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Place: Presence as Second-Personal Space

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Abstract

The concept of place is ultimately a matter of ethical significance—of where something fits in a nexus or structure of meaning. Often this meaning is quite personal, involving a sense of presence we associate with a place. This essay investigates this connection through a study of Wordsworth’s poem, “Tintern Abbey.” It argues that the notion of a presence-infused place is ultimately that of a second-personal space. Presence is a matter of second-personal openness. Therefore, when presence infuses place, it makes its space second-personal also.

Keywords: presence, place, second-personal, space.

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Introduction

What is ‘place’? If I “can’t quite place you,” then I can’t recall where you fit in some larger history or narrative, whether my personal history or an account of some other kind. If I remember, say, where we met, spent time together, or last saw each other, I will have placed you, indeed, in some *place*, a location that has significance in my and our lives: “Oh right, we met at Olga’s party.”

When people used to be said to know or not to know their place, what was being referred to was a location of an essentially social kind, a slot in a social hierarchy. This could be either the status location or the spatial locations to which that distinctive status was tied. When it was said that “a woman’s place is in the home” or “in the kitchen” that both referred to specific spatial locations and to the status location to which these were tied. It was “putting women in their place” both spatially and hierarchically. Of course, homes and kitchens are special places themselves, not by virtue of their spatial location alone, but because of how they fit in our lives, both individually and in common.

If we are trying to “place” a suspect at the scene of the crime, we are looking for some plausible account that might explain why she would have been there. If asked to list “public places,” we look to locations that have some public meaning, especially as “places to be,” like parks, plazas, squares, restaurants, and the like. Pick some random street crossing in Manhattan through which many regularly place, say Fifth Avenue and 47th St. Even if, on a given day, many more people go by that location than, say, Bryant Park, there is an obvious sense in which the latter is a public place and the former is not. Partly this has to do with the latter’s being a “destination,” partly its being a place where people spend time. But as with our other examples, what makes public places places is their significance in our lives.

So let’s assume that place has to do with significance and meaning. Although, as we have seen, places can be significant locations in a variety of different frameworks, I will be concerned with place in a more “natural” sense. My subject will be places in nature, although these may have artificial aspects—human “effects” including those with social aspects.

One example to which I will be returning is the area on “the banks of the Wye” River that Wordsworth writes about in his poem, “Lines Composed a Few Miles

above Tintern Abbey” (Wordsworth 2013).² It is, of course, the “river,” “hills,” “mountains,” and “woods,” with which Wordsworth is primarily taken. But farmers’ “hedge-rows,” “pastoral farms,” “orchard-tufts,” and a “hermit’s cave,” are no less significant parts of Wordsworth’s landscape.

A striking aspect of Wordsworth’s poem is what he describes as “a presence” he senses in the pastoral scene, from which he draws profound comfort and a “joy of elevated thoughts” (95-96). I want to explore what it might mean to sense presence in natural places. Wordsworth speaks not just of the natural or being in nature, but of “Nature,” as something that can be “loved and “worshipped”: “Nature never did betray the heart that loved her” and “I so long a worshipper of Nature, hither came” (122-123, 152-153). What, I want to consider, is the relation between these, between natural sites being places where it is possible to sense a kind of presence and their being appropriate objects of love and, even, worship?

I want to begin by describing an experience I once had while running in a forest. It was in what is known as the Duke Forest in North Carolina, hardly wilderness, or even really suitable for what is usually called “trail running,” but woods bounded by residential and rural farming areas, crisscrossed by paths that are intended primarily for walkers. For whatever reason, it was deserted that day, and I had already run several miles. So I had something of an endorphin buzz and was already feeling in tune with the environment. The path was covered with pine needles to soften my step, the air was cool (not the punishing heat and humidity of the Carolina summer), and the sweet smell of the pines, and the sway and brush of their needles, brought me out of myself and my usual “non-natural” thoughts and filled my senses and mind with my natural surroundings.

Out of nowhere, it seemed, a large running dog appeared. Not a wild creature, somebody’s Irish Setter, but without his owner, running on his own. He came right alongside me, and somehow we got into the same pace, matching each other’s stride. The dog wasn’t relating to me in ways dogs usually do with human beings, either barking, or looking for a petting hand, or anything. There seemed nothing he wanted *from* me or to express *to* me; he just seemed to want to run *with* me.

2. I am indebted to Molly Montgomery for a discussion of Wordsworth’s poem and the pronoun use in it for suggesting to me its usefulness in the present context.

And not, as it were, as a dog with a human, but just as one natural creature with another. At least, that was the way it felt to me. It was an extraordinary experience. Our running felt mutually energizing, drawing one another along in a way that felt like running in a pack of two. We went on for quite awhile, probably somewhere around a mile, and then, just as quickly as the dog had appeared, he took a different turn and was off.

Obviously, this was memorable. It must have been close to forty years ago, but I remember it almost as if it were yesterday. What I remember most was the sense of mutual attunement and mutual presence. I don't think I could express my feelings about it better than to say I felt "pure, unmitigated joy."

Presence as Second-Personal Space

Recall Wordsworth's identifying his sense of "a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts" (95-96). Later I will return to the connection between presence and joy in Wordsworth's poem, and reflect on the nature of joy and the capacity of natural presence to inspire it. First, however, I want to pause to consider what presence itself is, beginning with the idea of *someone's presence*. What is presence of this kind? And what it to be in it? ³

Reflection on the etymology and meaning of 'presence,' the verb 'present,' 'presentation,' and 'present' (the presented offering or gift) is illuminating, extending also to 'being present to' someone, 'being fully present' in interaction. The first meaning of 'presence' given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is: "The place or space in front of or around a person; the immediate vicinity of a person; the company or society of someone." And then it adds, "frequently with reference to ceremonial or formal attendance on a distinguished, especially royal, person."

The first thing to notice, then, is that this ties the concept of presence to that of a *person*. To be in someone's presence is to be brought somehow into awareness of and relation *to* him as a person, including awareness of his *personage*, if that is distinguished, like a king's. ⁴ In *The Second-Person Standpoint*, I argue that *person*

3. The rest of this section draws heavily from Darwall, 2013.

4. Cf. Erving Goffman on "co-presence" and "interaction rituals" in Goffman 2005: 1.

in this sense is a *second-personal concept* since it is understood within a network of concepts that involve the authority or standing to address (second-personally) legitimate claims and demands to others, along with the distinctive kind of reasons for acting they create (*second-personal reasons*) (Darwall, 2006). Locke says that “Person’ is a Forensick Term” (Locke, 1975: 346). To be a person is to be an *accountable* moral agent to whom actions can be *imputed*. I argue that this is also P. F. Strawson’s point in “Freedom and Resentment” when he distinguishes between the “inter-personal” (or, as I call it, “second-personal”) perspective from which we regard, and implicitly relate *to*, one another as persons, holding ourselves answerable to each other through what Strawson calls “reactive attitudes” like resentment and moral blame, on the one hand, and an “objective” stance through which we view beings, even persons, in ways that neither imply nor insinuate interpersonal relationship (Strawson, 1968; Darwall, 2006).

‘Presence’ is thus a second-personal notion. A *presentation* is something made by someone with requisite standing or presence to another in her presence, that is, *to* someone with the standing to receive it and in a way that involves a mutual acknowledgment of the respective standings of both parties. When the presentation is an offering of some kind, it constitutes a *present*. We say, “present,” when the roll is called, not just to register physical location, but in *response*. Someone is said to be more or less present as she is more or less a “second person” to one—actively relating, or open to it. And so on.

Thus, if ‘presence’ is the “space around a person,” it is not a merely physical space. It is a normative space of second-personal interaction, configured differently depending on the specific authorities or standings involved. And we are *present to* one another when we are open to relating to each other second personally in ways that acknowledge our second-personal standings.

In *The Second-Person Standpoint*, I argue that anyone who has the competence to be held, and to hold herself, accountable is a person with a basic second-personal authority that underlies *mutual accountability*. Morality, I argue, is the set of demands that persons legitimately make of one another and themselves, being therefore mutually accountable for compliance.

More recently, I have been arguing that there are other forms of reciprocal

relating, involving standings to relate in their respective ways, that do not involve mutual accountability, but that nonetheless presuppose second-personal mutual responsiveness. Unlike deontic reactive attitudes, these presuppose no authority to hold people to account, but rather standings to relate reciprocally in non-deontic ways. Attitudes like trust and love, I argue, are “second-personal attitudes of the heart” in that through them we make ourselves personally vulnerable to others, open our hearts to them, and invite them to open themselves (and their hearts) to us in return (Darwall forthcoming a, 2017). When we trust someone, we implicitly invite them to trust us in our trust. And the attitudes that lovers and friends bear to one another implicitly invite the other to reciprocate and give the other standing in a personal relationship.

Being in someone’s presence, therefore, means being in a space of second-personal relating to them, whether deontically or non-deontically. This does not necessarily mean that mutual relating is always yet accomplished. But it does mean that some kind of openness and vulnerability is involved or in the offing. Sensing presence is not just having evidence that another is nearby. Presence is always ultimately *to* someone or some being, and we sense it by opening ourselves in some way to the being who is present it to us, even if the other is not aware of that.

Presence and Heart in Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey”

Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” illustrates these connections between presence and second-personal space. The poet addresses the “sylvan Wye”: “thou wanderer thro’ the woods, How often has my spirit turned to thee!” (56-57). It is next to the Wye that the poet feels “Nature”’s “presence” (95, 124-5).

The poet describes the different relations he has had to the river and environs at different parts of his life. When he first “came among these hills” he “bounded” “like a roe . . . o’er the mountains” and along the river and streams. In these “boyish days” he enjoyed nature’s “coarser pleasures” and “glad animal movements.” To him, then, “mountain” and “wood” were “an appetite: a feeling and a love” (67-81).

“That time is past,” now, and the poet returns after “a long absence” (84, 24). During intervening years, “the fretful stir unprofitable, and the fever of the world” have frequently “hung upon the beatings” of the poet’s “heart” (53-55). For consolation, the poet “oft, in spirit,” has “turned to thee” (the “sylvan Wye”) (58).

“Oft, in lonely rooms, and ‘mid the din of town and cities,” and “hours of weariness,” the poet has “owed” to his remembered Wye, “sensations sweet, Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart” (26-29).

These consoling thoughts have given him “tranquil restoration.” But the poet also marks another “gift, of aspect more sublime” over the period that has passed since he was last by the Wye’s banks:

. . . that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened: --that serene and blessed mood (37-42).

Returning now, he has “learned to look on nature, not in the hour of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes the still sad music of humanity” (89-91). Wordsworth then describes his sense of a deep presence that, enables the poet to hold even the “still sad music” of human suffering because, as we might put it, that which is present holds him:

I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of thought,
And rolls through all things (94-102).

The “presence” “felt,” the “something” “sublime[ly]” “sense[d],” “dwells” both in natural places and “in the mind of man”. It is a “motion and a spirit” that impels all “thinking things” and “rolls through all things.” In this, the poet says, he “recognise[s]” “the anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, the guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul of all my moral being” (108-112).

Whereas in youth, Nature was the poet’s playground, it now provides him a consoling presence that enables acknowledgment of “the still sad music of

humanity” to which age inevitably exposes us while giving him a sublime sense of a “spirit” that is the source simultaneously of all natural and moral beauty. And this gives him joy.

Presence and Spirit/Heart

In this concluding section I want to reflect on the relation between presence and heart or spirit. We might begin with the two emotions that figure prominently in Wordsworth’s poem, joy and sadness. I would call both emotions of the heart or spirit. Joy gladdens our hearts and lifts up our spirits. And sadness can be heart-breaking and give us heartache, it turns out, not just metaphorically, but literally as well.⁵ We also speak of sadness as “bringing us down” and lowering our spirits.

Heart (in the nonliteral sense) and spirit are, of course, metaphors that are primarily delimited in relation to emotions like joy and sadness as the “place,” or perhaps places, where these emotions are felt. (Here again “place” is defined by meaning, in this case emotional significance in relation to the values to which emotions apparently respond.) Heart is perhaps associated more with our natural embodiment. When Wordsworth refers to the “sensations sweet” of his memories of the Wye during the absence after his playful youth, he says these are “felt in the blood, and felt along the heart.” It is then that they pass “even into [his] purer mind” (28-29). And the “presence” that on his return, “disturbs [him] with the joy of elevated thoughts” is of “a spirit, that impels all thinking things, all objects of thought” (95-101).

To feel sadness and joy fully, we must open ourselves, our hearts and minds, and thus be present to that which makes us sad or joyful. But as presence is always implicitly reciprocal or second personal, this means that we do not simply take these emotions into ourselves in response. In opening our hearts and minds to these emotions, we also become emotionally vulnerable and so, at least when undefended, open to those in whose presence we find ourselves. What it is for a

5. “When we feel heartache, for example, we are experiencing a blend of emotional stress and the stress-induced sensations in our chest—muscle tightness, increased heart rate, abnormal stomach activity and shortness of breath” (Emery and Coan 2010).

heart to be open is for it to be open *to another heart*. It is of the nature of heartfelt emotions like joy and sadness to seek expression to another with whom they can be shared. Joy and sadness naturally express themselves in song—a quintessential form of second-personal expression that is quite different from, for example, the sweaty palms or the churning stomach of anxiety or fear.

In nature, whether along the banks of the Wye or in the Duke Forest, we can, like Wordsworth, have a “sense sublime of something more deeply interfused” that “rolls through all things.” The presences (or presence) we sense in nature share a common mutual responsiveness that runs through all life. Our very life’s breath, our literal “inspiration,” is a basic form of natural interaction that ends only with death. Even in death, Wordsworth says, “when the breath of this corporeal frame and even the motion of our human blood almost suspended, we are laid asleep in body,” we become, he says, “a living soul: while with an eye quiet by the power of harmony, and the deep power of joy, we see into the life of things” (44-50).

Returning my mind now to the Duke Forest, I recall the profound sense of natural connection, presence, and mutual responsiveness in being part of a running “pack of two” with that Irish setter almost forty years ago. The joy I felt then was more like that of the young Wordsworth, the exuberance of our joint play. I run less these days, certainly not the “bound[ing]” “o’er mountains” of Wordsworth’s (or my) younger years. But neither am I quite ready to be “laid asleep.” Throughout it all I have been carried, like Wordsworth, by a joy born of memory of presence in natural paces, which makes it possible not to look away from “the sad music” of suffering, human and otherwise, but to hold it in the joyful sense of a deeper natural presence that holds us all.

Conclusion

I have been arguing that the idea of place is irreducibly ethical. It is not simply a geographical location, but a location in a structure or space of meaning and significance. Particularly meaningful places have a kind of presence, like that Wordsworth gives expression to in his famous poem about Tintern Abbey. With Wordsworth’s help, I have argued that presence is itself ultimately a kind of second-personal space, making presence-infused place second personal also.

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