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# Putting space in place: philosophical topography and relational geography

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**Abstract.** Space is a concept that is central to geographical thinking. Yet, relatively little attention has been given to exploration of the concept of space as such, and this is so outside of geography no less than within it. Beginning with an examination of the ‘relational’ view of space that now seems dominant in geography as well as many other areas of the social sciences (and which is often presented as an elucidation of space itself), this paper explores the concept of space as it stands in connection with time and place, making particular use of the notions of boundedness, extendedness, and emergence while also shedding light on the idea of relationality. The aim is to outline a different mode of theorizing space than is to be found in much of contemporary geography and social theory—one that also draws geographical thinking into the domain of ‘philosophical topography’.

**Keywords:** boundary, boundedness, concepts, emergence, extendedness, geography, ontology, philosophy, place, relationality, space, time, topography, topology, void

## 1 Introduction: space and geography

Although a discipline often characterized as essentially spatial in its orientation, geography seems only very seldom to have devoted significant attention to exploring the concept of space itself. Indeed, the shift in geographical thinking over the last fifty years or so towards a mode of thinking that takes space as bound up with social and political process actually serves to reinforce, rather than rectify, the neglect of space within geographical theorizing. A similar point could also be made with respect to many of the theorists on whom geography draws. Both Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre, for instance, while they emphasize the inextricability of the spatial and the sociopolitical, nevertheless rely upon a notion of space that remains essentially unarticulated and largely unexplored. Just what the phenomenon of space might be that is at issue in the various spatialities and spatializations that appear in their work thus remains obscure (in spite of Lefebvre’s own claims)—and it is no less so in most of the other thinkers who have been taken up within recent geographic discourse or in the geographical appropriations of their thought. Thus from Gilles Deleuze through to Peter Sloterdijk spatial ideas and images are constantly in play, and yet what is at issue in the very idea of space and the spatial is almost never directly addressed.

In this latter respect any criticism of geographical theory for its relative neglect of space cannot be restricted to geography alone. With some notable exceptions, very few thinkers, no matter what the discipline, have given serious attention to the *phenomenon* of space, any more than to the phenomena of time and of place, but have tended instead to deal with various *forms* or *modes* of space—to *spatialities* rather than to space as such. Inasmuch as space is a concept that is indeed central to geographical thinking, so the need to attend to the concept of space is surely more pressing for geographically oriented thinkers than for those working in other domains. Yet space must be a fundamental concept in almost every domain, and so one might argue that geographical reflection upon space, regardless of how adequately the concept of space has previously been theorized within geography, ought to be significant in a way that

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extends far beyond geography alone. Indeed, if the supposed turn to space that is often cited as a central feature of contemporary social theory is not to be viewed as merely a shift in rhetorical usage, then it is imperative that the concept of space be more carefully and critically examined; and for that to occur it seems that geography must itself become more critically reflective about what is actually at issue in the concepts of space and spatiality.

My aim in the discussion that follows is to draw the concept of space as it appears within geography, in particular, into the sphere of what I term ‘philosophical topography’ (see Malpas, 1999). This is a mode of thinking that reverses much of the standard philosophical thinking in regard to space and place and that, while it gives a central role to the notion of space, as well as to time, also understands space as itself given from within the structure of place (*topos*). Inasmuch as the focus is indeed on place here, so philosophical ‘topography’ is another name for what can also be understood as a form of philosophical ‘topology’ (see Malpas, 2006, pages 35–36) and implies no opposition of the one to the other [in distinction from the way these terms appear in, for example, Amin (2002)]. In bringing space into connection with place in this way, my purpose will be to direct closer attention onto the concepts at issue with the aim of better understanding their nature and interconnection. My discussion will proceed in two main parts. In the first part I will examine the character of the ‘relational’ view of space that now seems to be dominant within geography as well as many other disciplines—I focus on this particular view of space partly because of its dominance but also because it does indeed purport to offer an account of *space* rather than simply taking the concept for granted. In the second part, and following on from some basic methodological considerations, I will aim to look again at what is at issue in the idea and the phenomenon of space, using the concepts of boundedness and extendedness, and examining the way these concepts play out in relation to other concepts, including that of relationality. My aim will be to sketch a different mode of theorizing space—perhaps a simpler, but also more basic and perspicuous mode—than is to be found in much of contemporary geography and social theory. In so doing I hope to put space back into relation to place (and place to space) in a way that also retains the distinction between them. Rather than being an immediate instance of geographical theory in its own right, what will result is a conceptual framework that may help to guide modes of spatial and topographic analysis, including more applied modes as these are developed within geography. Geographers may regard such conceptual reflection as too far removed from the immediate concerns of geography itself, and yet geography remains dependent upon such reflection as well as upon the concepts at issue in it. It may well be that abstract conceptual considerations do not go down well in contemporary geographical circles, but such considerations cannot be avoided, and to attempt to do so can lead only to conceptual blindness and intellectual confusion.

## **2 Proliferation, relationality, and construction**

There are many geographers who would argue, contrary to my claims above, that a critical examination of space is precisely what has been occurring within geography over the last twenty years or so. Doreen Massey, in particular, has drawn attention to the variety of meanings attached to notions of space and the spatial, and yet as this variety of meanings is seldom made the object of direct discussion, so it conceals, she writes, “a debate which never surfaces; and it never surfaces because everyone assumes we already know what these terms mean” (1994, page 250; see also Smith and Katz, 1993, pages 67–83). It seems, then, as if my own qualms about the inadequate theorization of space within geography are actually shared by geographers themselves.

Certainly, Massey is not alone in the concerns she expresses, and her work can be seen as part of a larger body of literature concerned to address questions concerning the nature of space and spatial discourse.

Partly because of the way she focuses on the lack of attention to the concept of space as it operates within contemporary geographical theory, Massey will be an important focus for my discussion here. Another reason for taking Massey to be significant, however, is that her own view of space and spatiality can be taken as representative of (and is certainly an important influence on) what is now the dominant view of space and spatiality within geography and many related disciplines—a view of space and spatiality as essentially *relational*. Moreover, far from contributing to a clearer analysis of space, this relational conception has itself contributed to a further proliferation of spatial tropes and figures that often serve further to obscure the concepts at issue. Thus, within much contemporary literature, in geography and beyond, space appears as a swirl of flows, networks, and trajectories, as a chaotic ordering that locates and dislocates, and as an effect of social process that is itself spatially dispersed and distributed.

Writing with direct reference to Massey's work, as well as his own, Ash Amin comments on the way the re-thought and re-imagined spatialities at issue here give rise to new conceptions of places, cities, and regions in a way that highlights, if unintentionally perhaps, this conceptual and figurative proliferation:

“they are recast as nodes that gather flow and juxtapose diversity, as places of overlapping—but not necessarily locally connected—relational networks, as perforated entities with connections that stretch far back in time and space ... as spatial formations of continuously changing composition, character and reach ... they are made through the spatiality of flow, juxtaposition, porosity and relational connectivity ... summoned up as temporary placements of ever moving material and immanent geographies, as ‘hauntings’ of things that have moved on but left their mark ... as situated moments in distanced networks, as contoured products of the networks that cross a given place” (2004, page 34).

The rhetorical and imaginative frameworks that result are intoxicating in the excitement and dynamism that they evoke, but they also tend to resist clear or precise analysis just because of the proliferation of terms, ideas, and images on which they draw. Indeed, one suspects that this is partly what enables such approaches to gain currency—it is as much their rhetorical and imaginative abundance that is attractive as any genuinely new insights to which they give rise. In Massey's case the shift towards this pluralized conception of space (which is more controlled in her own work than in that of Amin) occurs as an almost inevitable consequence of the way in which the relational view of space she advances is also intended to undercut a range of dichotomies and distinctions. Connected with this, especially in her more recent work, is an explicit emphasis on the project of a re-imagining of space—on exploring the possibility of thinking space ‘differently’ (Massey, 2005, pages 1–8). Such an emphasis suggests that what interests Massey is less the understanding of *space* than the social or political *consequences* of any such understanding. One might thus argue that what Massey offers is not a more adequate theorization of space, but instead a theorization of spatial rhetoric and of spatial imagining as this forms the core of a spatial politics.

On the face of it, Massey retains a commitment to the concept of place in her work (and has sometimes been criticized for doing so). The way place actually appears, however, is almost entirely in terms of a ‘meeting’ of relational flows or trajectories (see Massey, 2005, page 200, number 17) or as “articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings” (Massey, 1994, page 154)—ideas also reflected in Amin's talk of places, cities, and regions as “nodes that gather flow” or as “situated moments”.

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The images and ideas that can be seen to be at work, here, in both Massey and Amin, demonstrate the persistent influence (sometimes contrary to Massey's own claims) of a certain form of diagrammatic, or even cartographic, envisioning of relational organization and configuration. Relations are themselves understood as like lines drawn on a surface, and it is this that surely lies behind Amin's (2002) characterization of his position (in a way quite different from my own usage) as topological. It is one thing to emphasize the character of places as always interconnected with other places (such interconnection, evident in both the embeddedness of places in other places as well as the implication of places with other places through their mutual locatedness), but it is quite another thing to treat places as primarily points of linear intersection or relational convergence. In this respect, Massey's (2005) attempt to preserve a sense of place actually depends not on the defense of a *sui generis* concept of place but on the collapsing of the distinction between place and space: place becomes simply a moment (a meeting point) in space—a moment constituted through spatial flow and movement.

A key element in this spatial–relational conception of place is the rejection of the idea of place as essentially aligned with a concept of boundary. Referring to what she calls the 'reactionary' sense of place, Massey (2005) argues that "a particular problem with this conception of place is that it seems to require the drawing of boundaries" (page 152) on the grounds that such bounding "precisely distinguishes between an inside and an outside ... [and] can so easily be yet another way of constructing a counterposition between 'us' and 'them'" (page 152). Thus, Tim Cresswell writes that for Massey "places are not about boundaries"—although he also claims that this is true for most geographers anyway (2004, pages 73–74). The suspicion of the idea of boundary that appears in Massey also appears as a key point in the work of other relationally oriented geographers. Nigel Thrift, for instance, asserts simply that "there is no such thing as a boundary" (2006, pages 139–146), and Dagmar Reichert (1992) extends this claim to argue for a complete abandonment of the idea of the boundary in all its variations—for the abandonment of the distinction, the definition, the dividing line. The suspicion, if not outright abandonment, of the idea of boundary is something to which I shall return in my discussion below, but for the moment what matters is its centrality to the particular form of relationalism to which Massey and others are committed—a relationalism that takes the form of a heady swirl of spatial trajectories and flows, in which boundaries, if they remain at all, take on a highly uncertain status, and in which even the demarcation between concepts seems in danger of dissolution.

While it is certainly true that not all geographers have become converts to it, 'relationalism' in geography is nevertheless extremely widespread, if not dominant, across the discipline, and it is certainly not restricted to the work of such as Massey. Thus, for all that their approaches differ in many other respects, a 'relational' concept of space is also a key element in, for instance, the work of David Harvey (eg, 1973; 1996) and, beyond geography, that of Manuel Castells (eg, 1989). Yet the rise of such relationalism—as Massey's work, in particular, seems to show—has not resulted in any significant clarification of the concepts of space and spatiality, but perhaps the very opposite (in spite of Massey's own claims concerning the need for such clarification). Other writers have noted the problematic nature of spatial theorizing in geography as that might be taken to include even Massey's work. In particular, Bob Jessop, Neil Brenner, and Martin Jones argue that contemporary discourse in relation to space, both within geography and more generally, has been characterized by "an unreflexive 'churning' of spatial turns, leading to short intellectual product cycles for key socio-spatial concepts, limiting opportunities for learning through theoretical debate, empirical analysis, and critical evaluation of such concepts" (Jessop et al, 2008, pages 389–401).

In addition, they point to a number of limitations in what they refer to as the ‘one-dimensional’ approaches to spatial thinking (which they take as encompassing relational or, as they put it, topological approaches) ranging from forms of “theoretical amnesia” and the “overextension of concepts” to “an appeal to loosely defined metaphors over rigorously demarcated research strategies” (page 389). Arguing that what is needed here is much greater care and rigour in spatial analysis, Jessop and his coauthors propose the deployment of what they refer to as a ‘heuristic framework’ that allows for a plurality of spatial formations and concepts—centering on those of territory, place, scale, and network (the ‘TPSN framework’)—but also enables those formations and concepts to be systematically connected and defined.

My own response to the difficulties evident here is a little different. While one may develop frameworks to organize forms of spatial description and analysis, those frameworks will be, at best, *only* heuristic, whereas what is needed is a more careful analysis of the ontological underpinnings of the very concepts at issue. This is evident when one asks why one should take the terms ‘territory’, ‘place’, ‘scale’, and ‘network’ as the key analytic terms to be employed. It turns out not that these terms represent basic elements in spatial analysis but rather that they happen to match already existing modes of theoretical description and explication. This is entirely in keeping with the acknowledged aim of the proposal that Jessop and his coauthors set forth to provide a ‘multidimensional’ rather than one-dimensional system of spatial theorizing. They do so by combined, demarcating, and so systematizing the various spatial figures already present in the literature. Yet this leaves out of account the question as to the real ground on which the spatial figures being deployed actually rest and so the basis on which their deployment might be justified.

An underlying problem in much geographic discussion of space is the lack of attention to the very questions concerning the ground or justification of spatial concepts that emerge here—questions that, while they can be given a methodological construal, are nevertheless fundamentally *ontological* in character. Heuristic or stipulative approaches do not provide an answer to such questions but provide merely a means whereby they can be set temporarily to one side. What results is a certain ordering of terms and vocabularies, but an ordering that has no necessary relation to the underlying phenomena that might be at issue.

I take ontology as I use it here to have two meanings. In one sense ontology, understood as a singular substantive noun (hence ‘*an* ontology’), refers to the set of basic elements that are presupposed by a particular vocabulary, theory, or descriptive framework. In this sense one might refer to the ontology that is presupposed by a relational view of space (although part of the problem with such views is that the ontology to which they are committed remains unclear). In a second sense ontology, understood as a generalized activity (and so lacking the article), refers to a mode of analysis that aims at exhibiting the underlying presuppositions—not of some particular vocabulary, theory, or descriptive framework but of the very possibility of meaning, knowledge, or appearance. Insofar as the nature of ontological inquiry is such that it proceeds by attending to concepts (which does not mean that it attends to *only* concepts), so one way of understanding ontology is as the inquiry into what is most fundamental. Understood in this second sense, ontology is not simply to be identified with the attempt to find a single unique description for all possible phenomena that is often exemplified in metaphysics. To ask after what it is that grounds the possibility of multiplicity is not to assume that multiplicity can thereby be reduced to singularity. Thus, while some forms of ontology are reductionist, there is no necessity for ontology to proceed in that way, and there are good reasons to suppose that it cannot and should not proceed in such a fashion. The need to do justice to the ordinary appearances

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of things ('to save the phenomena') is no less important in ontological inquiry than anywhere else. In this respect, my characterization of ontology is closer to the Kantian critical enterprise or to phenomenology than to many forms of contemporary metaphysics (which is not to say that the latter are not instances of ontological inquiry but only that, on this account, they are problematically so).

Social science, including geography, retains its own ontological commitments in both the senses distinguished above. Thus, as I noted earlier, there is already *an ontology*, even though it may be unclear, that is presupposed by contemporary relational conceptions of space within geography. In addition, as soon as one attempts to address more general questions concerning the nature and limits of social science, one is thereby already engaged not merely in an epistemological inquiry (although it is that) but also in a form of ontology (epistemology is just the ontology of knowledge). It is only very seldom, however, that ontology or ontological considerations are directly addressed within geographic discussions, and when they are addressed they are often treated in a way that is relatively insensitive to the philosophical complexities at issue. Even the so-called 'ontological turn' in geography that has recently been a focus for discussion (see Escobar, 2007) actually remains within the frame of the first sense of ontology identified here, constituting a turn not *to ontology* as such nor to a more fundamental mode of ontological inquiry but merely a shift *in the ontologies* to which geographers might be thought to be committed. That this is indeed viewed as an ontological turn is itself an indication of how little explicit attention has been given to ontology within geography. While there are exceptions, social scientific and geographical thinking has tended to be largely dismissive of ontology. This is partly because ontological inquiry is sometimes seen as associated with various supposedly discredited forms of metaphysics and partly because it is also often viewed as having universalist pretensions that are no longer theoretically defensible or politically acceptable. In this latter respect political imperatives have generally been taken to have precedence over ontological concerns, and not only that but the commitment to political engagement has itself led to a turn away from any explicit concern with ontology. Nowhere is this clearer than in the almost universal acceptance within contemporary social scientific and geographic thinking of various forms of social constructionism.

Although there are a number of questions raised by social constructionist approaches that are deserving of much closer critical attention than they usually receive, what is most significant for the present discussion is the way in which such approaches allow forms of social scientific discourse to operate without any need explicitly to address issues of underlying ontology. The socially constructed character of phenomena is taken already to settle the ontological question. Thus freed up, social scientific discourse can concentrate its focus on the ways in which social construction actually takes place (which can be treated purely empirically) and on the possibility of alternative modes of such construction, thereby allowing for the possibility of an explicitly progressive form of political discourse. Yet this means that there is already a heavy investment in *not* allowing questions of underlying ontology to emerge as questions at all. To do so would bring with it a possible source of constraint that would be independent of the political commitments on which existing discourse is already largely predicated. The situation is made worse by the fact that, precisely because of its largely uncritical acceptance, the ontological commitments that social constructionism implies or in which it may be said to consist are seldom if ever made explicit. Social constructionism thus operates to cut social scientific discourse away from any genuine questions of ontology rather than providing an answer to such questions.

If those questions are to be readdressed, then what is needed, however, is a more radical rethinking of some of the basic presuppositions that underpin current geographical thinking. So let me take a step back—a step back toward a set of basic philosophical, conceptual, and ontological considerations; a step back to ask again what is at issue in the concept of space; a step back to ask after the very ‘place’ of space.

### 3 Spatial language and spatial concepts

The first issue that one encounters in beginning to explore the concept of space, place, or any other concept concerns *language*. This is not because language somehow determines everything else, but is rather a simple consequence of the fact that thinking *requires* language (which does not mean that it requires *verbalization*). In inquiring into the concept of space, part of what I aim to do is to ask after the ‘meaning’ of space, although this should be understood less as a matter of assigning a reductive definition to the term than of trying to explore the conceptual constellation within which it operates. In particular, this means trying to clarify the way ‘space’ relates to other terms, including ‘place’. The approach adopted by Jessop and his coauthors tries to do this in a largely stipulative fashion—to impose a set of distinctions onto the terms and concepts at issue. My approach is to move in the other direction: to look to the distinctions already presupposed by the concepts themselves. The focus on concepts that is evident here, and has been evident throughout much of my discussion so far, also cannot be avoided or evaded: concepts are the very forms of thinking. Moreover, the generality that attaches to concepts is not indicative of some dangerous hegemonic tendency that ignores the partialities of thought (its temporal and spatial situatedness), but simply reflects what thinking itself is.

Our inquiries must thus be attentive to concepts, as well as to language, but we need to be cautious about what we take the relevant concepts to be. It should not be assumed that the concept of space implies first and foremost a concept of *physical* space (we should also be wary of what the term ‘physical’ might mean) or, to put the point slightly differently, that physical space is what space is when understood *literally*, and that all other senses are secondary to these or are *figurative* or *metaphorical*. This is not because the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical cannot be made but because the distinction cannot be made in any *absolute* fashion. What counts as metaphorical depends on what we take to be literal, but what we take to be literal depends on what we take to be the relevant interpretive context (and there is no interpretation, or any meaning, outside of such a context). Much of the discussion of space within geography, and in other areas of the social sciences and humanities, tends to leave the question of literality and metaphoricity almost entirely out of account. This means that it often remains ambiguous, not only as to how the concept of space is being deployed but also what it is to which the concept of space is taken to refer. Thus there is an ambiguity that attaches to the very subject matter of the discussion. When it comes to contemporary geographic relationalism, the very proliferation of spatial ideas and images, along with the rejection of certain key distinctions, makes it difficult to identify what is metaphorical and what is not, to determine the phenomena that are at issue, or to clarify the ontological commitments that are presupposed.

So what, then, of space—and of place? I noted above that, whether or not we hold to a distinction between these terms, the fact that they are so often used together means that neither can be inquired into independently of the other (nor can they be inquired into independently of time). The terms ‘space’ and ‘place’ appear as distinct terms in English, however, and they are usually taken to carry different, if overlapping, sets of meanings (as can be seen by comparing almost any dictionary entry for the two terms). It is often said that the distinction between the English terms ‘space’ and ‘place’

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is not always replicated in other languages—notably, for instance, in French, where *espace* and *lieu* cannot be simply equated with space and place, respectively. Yet this is already to make the problematic assumption that the distinction between the English terms is itself clear and familiar—and while a glance at the dictionary will confirm the fact that space and place are used differently in English, it should also confirm that the nature of the difference is indeed not at all straightforward. Place and space are thus distinct in some usages and in others apparently the same.

In fact, the relation between these terms, and the way similar terms operate in other languages, suggests that what is at issue is not a neat distinction at all but a set of concepts closely bound together—concepts that weave in and out of one another as different senses become more important at one time than at another and as the relations between those senses shift. This is not to say that distinctions cannot be made but that some philosophical and conceptual work is required in order to do that. What becomes evident when that work is done is not that there is nothing that corresponds to the distinction that seems to be at issue in the distinction between space and place but rather that three key concepts are involved here: concepts that I will refer to as *boundedness*, *openness*, and *emergence*. These concepts all turn out to be fundamental to any adequate thinking of space and place—as well as of time—and always remain presupposed even by those modes of thinking that seek to escape them.

Simply in order to begin to speak about the conceptual constellation in which space and place are implicated, one needs to be able to make use of terms; and since those terms already carry a linguistic usage with them, so they already tend towards certain ways of speaking and thinking. It is not a matter of relinquishing the terms that are already involved here, but of trying to explore what is at issue without being misled by whatever assumptions might already be in play. One thing that seems clear is that, whatever other notions might be involved, there are at least two basic concepts at issue in talk of space and place that can be taken to correspond, very roughly, to the respective English terms. These two concepts are to some extent captured in a distinction made by Albert Einstein between what he presents as two concepts of space (in Jammer, 1993, page xv). Imagine a container—say a box containing cherries (the example is Einstein's). On the one hand one can think of space as that which holds the cherries within it, in which case space is like the box itself; and one can, as it were, think the cherries away to be left just with the space *as a container*. On the other hand, one can think of space as just that open expanse, the extension, within the box that is partially occupied by the cherries—in that case, one thinks away the box to be left just with space *as that which is contained* (the cherries might themselves be seen as modes of that space, as modes of extension, and this indicates an ambiguity in the notion of *extension*, between void and body, that itself plays a role in the development of modern ideas of space). This distinction between space as container and space as contained correlates with a distinction in Greek thought between *topos* and *chora*, on the one hand, and *kenon* on the other. *Topos* and *chora* both rely on a notion of a certain boundedness that also allows for an openness or extendedness within it—in Aristotle's *Physics* *topos* is the innermost boundary of a containing body (Hussey, 1983, pages 28, 212a2–6), while in Plato *chora* is the womb or matrix out of which things come into being (Cornford, 1937, pages 177–180). *Kenon* is identified with empty extendedness or void—in the atomism of Leucippus and Democritus the cosmos is made up of the completely full, those indivisible particles of being called atoms, and the completely empty, the void (see Casey, 1997, pages 80–81).

Although the English term 'space' does not derive etymologically from any of these earlier Greek terms (it comes from the Greek *stadion*, a unit of measurement, and *spadion*, a racecourse, via the Latin *spatium*), our contemporary understanding of

space is indeed related to, and partly derived from, these concepts. *Topos* and *chora* are variously translated from the Greek into English as either place or space (neither can be clearly correlated with the one or the other), and each can be argued to have a role in certain aspects of the development of spatial thinking—in mathematics and geometry, as well as in geography. Yet it is *kenon* that plays the decisive role in the rise of the modern concept of space, since it is *kenon* that is the primary source for the idea of space as potentially infinite extension (see Casey, 1997, page 83; see also Grant, 1981). The idea of extendedness is not absent from the notions of *topos* and *chora*—in both cases *enclosing around* is also a *making room for* and, similarly, *making room for* is also an *enclosing around*—but it is precisely a notion of extendedness correlative with boundedness. It is this correlation that becomes increasingly less important in modern thinking, and as a consequence a notion of space comes to dominate that seems more closely aligned with the idea of *kenon* than either *topos* or *chora*.

One can view the history of Western thinking about space as one in which there is, over time, a reversal of priority between the two conceptions of bounded and pure extendedness that are at issue here. So we move from a Greek conception—at least as far as Plato and Aristotle are concerned, in which what comes first is the notion of a boundedness that establishes an openness or extendedness within it (a notion inadequate thought in terms of mere ‘containment’)—to a modern conception, adumbrated amongst the atomists, in which what is primary is the idea of an extendedness that no longer stands in relation to any notion of boundedness at all (or if boundedness does appear, it is as arbitrary or conventional). Even the development of the field concept of space and time to which Einstein refers (captured in the idea of a single space–time) can be seen to remain within this framework, since it essentially constitutes a development of the idea of space as pure extension. The difference between a Newtonian and an Einsteinian conception of space thus lies in the manner in which extension is understood and not in any shift away from the primacy of extension. In this respect, and contrary to a commonly held view according to which the field theory of space–time involves an understanding of the inextricability of space *with time* (eg, Massey, 1994, page 261), one might better say that the field theory collapses time *into space*, at least inasmuch as time becomes another mode of extension.

Although neither can be reduced to or identified with modern notions of space or extendedness alone, *topos* and *chora* nevertheless already carry within them elements that allow for the development of notions of space as pure extendedness and for conceptions of place that emphasise its boundedness. It is thus that the same history can be read, by Einstein and Max Jammer (Jammer, 1993) as a history *of space*, by Edward Casey (1997), in his *The Fate of Place*, as a history *of place*, and by both as a history in which place gives way to space. Yet, given the way in which boundedness is itself tied to openness (that is, to a form of extendedness), so it would also be a mistake to view the shift here as one that moves simply from a notion of the bounded to a notion of the extended. Instead, the shift is from a concept of bounded openness to a concept of openness or extension thought apart from bound. If we are indeed to use the concepts of place and space to describe this shift, and there is good reason for doing so, then the shift is one in which the development of the concept of space as distinct from place is actually the development of a concept of pure extendedness, which comes to be identified with space, that is abstracted from out of the bounded openness of place.

The histories that are offered by Einstein and Jammer, and by Casey, differ in that the first thematizes that history as the rise of space (and the refinement of the concept of space) and the other as the demise of place. Yet there is another difference between these two readings: while there is no explicit question of literal versus metaphorical

uses here, Einstein and Jammer nevertheless unquestioningly assume that what is at issue here is a concept of *physical theory*, while for Casey both of these notions are understood much more broadly and specifically *not* as concepts of physical theory alone. The shift in the understanding of space and place evident in Einstein and Jammer can thus be seen to involve a shift in the understanding of what is at stake in the discussion of space and place—and in the primacy given to physical theory (and to natural science more generally)—in the understanding of the world and our place within it. As space comes to dominate over place—pure extension over bounded openness—so also does a purely *physicalist* (which should not be identified with a literalist) understanding take priority over others. The shift that occurs in the understanding of the relation between the ideas of bounded openness and of pure extendedness is closely related to the ways of thinking about space that are evident in parts of contemporary geographical thinking. Negativity towards the idea of boundary in the work of such as Massey and others can be seen as entirely within the tradition that prioritizes the idea of pure extendedness and that, in their case, involves a dissolution of the distinction between space and place through what is essentially, as I noted earlier, a *spatialization* of place—which can now be seen as the assertion of unbounded over bounded openness.

So far, the discussion of space and place has brought to the fore two concepts of boundedness and openness or extendedness. But there is also a third concept at play, even though it is a concept that, if addressed at all, is often treated independently of the first two and as if it were entirely *sui generis* in relation to them. The concept that I have in mind here is that of *emergence*—a standing or coming forth—that might itself be thought as a form of movement towards, into, or out of. Although it is seldom if ever taken up directly, one can already see how such a notion is implied in the idea of the *chora*—at least as it appears in Plato. The *chora* involves a notion of bounded openness, but that openness is an openness that allows for something to appear within it, and as such it allows for the thing that appears to emerge in that openness. This is why the *chora* is characterized as *matrix* or *womb* (or as receptacle—in that it *receives*): the *chora* is that which allows that which is contained and sheltered within it to come forth as apparent, as existing.

It might be thought that emergence is not an element in the Aristotelian account of *topos*, except for two points. The first is that Aristotle's treatment of *topos* is indeed a part of the *Physics*, and so a part of Aristotle's investigation into that which is understood specifically *as* emergent [taking note of the way the Greek *physis* already contains such an idea within it (see Heidegger, 1998)], as changeable, and as coming into and out of existence; moreover, one of the basic forms of change is movement, and one of the basic modes of movement for Aristotle is change of place—'local' motion. Second, the character of *topos* already contains with it a sense of orientation or directionality that implies that what is at issue here is no mere demarcation of two otherwise similar domains—*topos* is structured in terms of an inner and an outer that derives both from the way in which the body is enclosed by that which surrounds it, and also from the character of body as filling its place and so as pressing against that which surrounds. The dynamic character of *topos* is clearly evident in the Aristotelian account of *natural place* according to which each element belongs to a particular place within the universe towards which it is constantly directed—earth and water thus move downwards, and air and fire up. Far from being a merely static location, then, place carries with it an essential movement (a movement that occurs both within place and between place), and in this respect it would be inappropriate to treat place as somehow aligned solely with the spatial and as distinct from the temporal. If openness understood as extendedness is what underlies the idea of space, then it is emergence that may perhaps be taken to be the original foundation for time.

The way the phenomenon that I have called ‘emergence’ appears here is indicative of the way in which the concepts at issue are not distinct notions that stand apart from one another, but are rather bound closely together in such a way that not only does each depend on the others but each often takes on aspects of the others as a consequence of their close entanglement. Thus openness can itself have the character of a form of emergence—a dynamic opening out—that reflects the character of openness as always an openness *for that which appears within it and for which it allows*; emergence can take the form of an extending into duration, a perduring, that can itself be viewed as a form of extendedness. None of the concepts at issue, however—not openness, emergence, nor even boundedness—can be articulated or deployed completely independently of the others. For there to be bounds is for there to be that which is bounded—an open domain in which things can ‘take place’; for there to be emergence is for there to be an openness into which emergence takes place; for there to be openness is for there to be that which may emerge into what is open.

Within the history of Western thought, however, the tendency is for the inter-relatedness of these concepts to become obscured—especially inasmuch as that history is one in which the concept of extendedness increasingly takes on a dominant role in the thinking of all of the concepts that appear here. Boundedness comes to be seen as simply a division within the structure of extendedness—the boundary simply demarcates different regions within the same extended field. Emergence is likewise given a statically rendered form as simply a mode of temporal extendedness—a stretching between temporal points analogous to the stretching between points in space (a possibility already evident above). Moreover, extendedness itself—originally appearing as a mode of openness, and so as always tied to both boundedness and emergence, also takes on a gradually transformed understanding: as openness become extendedness and as extendedness is understood, partly through the influence of the notion of void, in terms of a homogenous, isotropic, measurable, and in principle unlimited field. It is this that then comes to be taken as the primary designation of ‘space’. It is against this conceptual background that contemporary discussions of space, within geography and elsewhere, have to be understood—unfortunately, it is a background that remains mostly implicit and unquestioned in such discussions.

The considerations that appear here are not merely of historical interest—even though they do require an attention to history. They open up a way of elucidating the primordial phenomena that underlie the concepts of space and place—and also, I would argue, of time. The concept of space is thus based in the phenomenon of openness or extendedness and time in the phenomenon of emergence—of movement into appearance. Both of these depend on a boundedness that allows an opening and an emergence. It is tempting to identify place with this boundedness, but place cannot be boundedness alone. Boundedness is not *another* phenomenon to be added to openness and emergence, but is rather part of the very character of openness and emergence as always occurring within and in relation to certain bounds. Place is always bounded, yet it is also always open and dynamic.

Place is thus the original opening up that establishes openness for emergence at the same time as it allows emergence into openness. When we look simply to the *openness* that is established, especially when viewed as extendedness, then we see the beginning of the idea of *space*; when we look primarily to *emergence*, and to emergence as also the establishing of a form of duration, then we see the beginning of the idea of *time*. The development of the more abstract conceptions of space and of time undoubtedly contributes to, while also being a function of, the tendency to separate out the basic phenomena that are at issue. Yet even space and time carry within them the marks of their original interconnection. Space is always space for movement in and between and

so calls upon the temporal as that which allows for the possibility of sameness in spite of difference in space; time is always a time for perdurance or decay and so calls upon the spatial as that which allows sameness in spite of difference in time. In fact, there is neither time nor space understood as distinct phenomena, and perhaps even the idea of time–space does not quite capture the integral unity of the two. That unity, I would argue, is best understood through the idea of place in which openness, emergence, and boundedness are originally held together.

#### 4 Place, appearance, and the ground of theory

It is significant that the analysis that I have been pursuing here is one that takes place, and so space and time, as closely tied to *appearance*—and appearance to be closely tied to place (so that appearing is both an appearing of some thing and an appearing of some place). This is certainly true of the way the notions of topos and chora are developed in Greek thought. In both Plato and Aristotle these notions are developed specifically in relation to body as that which appears within the chora—within the topos (which is why neither can be construed as *empty*). One might even say that something similar is true of kenon given its own correlation, as the emptiness of void, with the fullness of body, since it is only through the combination of void and body that there can be the possibility of both differentiation and unity that itself underlies any form of appearance at all—in this respect, even the distinction between void and body involves a fundamental boundedness.

The relation between place and appearance should not be taken to imply, however, that place is therefore secondary to appearance—as if appearance, or that which appears, is what establishes place and so also space and time. Place, as a dynamic and bounded openness, is what allows for appearance and yet is not determined by it. The structure of place is, in fact, the very structure of appearance (which is not to say that it is the same as the structure of what appears). Appearance requires an openness that allows emergence, but appearance, as it is always the appearance of some thing, is always a *taking place*, which is to say that it is always the establishing of a certain *there*—which refers both to that which stands at the centre of a surrounding context or environment, the thing, *and* its immediate place (which one might say is identical with the thing) as well as to the context or environment that surrounds. The structure that is evident here is one that can indeed be understood as topographical (or topological), since it is a structure that essentially concerns the structure not only of appearance but also of place (see Malpas, 2006, especially pages 3–17 and 27–37).

Focusing on the relation between place and appearance, one might say that what characterizes place from this perspective is the conjunction of two basic components: *salience* and *withdrawal* (notions that can be seen to be analogous to those of body and void). The structure of place is such that it draws towards its centre—towards the *there*, the *here*, the *this* that is salient within it—but as it draws in towards so place envelops and surrounds, but in a way that also itself draws away, withdraws. Thus, while place appears only inasmuch as some thing appears within it, the place nevertheless also withdraws into nonappearance—even if never completely so. (One might say that it is only when place is itself directly thematized as if it were some thing that place itself appears, but then, of course, its appearance is always in the midst of a larger place that in turn tends towards nonappearance.) The structure here is a thoroughly familiar one: appearance always takes place against a background of what does not appear or that appears only partially. It is a structure that is variously treated in terms of the distinction between figure and ground, between focus and field, between foreground and background, between intention and horizon [and in Heidegger between truth and untruth (see Malpas, 2006, pages 194–195)]. Yet, while this structure can indeed be

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seen as manifest in a number of different domains, and as expressed in different vocabularies or in terms of different figures, the underlying structure is the very same structure that is first given in the structure of place. Appearance, no matter the particular form of appearance that is at issue, is always topographic. It is always a 'taking place'.

The way in which place can be understood in terms of salience and withdrawal itself relates back to the importance of the idea of boundedness that is so closely connected to both openness and emergence. The way in which appearance is always tied to a form of nonappearance is indicative of the way in which appearance always occurs within a certain *relational* structure. This is not simply a matter of appearance as itself standing within a structure that involves a relation of mutuality between salience and withdrawal, but, more significantly, it derives from the way in which any and every appearance is always itself incomplete. Thus, what appears always appears in a particular way and yet implies other possible ways of appearing—in a visual presentation, for instance, one only ever sees one side or aspect of a thing and yet that aspect implies and shades off into other aspects. Salience and withdrawal occur within what the structure of what appears as well as between what appears and that within which it appears. Keeping in mind the topographic character of appearing, one might say that every appearing is always oriented, not only in the sense that the appearing presents a certain aspect to the one who witnesses that appearing but more importantly also through the way in which that which appears is oriented in relation to what surrounds it (and so also in relation to any witness to that appearing). Put more simply, one might say that things are never 'in' the world in some indeterminate fashion but are always oriented and located in relation to the other things around them. It is precisely the oriented and located character of any mode of being in the world that allows things to be in the world in the first place. Moreover, it is just this idea of appearing, of being in, as oriented and located that is a key element in appearance as always a taking place and so as always topographic. The orientation and location that are at issue here are possible only in relation to a certain boundedness—one might say, in fact, that boundedness just *is* the possibility of orientation or location. Boundedness is the establishing of a 'here', a 'there', a 'this'—the establishing of certain elements as salient and certain elements as withdrawn.

The latter point is so basic and so simple as to lead one to wonder how it could ever be overlooked. Yet much of contemporary geographic writing does overlook it, or else attempts to diminish its significance—Massey's insistence on thinking place apart from the concept of boundary and Thrift's bald claim that "there is no such thing as a boundary" exemplify a mode of thinking that runs well beyond their work alone. The neglect of boundedness is especially problematic when allied with the insistence on relationality, since the two are intimately connected. All relations presuppose boundaries, while the boundary is properly that on which the possibility of relation is dependent. The boundary is that which, inasmuch as it establishes the possibility of openness and emergence, also establishes a certain oriented locatedness. Boundedness is thus necessary for the establishing of what we might think of as a certain relational field as well as for the establishing of the elements that are related within that field.

At the extreme, the abolition of boundaries is not the establishing of a pure field of relationality, but the very abolition of relationality as such. That this is so is evident in the sorts of accounts that are commonplace in much contemporary geography, since in such accounts there is no specificity of relation but a proliferation of relationality of all kinds that matches the proliferation of spatiality. In Massey's work, as well as in that of many others, there is little or no account of the way in which particular relational structures operate; nor is there any sense of the way in which different relational

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vocabularies supervene on one another—that there is any such ordering or relating of vocabularies is often exactly what is denied. This actually makes it difficult to know how exactly to engage with such positions, since what is to varying degrees refused is the very concept, that of the boundary, that lies at the foundation of genuine theoretical or conceptual articulation—indeed, at its extreme, the attempt explicitly to enact that refusal (eg, Reichert, 1992) gives rise to an approach that might be construed as, at its best, a provocative performance and, at its worst, a babbling confusion. It is not surprising, then, that writers such as Jessop and his colleagues are concerned to attempt to bring some order into the proliferating menagerie of images and ideas that so often arise here, even if it seems it can be done only by theoretical imposition—by the use of the heuristic and the stipulative.

Occasionally, and most notably in Harvey's work (eg, Harvey, 1973; 1996), the relational conception of space that is so common among contemporary geographers has been presented as more or less identical with the relational understanding of space to be found in the work of Leibniz. Yet the relational understanding of space that appears in Leibniz (see especially Alexander, 1957) is very different, Harvey's protestations notwithstanding, from the relational view of space common in contemporary geography. Leibniz takes space (along with relations in general) to be derivative of the monadic substances that are the primary elements in his metaphysics (each monad may be defined in terms of its relations to every other monad, but those relations are nevertheless *internal* to each and every monad); and in this respect space, as the field of *externality*, is essentially 'illusory' on the Leibnizian account—the ontologically most basic elements in the Leibnizian cosmos are the monads and *not* the relations between monads. The relational space of contemporary geography, neither in Harvey nor in Massey, is not a Leibnizian space—even though the ontology that might be implicated with it remains unclear—since it actually involves a conceptualization of relationality as itself a form of pure extendedness. In writers such as Massey, in particular, relationality appears not as a relation between elements related (*relata*) but rather as a linear or planar function in which the *relata* figure is mere points or nodes (as, to use Massey's term, 'moments'). The *relata* are thus rendered as mere functions of such relationality, are themselves nothing but relations, and as such are entirely exhausted in their relational character.

In contrast to such 'absolute' relationalism (which is certainly *not* Leibnizian), and on the basis of the account set out above, the relation between relations and *relata* is best understood not as a matter of the priority of relations over *relata* (or of *relata* over relations) but as an ontological mutuality that obtains between the two. The relation is itself dependent on what it relates, but what is related is also dependent on the relation. Significantly, this way of understanding matters brings to the fore the nature of the relation as itself a form of boundary—the relation is that which functions to differentiate at the same time as it connects, and this is the very nature of a boundary (see Simmel, 1997, page 172; also Heidegger, 1971, page 154)—although this is not to say that the notion of boundary can simply be dissolved into the idea of relation any more than place can be submerged into the idea of space. One might claim that a generous reading of Massey's work would see it as arguing towards a similar conception of boundedness, were it not for Massey's own prioritization of the relational, together with her implicit refusal of the very task of conceptual distinction and differentiation (see especially Massey, 2005, pages 174–175) and the consequent absence of any developed account of the concepts at issue.

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## 5 Conclusion: placing space (and geography)

It is sometimes claimed that the sort of conceptual and ontological considerations that I adduce here have only limited relevance to empirical research. In this respect it is perhaps ironic that it is more often the social sciences that need convincing of the relevance of such considerations than do the natural sciences. The development of modern physics, for instance, has occurred in constant interplay with a set of essentially philosophical concerns and problems—something evident in Jammer's history of the concept of space. Perhaps the reason for the relative neglect of such considerations in the social sciences is precisely the desire to escape from the theoretical and conceptual imprisonment that would seem to come from too close an association with a natural scientific model. In that case, however, the cause of such conceptual imprisonment has been misidentified. Indeed, it is only through more careful attentiveness to conceptual and philosophical considerations that social scientific concerns can be distinguished from those of the natural sciences, and more importantly, only through such attentiveness can one begin to see how the understanding of space and place is not first given through the framework of physical theory but through a more fundamental understanding of the structures that enable all and any appearance whether in the realm of the 'physical' or the 'social'.

Leaving such general questions of methodology to one side, however, we can readily identify a number of more immediate implications for geographic thinking of the conceptual structures that I have outlined here. The most straightforward of these implications concerns the very notions explored above. The contemporary treatment of notions of boundary, relation, space, and place seems not to be well grounded in the underlying character of the phenomena that are at issue here. Attending to the underlying character of these concepts may well result in a readjustment of a number of aspects of current geographical thinking. Some of those adjustments may turn out not to be especially great. For instance, the emphasis on relationality in the work of such as Massey can be seen actually to reflect the essentially relational character of place itself. But if the considerations set out above are taken into account, then relationality has to be rethought in connection with the notion of boundedness as well as in relation to space and place.

Such a rethinking might well require a reorientation in geographic thinking back towards what has hitherto been understood as a more 'humanistic' mode of engagement (although here, too, the ideas set out above ought to lead to a rethinking of the 'human' as it appears in geographic discourse). Perhaps more significantly, such a rethinking ought to open up the possibility for a much more genuinely *critical* engagement of geography with contemporary forms of social and political organization. It is a striking fact that the language of relational spatiality that dominates much current geographic thought is also the language of contemporary globalized capital. Thus, Massey writes, in a highly revealing passage, that "I ... find mystifying the idea, argued by many, that time-space compression is somehow psychologically disturbing. Such flux and disruption is, as Harvey says, part of modernity. Why should the construction of places out of things from elsewhere be so unsettling?" (1994, page 143). The critique of 'relational geography' offered here is also a critique of those particular modes of ordering of the world that are currently embodied in widespread forms of social, corporate, and governmental organization that are themselves highly problematic (see Malpas, 2006, pages 278–303). A more critically engaged geography, I would argue, must also be a geography that is more attentive to the underlying character of space as it stands in relation to place and time—that is more attentive to the phenomena of boundedness, openness, and emergence—since it is the precisely the character

of contemporary modes of spatial, temporal, and hence topographic formation that is at the heart of many of our current ills.

There are three further points with which I would conclude. The first is that the inability to give clear theorization, while it can sometimes be a source of intellectual excitement and stimulation, can also serve to undermine theoretical development and hamper the capacity for effective dialogue and discourse. Part of the problem, here, is that it becomes difficult, in the absence of a certain degree of conceptual and theoretical articulation, to clarify the nature of both disagreement and agreement—in fact, it even becomes difficult to identify the real subject matter of discussion, and so discussion loses that on which it is normally focused and that also constrains it. The second point is related to the danger of such a loss of focus and constraint and, in the case of geography, the danger of a shift towards a purely ideological or political discourse. Some might argue that this has always been a problem for parts of geography, as it has often also been a problem in sociology. This is not to say that geographical thinking ought to be divorced from the political but only that when discourse becomes too taken up with its own imaginative and rhetorical reinventions, when it loses sight of its broader conceptual underpinnings, then it loses the capacity to present itself as anything *other* than a political or ideological discourse. In this way, the politicization of thinking, including the prioritization of the political over the conceptual, itself becomes a barrier to a genuinely thoughtful politics. The third and final point, which also follows on from the second, is that in the absence of attention to the sorts of conceptual considerations set out here the very ground of geographical thinking must remain uncertain and insecure even beyond the usual uncertainties of thought. If we misunderstand the basic phenomena that underlie it, the danger is that geography will actually misconstrue the conditions on which its own discourse is based—that it will misidentify the place to which geography itself belongs.

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