problems when we think about the world and our relationship with it.

2. THE NATURE OF SPACE

Space is often viewed as empty, as something that's just there, waiting to be filled. It has dimensions, can be measured, and is that area which all objects fill. All the things that surround us, we think, are contained in this space. Space, then, can be construed, metaphorically, as some kind of container that all objects in the world fill. But is this the only way to think about space?



Heidegger (1962) says no. This view of space, which he calls mathematical space or Cartesian space, regards space as primarily neutral and void of any signification except what can be expressed mathematically. The only meaning that space has—in terms of distance, closeness, and so forth—is what can be measured by certain instruments. Objects are farther to us in space only if they are mathematically distant, and can be measured to be so through some measuring device. A mountain that is a kilometer away, then, is spatially farther than a tree that is only twenty feet away; and a chair one is sitting on must be closer than one that is located across the room. Space, considered this way, is thought about in terms of its mathematical dimensions. A closer examination of this notion of space often includes, whether we realize it or not, particular human aspects, even if we speak about it in purely objective, non-human, mathematical terms. We might say that some object is above or below, up or down, east or west, but these are terms that make sense only in relation to the human body. Without human beings categorizing or dividing space in this way, it would make no sense at all to talk about up and down (up and down in relation to what, or to whom?), east and west (in relation to whose perspective?), or back and front (except in relation to a subject who experiences an object in front or behind one's body). The very measure of space, then, contains underneath it a perspectival property that requires the existence of a physical body that experiences space in a particular way. Scientists may remove such subjective components of space by speaking about space in more objective terms—for instance by referring to distance without any consideration of things being above or below or being to the left or right, but this is extremely difficult to do. It seems to be objectively true, whether observers are present or not, that an object in space is located at a place that is either to the left or to the right of some other object; but then again, one has only to stand in front of the object from another perspective for the left-right relation to be reversed. An object seen to be on the left now appears to be on the right when looked at from the opposite direction. This means that what is up or down, left or right, or above and below, though human constructs, cannot be completely eliminated from our description of the world because they form part and parcel of how we carve out the world and perceive it. In any case, thinking about space

mathematically allows us to reconstruct our conception of space in purely objective terms by using mathematics to divide it and measure it. If we can measure the distance between two objects and express this in terms of precise inches or feet or miles, without any regard to the objects' position in relation to a human body, then we can establish a sense of objectivity by eliminating, perhaps, the notion that one object is to the left or to the right of another. We could even say that one object, A, is moving towards another object, B, at such-and-such a speed without referring to left and right. Einstein showed, however, that such measurements, though objective, are still relative. It all depends on one's frame of reference—and of course, it is humans who establish, or decide, which frame of reference to take. Nonetheless, we can still speak of space in a purely objective, mathematical sense.

As mentioned earlier, Heidegger (1962) refers to this objective idea of space as Cartesian space or mathematical space. This notion of space assumes that our experience of spatial relations is governed strictly in mathematical terms, particularly in terms of measurement. This seems to be motivated by the urge to eradicate all subjective elements in our knowledge and description of the external world. In short, it seems to be the result of a particular mode of thinking—a scientific mode of thinking if we wish to have a label for it. This mode of thinking assumes that our relations with the world and the objects and persons in it can be objectified through mathematical and scientific means and can be understood completely in this way. Heidegger questions this in *Being and Time* (1962) by showing that our experience of space has little to do with objective measurements, and any attempt to understand our various experience of space mathematically prevents us from being able to explain why we experience space in particular ways. Some simple examples will clarify this point. Take for instance something as simple as seeing a close friend across the street. The friend who is, say, 10 meters away, though mathematically farther away than a stranger on the pavement beside me, is experienced, phenomenologically, as closer to me than the stranger. Or think, for instance, of someone who is beside me in a lecture hall who is completely closed to making any sort of human contact with me. I may experience this person as being more distant than a lecturer who I am listening to at the moment. Similarly, When a family goes shopping in a mall, the child might



experience the toy section to be closer, because that is what he values, whereas the father, who has his eyes focused on the backpacks that he needs to purchase, may completely overlook the toy section (which might even be invisible to him), because he values something else. We therefore experience space, phenomenologically, in ways that are difficult—if not impossible—to account for mathematically. How could my friend across the street be experienced as closer to me than the stranger beside me if my friend is objectively more than twenty feet farther than the stranger? Mathematics cannot account for this experience. It cannot make sense of it. The only way to make sense of this experience of being closer to something that is mathematically farther is by paying attention to our existential concerns. My friend across the street is experienced as closer to me, though mathematically farther, because I am in some important sense existentially connected to him. What connects me to him, we could say, is a value or a set of values. Since I value my friend more than the stranger, I experience him to be closer. Value, however, is not something that can be measured mathematically. It can only be measured, qualitatively, by bringing up existential human concerns—such as what I find important, my historical relationship with certain people, and a whole set of relations and interactions with other people. My closeness to this person, and my experience of him as being closer to me than the stranger beside me, consist of elements which are very difficult to articulate in simple terms. This closeness would include what I regard as valuable or important to me about persons, but would also include my upbringing, my interactions with other people, my views regarding strangers, and so forth. What is important to note here is that any attempt to understand my experience of a friend being closer to me than the stranger right beside me cannot be supplied through the understanding of space in purely mathematical terms. Nothing from the notion of space as mathematical can explain this phenomenon and others like it. To distinguish this human experience of space from mathematical space, we need a different term for it. We could call it, as Heidegger did, phenomenological space or existential space. In order to understand more fully this distinction between the two types of space, it might help to look deeply into the difference between houses and homes.

3. HOUSES AND HOMES

We have two different words for our dwelling places: houses and homes. We have two distinct words for them because we experience them differently. But what is it, precisely, that accounts for the difference between the two? No amount of measurements of two houses will be able to disclose to us which one should be regarded as home and which should be regarded as a mere house. In fact, the same dwelling place can be regarded as a house for someone, but a home for another. What would account for the difference? Certainly not the space where the dwelling place is located, or the distance between the rooms or the mathematical relations among the several objects within an architectural space. The only way to account for the difference between the two is to make reference, once again, to basic human concerns and interests—that is, to invoke values all over again. A house becomes a home when the objects within it (and the house itself) begins to have a special value for particular persons. If it is my house, and I dwell there, and if I associate it with the multiple experiences and events that have transpired there, then I may begin to consider it home, and *my* home, specifically. Notice, though, that a dwelling place that becomes a home requires the passage of time and the accumulation of experiences within a particular space. Before I start to feel at home anywhere or “be at home” in a certain location, I need to be there repeatedly, be familiar with a particular space, and also interact with that space in such a way as to imbue it with meaning. The coffee table at the corner is not just a coffee table, but is that space where I drink my beverage, do my work, and and continue to define myself existentially as, say, a professor who is required to engage in the world in a certain way (such as writing papers, preparing for lectures, and so forth). The coffee table then becomes part of my whole identity and is now connected with a whole set of existential projects. The same goes for the other objects in the house: the walls in the living room painted in Mediterranean yellow that reminds me of my trip to Florence; the bedroom where I lie down and watch TV or play with my pet poodle who is now much older and requires more care; or the dining table where I have had numerous conversations and meals with my wife, my child, and some of my closest friends and relatives. Apart from the objects, spaces too become imbued with significance



and value. A particular area may be the place where I do yoga or practice the guitar, both activities intimately connected with my existential concerns that motivate me to pursue both health and music. Sometimes, in order to make a new house more homey or home-like, we populate it with numerous objects closely connected with our identities. This is why, in order to make a house feel homey, people put up pictures of their family members. Perhaps family is one important component that turns houses into homes, although this is by no means essential for transforming houses into homes since people living alone can experience a dwelling place as home without family pictures populating the place or associating the place with experiences one has had with family members. Nonetheless, most people turn their houses into homes by populating them with objects that have some deep connection with their deepest existential concerns. A guitarist, for example, will have guitars around or pictures of guitars, or guitar stands in a room beside a music stand containing guitar books. These objects have value for him, increases the value he places on his dwelling place, and shapes the kind of experiences he has within that space that he may now refer to as home. Certain objects, then, and repetitive experiences with them, can transform a house into a home. What is clear, then, is that to turn a house into a home requires more than mere attention to mathematical space. A house cannot be converted into a home simply by dividing a hall into two or by adding another room, or by transporting the house to another location—all of which are mathematical attempts to try to transform it into a home. What is required is a close attention to what is meaningful for the individual (or individuals) who occupy a particular dwelling place.

4. KINSHIP

Perhaps another important aspect of home, even among people who live alone there, is the experience of a shared environment. A house becomes “homey” when the spaces within it, and the significance of the spaces within it, are shared by a number of people who have a close affinity with one another. This is perhaps why homes are associated with families, and why people regard the home they grew up in as their real home, since this home is associated with people who are valued. This cannot be explained in terms of mathematical

space, which takes no account of the presence of others, their relationship with me, and my kinship with them.

Part of this kinship is familiarity, and part of this familiarity is the use of names, both proper and otherwise (for instance, pet names or relational names like “mom” or “dad”). These names become closely affiliated or connected with the spaces within a dwelling place and contribute to experiencing this place as home. Thus, for instance, we can refer to a room on the second floor as Grandpa Warren’s room, the room where he stayed most of his life, and then make references to particular objects at home as belonging to Grandpa Warren or given to him as a Christmas gift by a colleague or another relative, and so forth. Names, then, and the entire naming process, contribute to the experience of home.

What happens when we are culturally conditioned to regard the spaces around us in purely mathematical terms? When this becomes a habit, we cease to notice what the objects around us mean to us and focus only on their objective mathematical properties. Objects become just objects, detached from any human concerns, and the spaces around us become neutral enough such that when we occupy them, or destroy them, we do not see how we also destroy and wipe out a whole web of significations related to our identities and our projects. It is easier, after all, to destroy a house than a home. A house is simply there, one object among many, located in mathematical space and having no connection with me the way a favorite vase that I own has some connection with me because of, say, its sentimental value (since it was given to me as a present by a mentor who has since passed away). If we see the value of such objects at all, it is simply in their use, their utility for other projects. They have no intrinsic value, because for anything at all to have intrinsic value, it must be infused with meaning or significance; and objects, seen simply in mathematical terms, together with the spaces they occupy, lose their connection with the significations that give them value. A house becomes simply a house, a vase simply a vase, a tree simply a tree, an animal simply an animal. Consider, for example, all the significations a tree might have if it is experienced within phenomenological space. A particular tree, imbued with value, and experienced as “nearer” to me than other trees may be experienced as such because it was the tree that I climbed as a child



and the tree where I built my first tree house. It may have been a tree where I carved out the initials my first sweetheart with the word “forever” beside it; the tree I sat under when I read my first novels as a child; the tree that withstood strong winds during a particularly stormy season. This tree then, since it has been imbued with particular significations, cannot be experienced solely as belonging to a particular mathematical space. It is also “located” within an existential space and is thus experienced differently. It becomes affiliated with me and my concerns and is closely connected with me the way my home is connected with me.

5. RE-ESTABLISHING OUR KINSHIP WITH THE WORLD

Perhaps one way by which we can transform our relationship with the environment, particularly those spaces that extend beyond the boundaries of our individual dwelling places, is by imbuing the spaces around us with the same sort of significations that turn houses into homes. This can be done, I suggest, in three different ways: first, by knowing the specific names and relevant details of the natural objects around us (thereby making them as familiar as the objects we find at home); second, by giving these natural objects proper names whenever possible; and third, by adopting them.

Let us turn to the first suggestion: to know the names and details of the natural objects around us. Normally, when we come across, say, a bird perched on a tree while walking from home to school, we tend to think about the bird in purely generic terms. If we are cognizant of the bird at all, we might say something like: “look, there’s a bird right there on the tree.” We often do not care to know the exact species of the bird we see, its peculiar habits, its mating rituals, and so forth. The same goes with our everyday experience with other natural objects like trees, shrubs, flowers, and the various plants that populate the environment. What would happen if we took the time to learn the specific names of these objects and learned their specific attributes? The bird perched on the tree may now be recognized as, say, a Silvery Kingfisher, a type of bird endemic to the southern part of the Philippines, with an unmistakable black and white plumage. It has a high-pitched tweet which can be recognized right

away when heard from a distance, and can be mimicked by humans if we cared to try. The tree on which it is perched might be a Katmon tree with its unmistakable white flowers that bloom on the branches. Knowing the specific names of natural objects like these together with their identifying properties and quirks imbues them with a web of significations associated with our human concerns and turns these objects into something more than just familiar. They soon become familiar in the same way objects inside one’s home are familiar. We start to develop a kinship with them, and are thereby experienced as closer to us in space than generic objects. By taking the time to know the specific names and attributes of the natural objects around us, we bring out a whole web of meanings that would have remained dormant if we simply experienced them generically, lying there in mathematical space in a certain location. In short, when we fail to recognize the names and attributes of the natural objects around us, they remain in the same sort of space that houses occupy. These natural objects then begin to occupy a space akin to home when they are properly labeled. And because they now occupy a space akin to home, it becomes more difficult to do violence to them. It is easier, after all, to kill a generic bird than it is to kill one whose attributes we are familiar with. Likewise, it is easier to chop a generic tree down compared with a tree whose name and features we know intimately.

Let us now take the second approach, which goes even further. Apart from knowing the specific names of the natural objects around us, we could, if we cared to, actually give them proper names. This is something we do in our homes when we take in a pet, for example. A pet Yorkshire Terrier may be given a specific proper name (say, “Charlie” or “Maxie”), and is now addressed by this name. This gives the pet a specific identity in relation to its owners, establishes it as a member of a family, and now occupies the same phenomenological space as other objects and persons found at home. What would happen if we also give proper names to the natural objects around us that we encounter on a regular basis? Let us say that a stray cat frequently occupies a particular space in the neighborhood and roams the environs at specific times. If this cat were to be given a proper name (say, “Betsie,”), our interaction with it would change dramatically. She would be difficult to ignore and would now have some kinship with us by the mere fact that she now



has a proper name. Not only is she not a generic cat, she is now a cat with a specific name and can be referred to by that name. A whole set of significations begins to be associated with this specific cat, and it now becomes even more difficult to do it harm. This is perhaps why farm animals that are raised for slaughter are not given proper names. As soon as we name a cow “Bessie,” and address her by that name, it becomes rather difficult to lead her out back and slaughter her for food together with some other animals. Something significant obviously occurs when animals are given proper names. The naming process, and all that it entails, somehow gathers the named object in within a particular space similar to the way in which the arms of a mother gather in towards herself her brood. Now what would happen if most of the natural objects around us were also given proper names? If a tree in the environ is named “Charlie” (no matter how silly this may appear at first), it would certainly be more difficult to chop it down to make room for a shopping mall. If we start naming the trees around us in this way, it would be easier to gather the resistance needed to go against those who may want to cut them down for profit. Naming trees may, as I mentioned, seem silly at first. But if enough people do it, and the practice spreads, we might still be able to save the trees from the violent hands of those who want to make room for shopping complexes and roads.

A third approach for re-establishing our kinship with the natural world is through adoption. By this, I mean the conscious act of adopting particular spaces or natural objects by a community. Apart from knowing the specific names and attributes of the natural objects around us and giving them proper names whenever we can, we could also bring them into that space called home by adopting them. When a family adopts an infant, for example, the infant is brought into a familial space and is now considered part of the family. The infant becomes one of the primary contents of one’s home. Similarly, if a community of human beings were to adopt a specific space outside home, the space—and everything contained in it—would begin to become part of one’s home. The space that we call home—that is, our usual dwelling place—would now extend to those spaces we have adopted. I therefore suggest, as part of environmental advocacy, that we encourage communities to familiarize themselves with the names of the objects in their environment, give them proper

names whenever possible, and then adopt them. These communities could adopt trees, open areas, and even animals. When these spaces are adopted in this way by communities, it becomes more difficult to do violence to them. Communities could say: these spaces are ours; we have formed kinship with them; they are part of our family; they are part of what we call home.

6. CONCLUSION

Our discussion has shown that there is a fundamental difference between mathematical space and phenomenological space. When space is viewed in purely mathematical terms, certain consequences arise. Within mathematical space, natural objects are perceived as mere generic objects that occupy a certain location, and have little meaning except in their utility. When human beings are conditioned to view space in this way, it becomes easier to damage the environment. In order to protect the environment, we need to get into the habit of viewing space phenomenologically—that is, by noting how the spaces around us, together with the objects within them, are intimately connected with our human concerns and projects. One way of encouraging this view of space is by knowing the specific names of the natural objects around us, by giving them proper names whenever possible, and then adopting them. By so doing, we begin to imbue a particular set of significations to the natural objects around us and start seeing them as part of a shared home.

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