

Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience

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Introduction

capacities, and needs, and on how culture emphasizes or distorts them. Three themes weave through the essay. They are:

(1) The biological facts. Human infants have only very crude notions of space and place. In time they acquire sophistication. What are the stages of learning? The human body lies prone, or it is upright. Upright it has top and bottom, front and back, right and left. How are these bodily postures, divisions, and values extrapolated onto circumambient space?

(2) The relations of space and place. In experience, the meaning of space often merges with that of place. "Space" is more abstract than "place." What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value. Architects talk about the spatial qualities of place; they can equally well speak of the locational (place) qualities of space. The ideas "space" and "place" require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.

(3) The range of experience or knowledge. Experience can be direct and intimate, or it can be indirect and conceptual, mediated by symbols. We know our home intimately; we can only know *about* our country if it is very large. A longtime resident of Minneapolis knows the city, a cabdriver learns to find his way in it, a geographer studies Minneapolis and knows the city conceptually. These are three kinds of experiencing. One person may know a place intimately as well as conceptually. He can articulate ideas but he has difficulty expressing what he knows through his senses of touch, taste, smell, hearing, and even vision.

People tend to suppress that which they cannot express. If an experience resists ready communication, a common response among activists ("doers") is to deem it private—even idiosyncratic—and hence unimportant. In the large literature on environmental quality, relatively few works attempt to understand how people feel about space and place, to take into account the different modes of experience (sensorimotor, tac-

tile, visual, conceptual), and to interpret space and place as images of complex—often ambivalent—feelings. Professional planners, with their urgent need to act, move too quickly to models and inventories. The layman accepts too readily from charismatic planners and propagandists the environmental slogans he may have picked up through the media; the rich experiential data on which these abstractions depend are easily forgotten. Yet it is possible to articulate subtle human experiences. Artists have tried—often with success. In works of literature as well as in humanistic psychology, philosophy, anthropology and geography, intricate worlds of human experience are recorded.

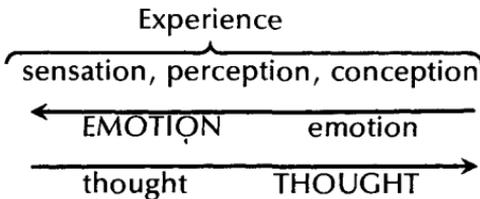
This book draws attention to questions that humanists have posed with regard to space and place.³ It attempts to systematize humanistic insights, to display them in conceptual frames (here organized as chapters) so that their importance is evident to us not only as thoughtful people curious to know more about our own nature—our potential for experiencing—but also as tenants of the earth practically concerned with the design of a more human habitat. The approach is descriptive, aiming more often to suggest than to conclude. In an area of study where so much is tentative, perhaps each statement should end with a question mark or be accompanied by qualifying clauses. The reader is asked to supply them. An exploratory work such as *this* should have the virtue of clarity even if this calls for the sacrifice of scholarly detail and qualification.

A key term in the book is “experience.” What is the nature of experience and of the experiential perspective?

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Experiential Perspective

Experience is a cover-all term for the various modes through which a person knows and constructs a reality. These modes range from the more direct and passive senses of smell, taste, and touch, to active visual perception and the indirect mode of symbolization.¹



Emotion tints all human experience, including the high flights of thought. Mathematicians, for example, claim that the design of their theorems is guided by aesthetic criteria— notions of elegance and simplicity that answer a human need. Thought tints all human experience, including the basic sensations of heat and cold, pleasure and pain. Sensation is quickly qualified by thought as one of a special kind. Heat is suffocating or prickly; pain is sharp or dull, an irritating tease or a brutal force.

Experiential Perspective

Experience is directed to the external world. Seeing and thinking clearly reach out beyond the self. Feeling is more ambiguous. As Paul Ricoeur put it, "Feeling is . . . without doubt intentional: it is a feeling of 'something'—the lovable, the hateful, [for instance]. But it is a very strange intentionality which on the one hand designates qualities felt *on* things, *on* persons, *on* the world, and on the other hand manifests and reveals the way in which the self is inwardly affected." In feeling "an intention and an affection coincide in the same experience."²

Experience has a connotation of passivity; the word suggests what a person has undergone or suffered. An experienced man or woman is one to whom much has happened. Yet we do not speak of the plant's experiences, and even of the lower animals the word "experience" seems inappropriate. The young pup, however, is contrasted with the experienced mastiff; and human beings are mature or immature depending on whether they have benefited from events. Experience thus implies the ability to learn from what one has undergone.³ To experience is to learn; it means acting on the given and creating out of the given. The given cannot be known in itself. What can be known is a reality that is a construct of experience, a creation of feeling and thought. As Susanne Langer put it: "The world of physics is essentially the real world construed by mathematical abstractions, and the world of sense is the real world construed by the abstractions which the sense organs immediately furnish."⁴

Experience is the overcoming of perils. The word "experience" shares a common root (*per*) with "experiment," "expert," and "perilous."⁵ To experience in the active sense requires that one venture forth into the unfamiliar and experiment with the elusive and the uncertain. To become an expert one must dare to confront the perils of the new. Why should one so dare? A human individual is driven. He is passionate, and passion is a token of mental force. The emotional repertoire of a clam is very restricted compared with that of a puppy; and the affective life of the chimpanzee seems almost as varied and intense as that of a human being. A human infant is distin-

guished from other mammalian young both by his helplessness and by his fearsome tantrums. The infant's emotional range, from smile to tantrum, hints at his potential intellectual reach.

Experience is compounded of feeling and thought. Human feeling is not a succession of discrete sensations; rather memory and anticipation are able to wield sensory impacts into a shifting stream of experience so that we may speak of a life of feeling as we do of a life of thought. It is a common tendency to regard feeling and thought as opposed, the one registering subjective states, the other reporting on objective reality. In fact, they lie near the two ends of an experiential continuum, and both are ways of knowing.

To see and to think are closely related processes. In English, "I see" means "I understand." Seeing, it has long been recognized, is not the simple recording of light stimuli; it is a selective and creative process in which environmental stimuli are organized into flowing structures that provide signs meaningful to the purposive organism. Are the senses of smell and touch informed by mentality? We tend to slight the cognitive power of these senses. Yet the French verb "savoir" (to know) is closely related to the English "savour." Taste, smell, and touch are capable of exquisite refinement. They discriminate among the wealth of sensations and articulate gustatory, olfactory, and textural worlds.

The structuring of worlds calls for intelligence. Like the intellectual acts of seeing and hearing, the senses of smell and touch can be improved with practice so as to discern significant worlds. Human adults can develop extraordinary sensitivity to a wide range of flower fragrances.⁶ Although the human nose is far less acute than the canine nose in detecting certain odors of low intensity, people may be responsive to a broader range of odors than dogs are. Dogs and young children do not appreciate flower fragrances in the way human adults do. Young children's favorite odors are those of fruits rather than flowers.⁷ Fruits are good to eat, so preference for them is understandable. But what is the survival value of sensitivity to the chemical oils wafted by flowers? No clear biological purpose is served by this sensitivity. It would seem that our nose, no less