

Place and Space An Aristotelian view of Sacred Geography



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The aim of this lecture

- To discuss the concept of place in the light of Sacred Geography.
- To introduce you to the Aristotle's notion of place as a theory/philosophy that can be used in Sacred Geography.
- To consider Aristotle's arguments that a body naturally moves to its proper place.
- To introduce you to Aristotle's view of the attributes of a body in its proper place.

Sacred Geography

- Any discipline requires three components:
- **A praxis with its methodologies** – its teachings
 - In SG we largely draw on anthropological methods in particular phenomenology.
- **A philosophical framework**
 - We are going to explore Edward Casey and Aristotle today as some of that philosophical framework.
- **A theological framework**
 - In SG we use Eliade and Durkheim plus other authors such as Belden Lane, Barbara Bender and other literature in earth-based religions.



Anthony Thorley put forward a definition:

*‘Sacred Geography is the study of qualities of the sacred and **related cultural activities** found in certain places in a spatial context.’*

Spica, Vol 4 No2 p.8 [http://sophia-project.net/Spica/pdfs/SPICA_4.2.pdf]



The Fate of Place

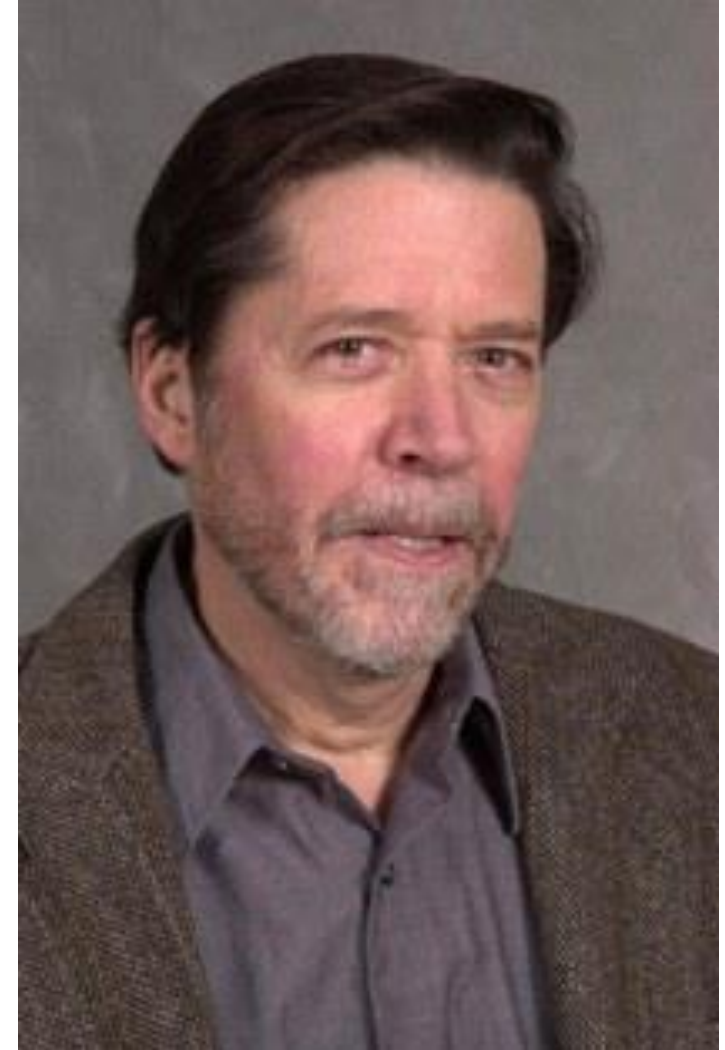
A Philosophical History

Edward S. Casey

Copyrighted material

ebook in the Library and on
the module reading list

Required reading pp50-75



Casey, Edward S. *The Fate of Place, a Philosophical History*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998

Edward Casey on Place and Space

Place and Space



According to Edward Casey, contemporary society considers **place** to be neutral, and he argues that the idea of the quality of place has been subsumed by the modern concept of **space**, which has drawn:

...much of the complex and subtle structure of place into its nebulous embrace.

Casey, Edward S. *The Fate of Place, a Philosophical History*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998: p.xii.

Place and Space according to Casey

Casey states:

‘To be at all - to exist in any way - is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place. Place is a requisite as the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand, the bodies we have. We are surrounded by places. We walk over and through them. We live in places, relate to others in them, die in them. **Nothing we do is unplaced**. How could it be otherwise? How could we fail to recognize this primal fact?’

Place and Space



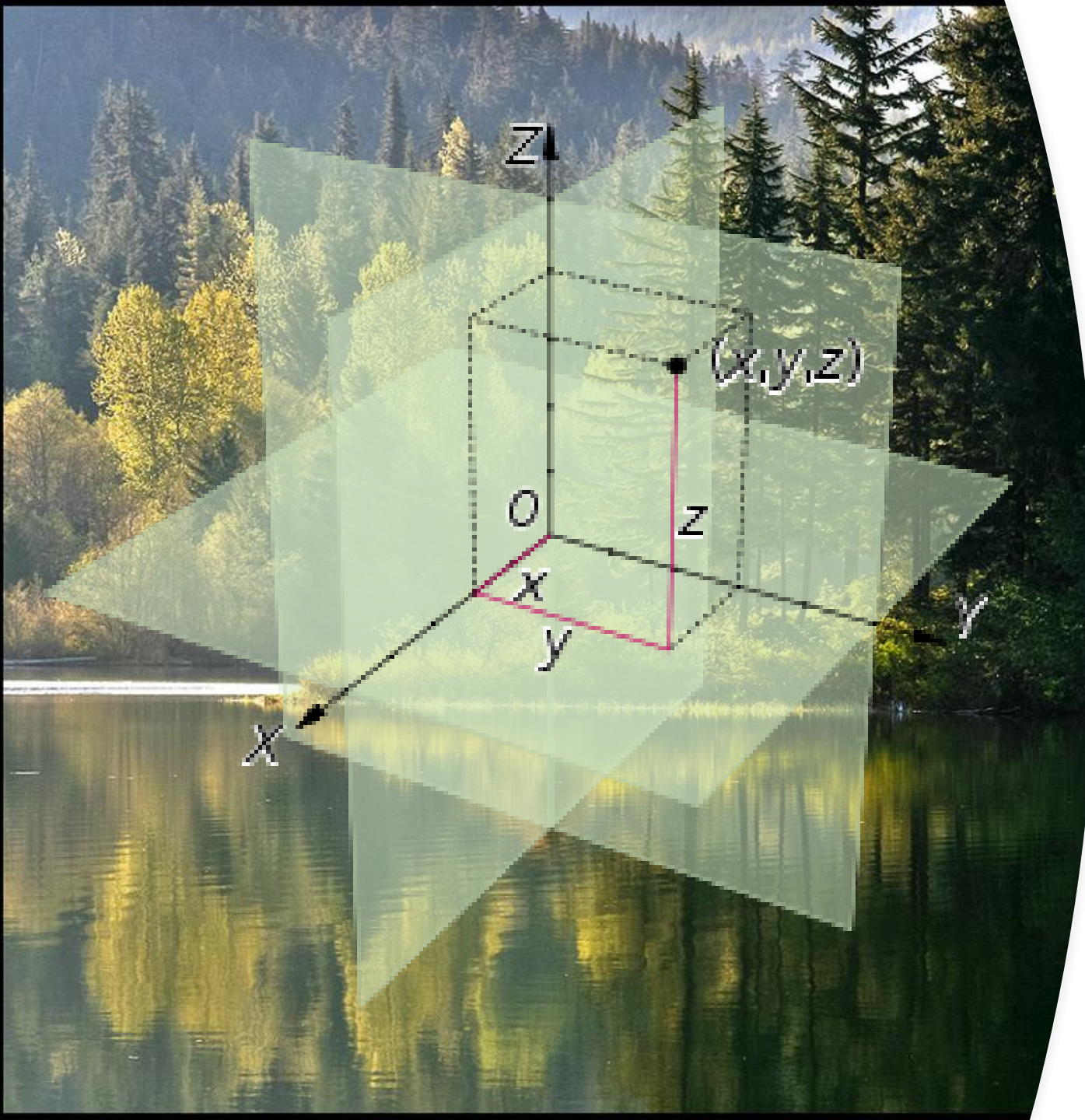
Casey turns to Aristotle and Hobbes to challenge space.

Casey (p. ix)

Aristotle - 'The power of place will be remarkable.'

Physics

Thomas Hobbes, - 'No man therefore can conceive anything, but he must conceive it in some place.' *Leviathan*



Why is this important?

Because the merging with place into space has rendered all areas defined as spaces.

But space is neutral; hence its dominance has portrayed place also as neutral.



Turning to Aristotle |

Aristotle and Place – Primary source

Aristotle (385 BC -322BC) as a protophenomenologist asked, what is place?



Aristotle's primary definition of place was:

The limit of the surrounding body (at which it is in contact with the thing surrounded).

Physics 4.4 212a6-6a.

This definition was later refined by him to:

...the first immobile limit of what surrounds.

Physics 4.4 212a20-1

Aristotle and Place

Aristotle discussed place as:

- A vessel which gives shape to the water.
- Yet the water can be removed and replaced by something else.

In this way the vessel is separate to the contents.

- a place is **co-extensive with its occupying body**.

Physics 4.2, 209a 8-9, 32-33



Casey argued that place's ability to contain its *own quality and independent existence* is a distinctly Aristotelian, rather than Platonist, concept.

Casey, Edward S. *The Fate of Place, a Philosophical History*.: pp.xii, 51-53.



Aristotelian
place is both
separate to its
contents but
also contributes
to its contents.



Aristotelian place

Aristotle argued that place cannot be a body.

‘Hence while place has size it has not a body.’

Physics 209a1-25.

Secondary Source

Casey comments on Aristotle's mature vision of place:

‘This is the acknowledgment of place as a unique and nonreducible feature of the physical world, something with its **own inherent powers**, a pre-metric phenomenon (thus both historically and conceptually pre-Euclidean in its specification). And above all something that reflects the situation of **being in, and moving between**, places.’

Casey points out that Aristotle takes Plato's views of place in the *Timaeus* and shifts it.

- Plato's place is defined as *Khôra* or *Chora*, a third kind of receptacle in which the Platonist forms are held, an interval.
- Aristotle place is *Topos*, a receptacle which bounds and is a container which imposes its qualities on its contents.

Place linked to either a monist or dualist argument

Aristotle and the Stoic philosophy both took up a **monist position** and thus both upheld the idea of **immanence**, that is all contained in the cosmos, rather than Plato's view of **transcendence and dualism**, god outside the cosmos.

Hence:

Is sacred place, immanent, (local and self contained) or created by a transcendent (a universal divine) power? Or both?

Thus rather than the dichotomy of Eliade vs Durkheim can sacred place be viewed as Aristotelian, Platonistic, or neither?

Place and Aristotle's four causes

Aristotle:



‘Also we may ask: of what things is place the cause? None of the four modes of causation can be ascribed to it. It is neither cause in the sense of the matter or existents (for nothing is composed of it), nor as the form and definition of things, nor as end, nor does it move existents [life]’ *Physics* 4.1 209a20-23.

This was a problem for Aristotle as it suggested that ‘place’ was powerless or neutral – which challenged his earlier notion that place bestowed something to its contents. He resolved this by his theory of motion.

Motion and Place

- In Aristotle's physics **motion is secondary to place.**
- Motion is the phenomena of changing from one place to another.
- **Location motion** rather than locomotion



Aristotle and his notion of a Proper Place

‘Further, the locomotions of the elementary natural bodies — namely, fire, earth, and the like — show not only that place is something, but also that it exerts a certain influence.’ *Physics* 208b11

Secondary Source comment:

Peter Machamer suggests that another translation of the word ‘influence’ could be that:

‘it (place) has some potency’

Machamer, Peter K. "Aristotle on Natural Place and Natural Motion." *Isis* 69, no. 3 (1978): 377-387. p.378.



Aristotle and his notion of a Proper Place

Since all bodies, organic and inorganic are made up of the four elements; earth, air, fire and water, then, according to Aristotle, all bodies are drawn, pulled, into places.

All bodies seek their **proper place**, or natural place.



Aristotle:

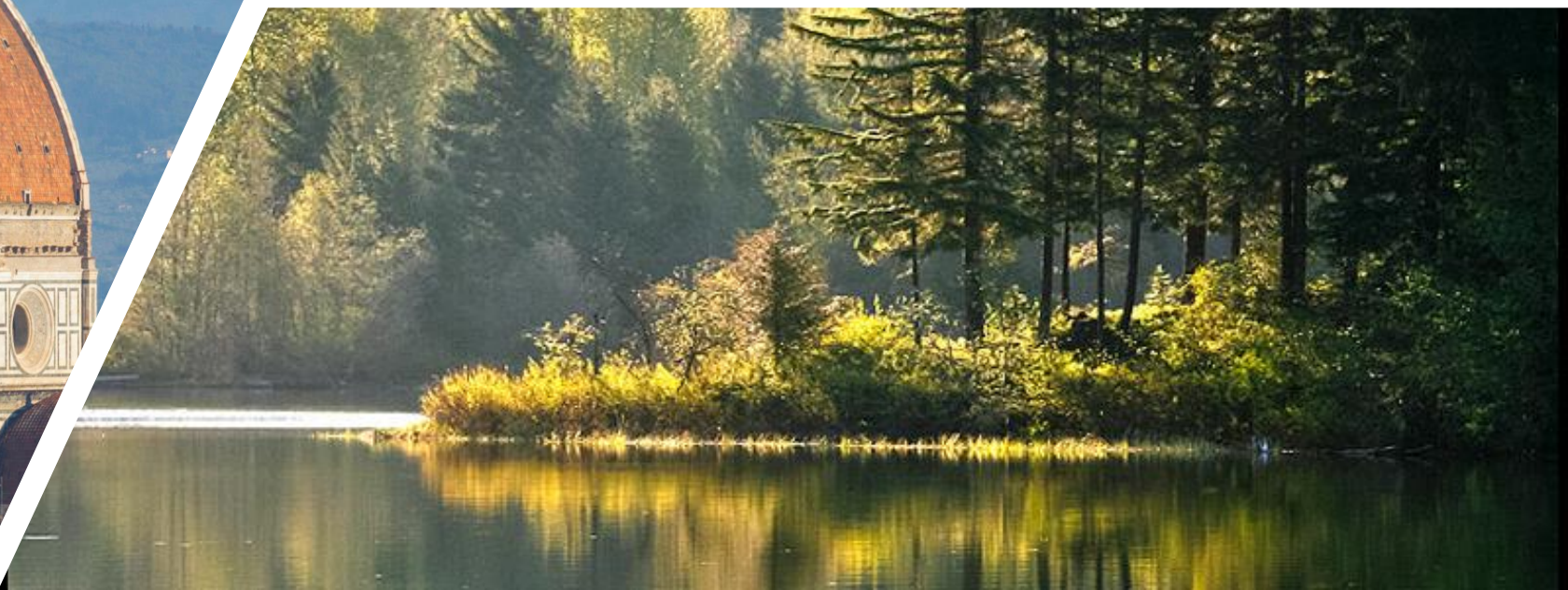
... and the movement of each body to its own place is motion towards its own form. De caelo IV 3, 310a35

This potency of place was **Aristotle's notion of gravity** – a teleological unknown cause which drew a body to its 'proper place'.

Proper Place

For Aristotle, when a body is in its **proper place** it can become **part of the whole**, it can find a form of stillness or completeness.

Metaphysics Bk IV, 1014b16-26



Contemporary Space vs Aristotle's Place

- Space is a continuous extension.
- Space is independent of any substance which occupies it.

Casey argues: The iteration of 'place' is resolved by the very nesting of special *topoi* within an overarching *Topos* [which] has the virtue of conceiving the cosmos not as an empty and endless Space but as an embracing Place, filled to the brim with snugly fitting proper places.' P.71

- Place has the power to 'pull' a body to its proper place.
- Place exists independent of its contents.
- Place does not have a body.
- Place ascribes a quality to 'its' contents.
- A body is **whole** when it is in its **proper place**.

The loss of Aristotle's view of place from modernity's world view.



Aquinas and divine space

Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) installed Aristotelian physics into Christianity and in doing so **needed to locate God in his 'proper place'**.

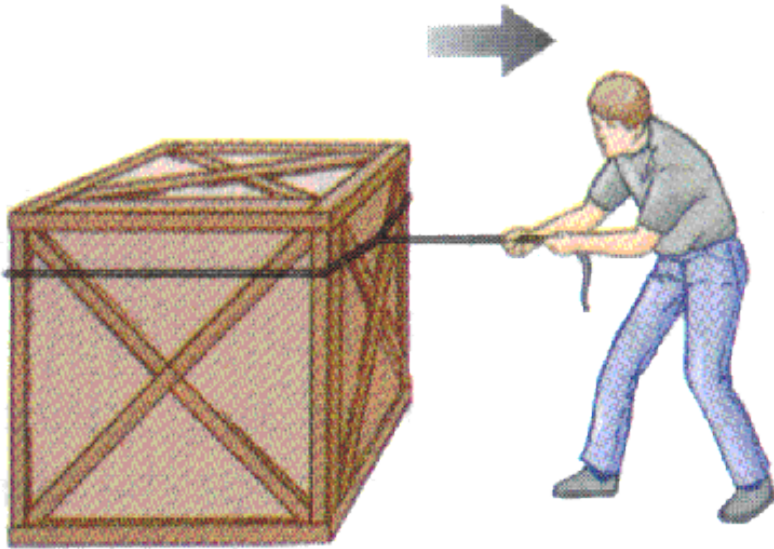
God's place was logically limitless, so the space in the heavens needed to be defined as limitless, for God could not be contained!

Hence, **limitless space** became superior to place. Space was divine while place was sublunar, below the moon.



God the Creator
Bible historiale Royal 19D. iii,
vol.1.f.3 circa 1411

Motion removed from Place



Galileo Galilei's work in understanding motion and later Isaac Newton's laws of motion combined to show that the idea of motion, **velocity and weight, became the central features of movement, instead of the potency of place.**

This finally removed place as a concept.

Loco Motion, changed to locomotion.

Place as a phenomenon

However, although Aristotle's notion of place, and in particular **proper place** may have fallen out of science and physic it is still part of the lived experience.

Humans and all other life forms seek out their 'proper place'

Aristotle: 'When a body is in its proper place it can become part of the whole, it can find a form of stillness or completeness'. Metaphysics Bk IV, 1014b16-26





Finding our proper place can be viewed as the dominant theme of human existence and it is evident in a multitude of ways.

In art: A portrait may seek to show the subject in their 'proper place' thus enabling them to reveal their correct 'form' or wholeness.

Proper place here is both the setting as well as the clothes - the extremity of the 'body'.

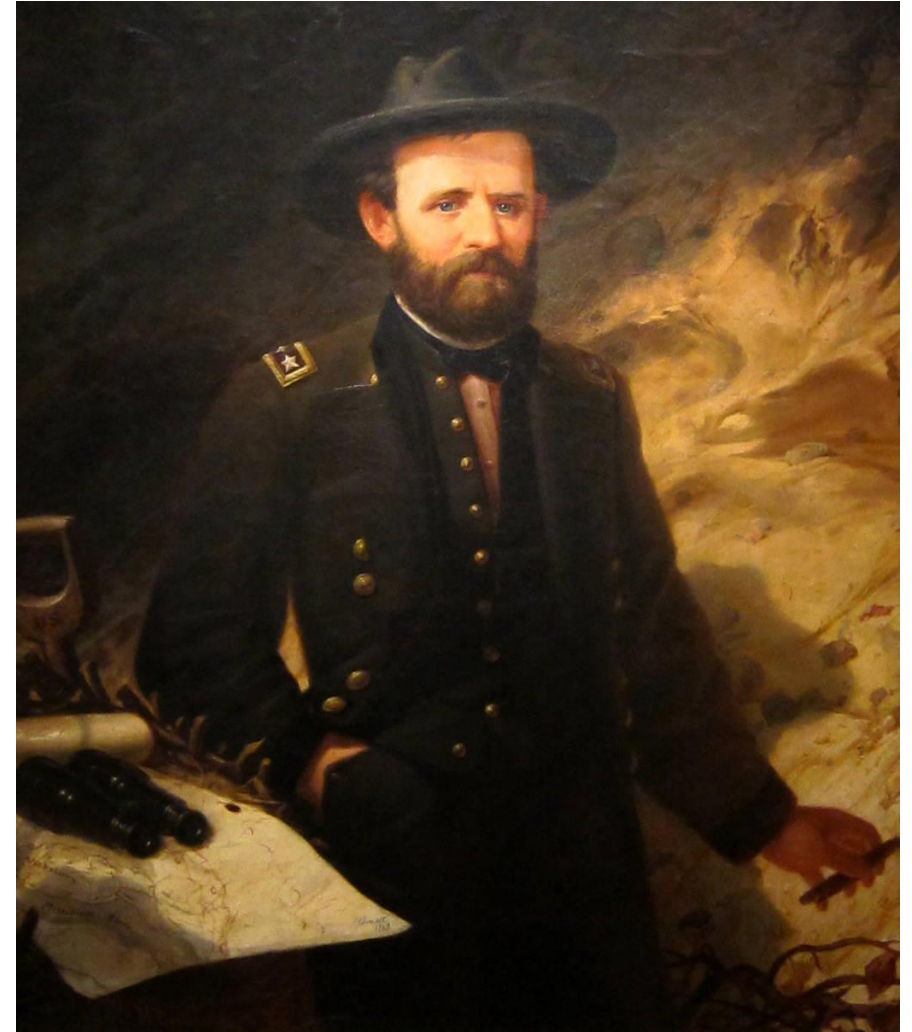
Rembrandt (1634) *A scholar and his book*

A body in its 'proper place'



Queen Elizabeth of England, 1588

The individual becomes more than just themselves – they become part of a larger whole while also showing stillness or completeness.



A portrait of Ulysses S. Grant
(1865, Ole Peter Hansen Balling)



Proper Place = stillness, wholeness, completeness and authority.

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ARISTOTLE'S NOTION OF PLACE

The Properties of Place

- Place exists and contains something but is also separate to what it contains.
- Place does not have a body.
- Place ascribes a quality to 'its' contents.
- Place has the power to 'pull' a body to its proper place.
- A body is whole when it is in its proper place.

Proper Place - phenomenological 'gravity'

The potential of place to draw objects or creatures towards it is also the feature of objects seeking their proper place – I think of this as 'phenomenological gravity'.

This 'gravity' results in a place containing what is right for that place. Hence a place offers perfection, reflected as wholeness, empowered or stillness, to what it contains.



Aristotelian questions to take into your field work



What is **in** this place?

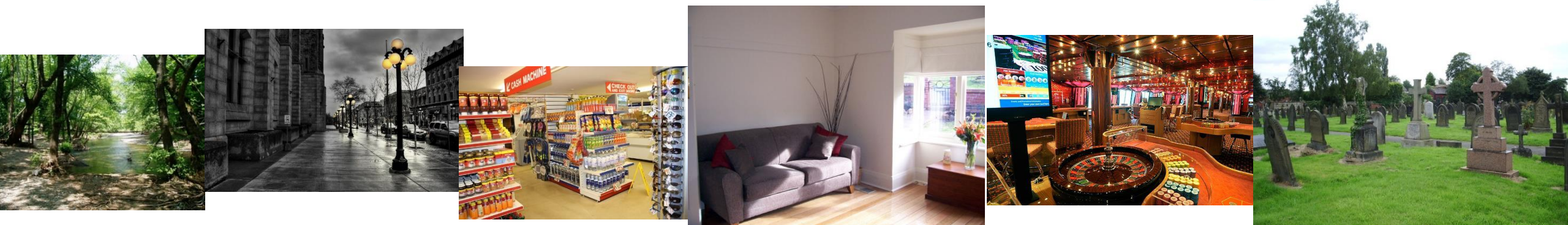
What is **drawn** to this place?

What is **alien** in this place?

What is **destructive** to this place?

What **supports** this place?

Note: These questions open the environmental ethical consideration raised by Thomas Berry – what is good for (Berry's) field is good, but what is not good for the field, is not good.



The Power of Proper Place

With the idea of **proper place** comes the idea of a **place having agency**.

This agency allows for place to maintain itself, thereby endeavouring to retain its own 'state' its own 'personality'. It may employ human help in this endeavour.

The agency of place acts, like all of life, to ensures that it is homeostatic – does not change.



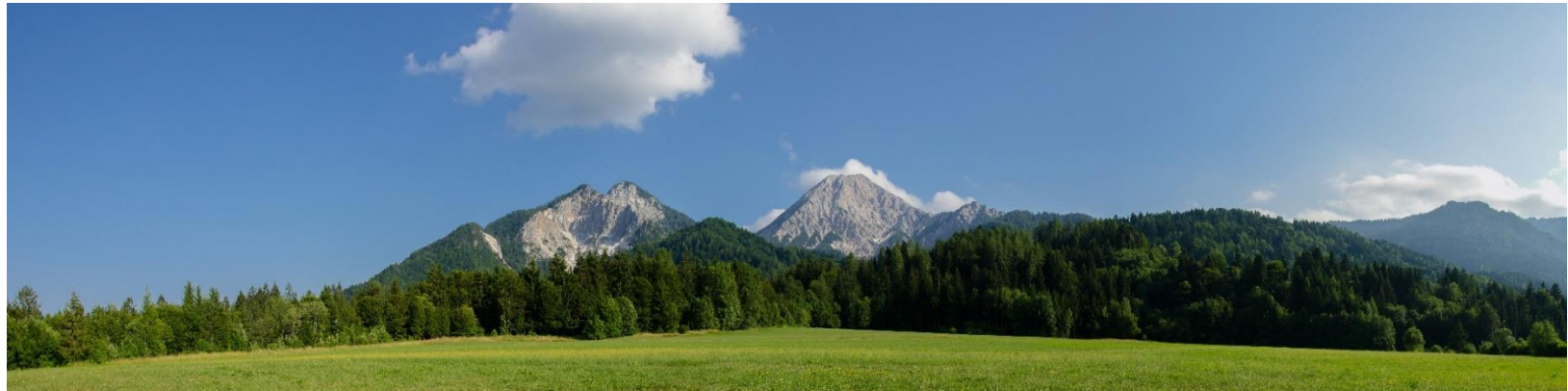
Further Aristotelian questions to ask of a place



- What **happens** in this place?
- What is the greater **wholeness** of this place to which the many bodies seeking its wholeness, contribute?



Place, unlike space, contains many parts. It is multifaceted, complex, many-sided and multidimensional.



ARISTOTLE'S NOTION OF PROPER PLACE AND SACREDNESS

We can argue that it is a **place's agency** which leads to the phenomena of sacredness.

But our idea of our 'proper place' is normally defined by where we feel complete or closer to wholeness.

Thus we ascribe 'sacredness' to such places rather than a supermarket.



VIP: However, place allows for but does not require sacredness. In Aristotelian place, sacredness is allocated by the individual species.

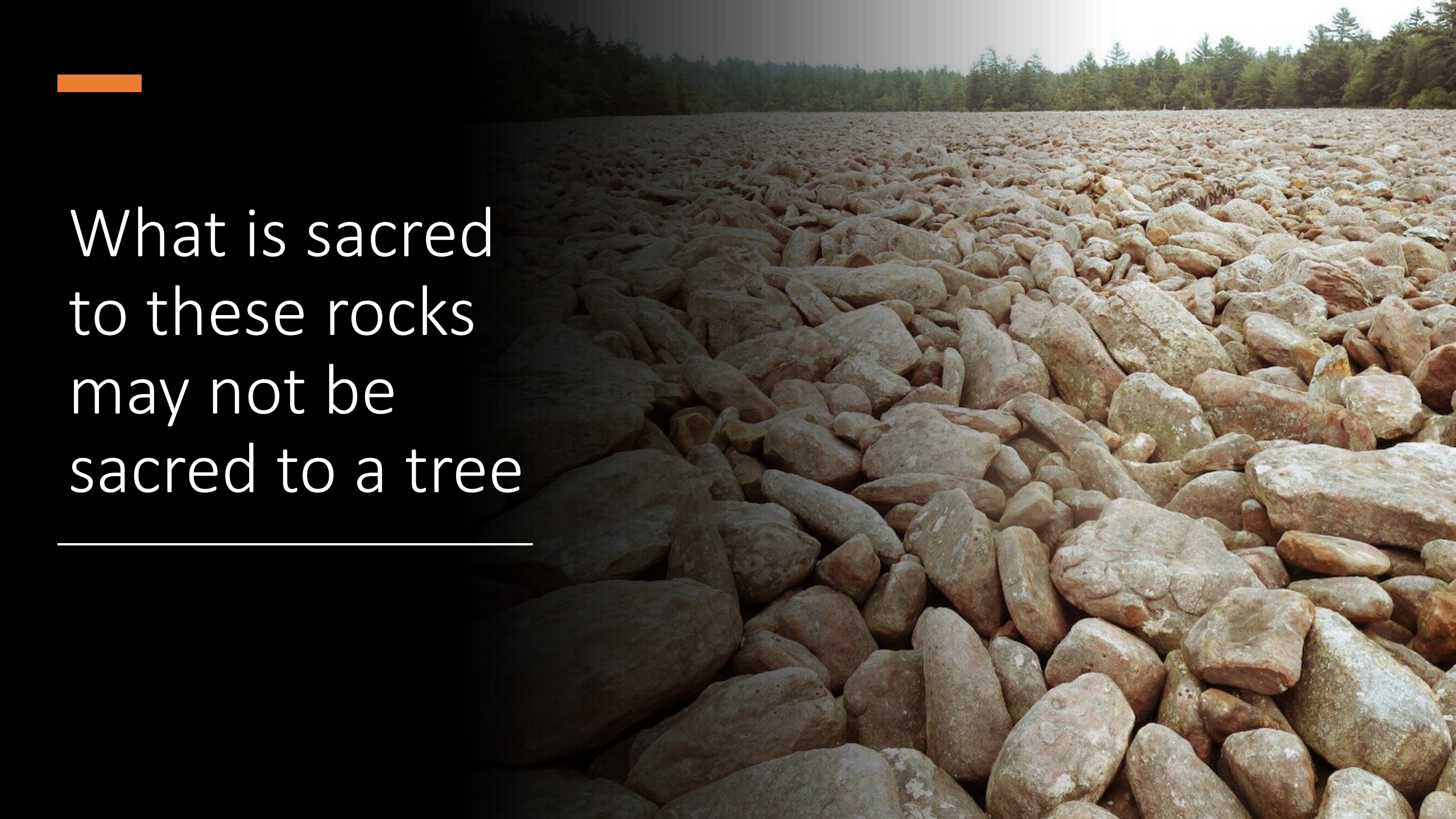


What is 'sacred' for one animal (where it finds wholeness) may not be 'sacred' for another.

Questions of habitat.

What is 'sacred' for one animal (where it finds wholeness) may not be 'sacred' for another.





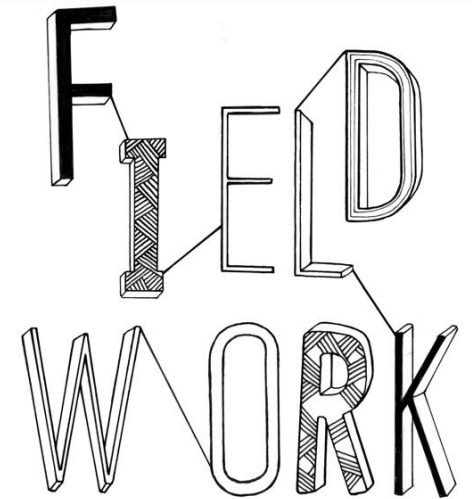
What is sacred
to these rocks
may not be
sacred to a tree

In conclusion: in seeking an understanding of Place

- By embracing Aristotle's notion of proper place one has a framework for considering the agency of a place – phenomenological gravity.

Additional questions, therefore, that one can ask which acknowledge place's agency are:

- How does the place maintain itself? – What are its homeostatic qualities?
 - Human co operation/landscape/climate?
- What are the 'bodies' in that place?
 - For any given species is it : transient or habitat?
- The activities which the place 'wants'
 - The ethics of the place – what is good for that place?
- For what creature, feature or activity is this place sacred? – Organic, inorganic, sky, also trade, home, university, etc.



Summary of questions about place

Questions from your perspective – the outsider



- What is **in** this place?
- What is **drawn** to this place?
- What is **alien** in this place?
- What is **destructive** to this place?
- What **supports** this place?

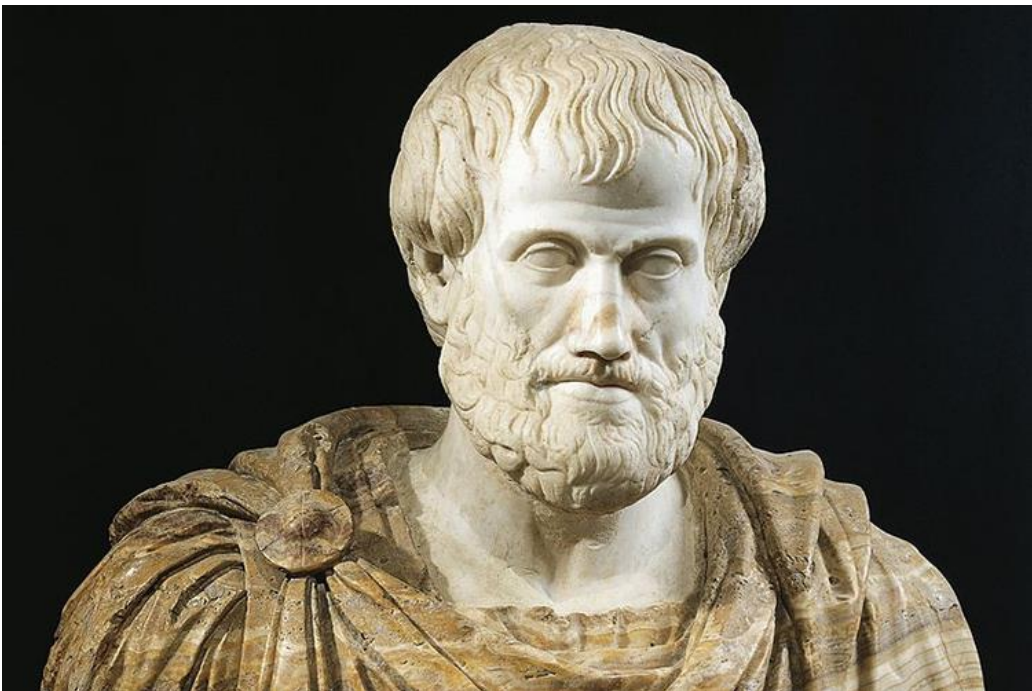
- What **happens** in this place?
- What is the nature of the **wholeness** of this place which the different bodies engage and contribute to?

Summary of questions about place



Questions from Place's perspective

- How can it maintain itself? – What are its homeostatic qualities?
 - Human co operation/ landscape/ climate?
 - What are the 'bodies' in that place?
 - For any given species is it : transient or habitat?
 - The activities which the place 'wants'
 - The ethics of the place – what is good for that place?
 - For what creature, feature or activity is this place sacred? – Organic, inorganic, sky. Activities: trade, home, study, work, travel, breeding.....



Aristotle (384-322BC)

When we consider Aristotle's philosophy of place then **place itself become the central defining feature.**

The cultural activities of humans and even the questions around sacredness become secondary extensions of the idea of *place*. Thus we can define Sacred Geography as:

Sacred Geography is the study of the activities of place. (not in place but of place!)

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<http://classics.mit.edu/Browse/browse-Aristotle.html>

Online archive of Aristotle's works.