

Landscape, Language, and Experience: Some Claims and Questions

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Philosophy’s proper object is the creation, propagation, contextualization, analysis, and understanding of the concept. For example, what is the relationship between words and the ideas they represent? How can a set of concepts work as a kind of “meaning ecology” to provide specific cultural or disciplinary needs? Where do new concepts come from, and how can we be deliberate about their creation? How might we extend concepts to a new sphere or along a new trajectory? How might we use concepts appropriately yet creatively?

Landscape is an intriguing concept to think of in these terms. It often stands for a host of other place and environmental words. I once asked a professor who taught landscape architecture what she told her students about what landscape was. Her answer was that she didn’t tell them anything. Rather she asked them what they thought it was. Students gave answers that ranged from place to home to terrain to a host of other things. She was fine with that.

In fact, landscape is not all these things. It is not the same as place, land, home, or terrain. Its provenance is different, and its current uses cannot be interchanged with other place-related terms. In short, we must be clear on the concept we use.

This need for clarity also makes a difference because different concepts arise from different disciplinary methods and questions. We may use the same word across those disciplines or even within the same discipline, but in fact the concepts are not the same because they usually do different work.

Disciplines have resources for systematically asking questions and answering them. Both questions and answers are necessary, but it is questions that are said to be on the way to something more substantial. I would like to *question our questions*—to see where our concepts come from and what work they do.

In this essay, I consider two ways by which philosophers might interrogate the concept of landscape: first, the history and adaptation of concepts; second, phenomenology. Both approaches have implications for the relationship between language and landscape. Superficially, the first may seem an “external” way of understanding a concept through its “provenance,” while the second may seem “internal” in the sense that phenomenology takes up questions of subjectivity.

I argue these two approaches need each other—that each opens to the other. More precisely, I attempt to demonstrate that the concept of landscape is a useful context for thinking about how meaning is shaped culturally and how speaking and referring are not just afterthoughts of an already constructed subjectivity but are constitutive of it. In other words, our sense of landscape, like our sense of place, is fundamental to who we are. It is not just an idea deployed to serve a descriptive, analytic, or theoretical purpose.

Traveling across Disciplines

The concept of landscape has traveled across disciplinary boundaries. Its provenance passes through art, but from there we find it used metaphorically in

many other ways. There are moonscapes, seascapes, cityscapes, and so forth. Roberto Matta and other surrealists painted “inscapes”—the “scape” of the interior world. People speak of a political or religious landscape.

What these various uses share in common is engagement with the land, either by traveling through or living with it. These uses of landscape involve a recognition of contours and a sense that the land makes a whole rather than a piecemeal composite of discrete parts. These uses suggest land as narrative, whether placed on the land in the process of naming and representing it or implicit in a natural or human engagement with the land. There is an element of temporality in these uses of narrative, illustrated most literally in the history of landscape painting, which often included ruins or some indication of the interaction of the human past with the quotidian present.

Arguably, the advent of geographic-positioning systems (GPS) signals the end of landscape, since, through use of this technology, there is no longer the necessity of direct engagement with the land. With GPS, we do not need to read the land, either literally or through textual proxies such as maps. We follow instructions, based on geographical information readable primarily through a device, which fixes position not by any aspect of lived human meaning but through overlapping signals that triangulate positions on an abstract grid.

With GPS, our environmental embodiment does not need to unfold as we move through the land. Rather, we are self-contained and apart from the land, through which we still move but from one digital marker to the next. Our engagement with the land becomes *instrumental* in that a digital indicator or mechanical voice provides directions and is not concerned with what lies in between. Places are first of all coordinate points rather than geographical intensifications. Nothing is any longer related to history or myth. Removed from narrative and shifted to technology, navigation is taken out of language.

Rather than claiming that GPS marks the death of landscape, it might be better to say that this technology points toward a new means of engaging the landscape. At the beginning of the modern era, our orienteering moved from reading “texts” more di-

rectly inscribed in the land or written about the land to deciphering schematic representations of the land expressed in latitude and longitude. At the same time, landscape painting brought the human back into the world by pictorially representing people as engaged in that land. What we lost in the map, we recovered in the picture.

Similarly, with the rise of the GPS, we engage the landscape in a different way. GPS takes the burden of a particular kind of way finding out of narrative, which is thus freed to do other things with landscape. In this sense, cultural engagement is particularly important, partly because we are in need of new ways of understanding what it means to live in and with the land—not just on it.

On one hand, we could interpret landscape as a system of signs arising from a particular culture and history. On the other hand, we could interpret landscape as an “ecology” of concepts shared among disciplines but changing according to disciplinary demands. I use the term “disciplinary” here broadly, to indicate any making of knowledge with an object, method, and history. This difference can be phrased in terms of “synchronic” and “diachronic”—in other words, understanding how concepts are used informally at a particular moment in time vs. understanding how concepts become formalized, disciplinary property.

Why is this difference important? Because landscape is not synonymous with land, territory, region, or even place. In the history of Western art, for example, landscape eventually took on a character of its own. We can trace this shift through the paintings of Claude Lorraine through the Dutch masters to the American Hudson River School and, later, the Canadian Group of Seven.

Today, the sense of landscape often moves away from a literal connection with land to more abstract expressions—we speak, for example, of a “landscape of corporate culture” or “the web as a landscape through which we navigate.” If we are cognitive scientists, we might highlight the “landscape of the brain.”

In this sense, to speak of landscape is to speak of spatial movement, whether literal or figurative, remembered or anticipated, solitary or collective. In one significant sense, the space is created by the

movement and does not pre-exist our engagement with it. We see the land *as* something. In ecological psychologist James Gibson's words, it "affords" something for us, just as a chair "affords" sitting.

Phenomenology of Landscape

When we think about phenomenology and place, we need to distinguish between different styles and approaches. In founding phenomenology, Edmund Husserl sought to find the universal in experience by bracketing off metaphysics, including ideas such as "objectivity" and "subjectivity."

In contrast, Martin Heidegger was much more interested in interpreting human experience, including the nature of human inhabitation, dwelling, and place making. For Heidegger, we are always caught up with that which we know. "Dwelling-in" describes that engagement. What we build frames the world in ontological ways—for example, in ways that either reveal our humanness more fully or cover it over and reduce us and our world to instrumental things. Yet again, we can speak of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, which builds on the lived body as the first site of experience—an approach that might be called "embodied phenomenology."

Edward Casey is one philosopher currently thinking about landscape. His *Representing Place: Landscape Painting and Maps* (2002) sketches out the provenance of the term and examines what it means to represent landscape. Casey begins with the Heideggerian claim that we dwell in the land and thus turn it into landscape as we inscribe ourselves on it. Further, landscape becomes the site in which our subjectivity emerges and is made manifest. Casey then explores the idea that the landscape concept has a history, which accrues a set of meanings by the path that it has taken through various forms of knowledge construction in history.

But we can also find phenomenological accounts of landscape outside philosophy. Take, for instance, anthropologist Tim Ingold's *Lines* (2007), which considers the relationship between movement and inscription. Moving through and representing the land, whether verbally or graphically, involve proceeding along lines. Superficially, a meditation on lines may seem not about landscape. Ingold's

interest, however, is all sorts of movement across surfaces—something we find in both landscape and writing. What is significant in Ingold's work is his ability to move across cultural boundaries to identify the ways in which narrative becomes inscribed on the land and the land becomes understandable as elements of narrative in a host of different ways.

It is important to note that the move from descriptive to hermeneutic phenomenology is in part the move from the search for the universal in experience to the recognition that all experience comes mediated through interpretive mechanisms—in other words through the particular personal and cultural situations of individual and group. Husserl could write the *Cartesian Meditations* as a primer on phenomenology because he was following Descartes' lead of attempting to find a universally reliable method for knowledge. Heidegger, on the other hand, is resolutely anti-Cartesian. If we are to look for philosophical method that will not only allow us to analyze place but also be sensitive to the implications that place might have on the emergence and development of knowledge, we will find the Husserlian vs. Heideggerian explications dramatically different in emphases and conclusions.

Whatever its particular sense, there is a conviction in all phenomenological efforts that philosophy must be about experience, though what it means to access that experience may vary with phenomenologist. In addition, what we do with experience once we describe or interpret it may also differ, though we are definitely not engaged in thinking about metaphysical abstractions, whether in regard to the land or to the self. Landscape is not land but *experience of the land*. A theoretical approach that appreciates that distinction is crucial.

Language & Landscape: Questions

We have, in short, two methodological poles and shades of difference between them that help one to understand the relationship between landscape and language. On one hand, we can trace the concept of landscape across disciplinary and cultural changes; with enough care we can tease out distinctions between landscape as a concept and other related concepts like land, terrain, or place. On the other hand, we can ask about how we as human beings engage

the land to produce landscape—that is, how we experience the land.

These contrasting approaches to landscape turn on how we treat subjectivity. Both approaches give us significant direction as to how we, on one hand, might understand landscape within our own specific lived situation; and how, on the other hand, we might understand landscape across various disciplinary and cultural boundaries. To conclude, I present a set of six questions that might be helpful in thinking about what it means to move across these boundaries.

1 What is the purpose of asking about landscape? Are we asking about naming? About place? Are we getting some insight into a culture? Are we sharpening our geographical knowledge? Are we finding ways of interpreting across boundaries?

The question of purpose moves us beyond the idea that we are working with bare concepts that have no relation to social, political, religious, or disciplinary perspectives. For example, maps of Africa were far more “filled in” in the interior of the continent before the 19th century than they were during the 19th century. Africa was not always the “dark continent” but became that label as particular kinds of questions about Africa became prevalent.

In this case, geography contributed to the colonial enterprise by confirming the prejudice that Africa was an empty continent with no history and, therefore, ready for the taking. The African landscape became a way to avoid thinking about the people who lived there.

For example, one can still find settlers in Kenya from before independence who, regarding the “real” Kenya as the place of birds and animals, speak of native Africans as a corrupting influence. Landscape becomes the rural idyll, not only confirming a Rousseauian view of nature but a Hegelian view that Africans are by nature uncivilized.

If landscape is viewing land *as* something, that “as” need not be benign or positive. In this sense, asking why one inquires about landscape is a way to identify narrative implications.

2 What does it mean to understand the other spatially and platially? Does one understand the other *through* or *with* place? Or does one understand place by understanding the other? Do I infer something about the other by understanding their uses, namings, and practices of place, or do I gain insight on place by understanding those who inhabit it?

Heidegger is useful here. He would ask us to see dwelling as a fundamental mode of being and to see building as making possible dwelling. In other words, we are never dealing with the purely natural because we always build, even if that building amounts to words about natural space designed to render it less foreign.

One example is the idea of wilderness, a concept used quite differently in different places, in part because of different relationships with the natural other. Naming and defining that natural other is always entwined with the human other and, thus, “wilderness” is something quite different in Europe than it is in the United States. In Europe, the meaning arises from “wildness,” or the place where the wild person lives. In the United States, wilderness is the pristine—what is untouched by human hand.

In short, if one is speak of dwelling, one must speak of it differently in different places. This is not geographical determinism, but the recognition that our places have a provenance—they are imagined using the understandings we have available. This perspective allows one to think about landscape across cultural boundaries.

3 In what languages does landscape speak? Landscape itself is a language that always embodies a set of conventional signifiers. For example, Claude Lorrain’s paintings established a particular vocabulary of the land with terms like “picturesque” to refer to particular landforms. Travelers on the Grand Tour carried a Claude glass (or “black mirror”) by which they could transform any landform they encountered into a version of a Claude painting, complete with frame and muted tinting.

In short, landscape is always already language, though this in itself doesn’t tell us much. To what language does landscape refer? Or rather, what lan-

guages might it be? Does landscape speak in dialects or entirely different languages? In other words, is there enough commonality in the conventional systems of understanding the land so that we can speak of a common meaning core, or does landscape function like languages, sufficiently different so that we are working with incommensurable meanings?

The appropriation of landscape in the sciences tends to turn it into a meta-term, applicable beyond the level of locally significant signifiers. We might recognize, therefore, that what counts as landscape in the United States might be vastly different in a Chinese context. On the other hand, we might also realize that there are sufficiently similar ways of making the land comprehensible so that we can speak at this meta-level in a meaningful way.

4 How is landscape as a concept being used? Focusing on use often allows us to tease out the different provenances within the ecology of similar concepts and assists in clarifying those concepts. On one hand, landscape may be used as the *mirror of the processes of consciousness*. In other words, landscape can inscribe differing forms of consciousness, and if we can locate differences among those inscriptions, we can learn about how consciousness operates and acts. In this mode of interpretation, we treat landscape as a text, perhaps more specifically as *parole*—the coherent utterances that bear meaning and are the immediately experienced elements of meaning.

On the other hand, we might understand landscape in terms of *langue*—the *invariant structure that underlies the possibility of practice*. Here, we can speak of a language of landscape that is richer or poorer. For example, we could imagine an extremely rudimentary language—a kind of proto-language—that describes experience in broad categories that do not distinguish between kinds of related experiences. We could, in a contrasting way, imagine a language that has elaborate means for distinguishing related but different experiences. Human-made landscapes, in particular, can be seen as affording rich or poor grammar: Consider the contrast between strip mall and traditional marketplace. The former affords a limited vocabulary in that the

proper form of engagement is primarily commercial, while the latter is more rich in expression, since we can imagine other modes of engagement that include sociability, diversity, and serendipity.

5 How does landscape encode time? In her *On Landscape*, Susan Herrington (2009) explains that landscape exists along the axis of time, particularly in terms of memory, imagination, and anticipation. What kinds of memory does landscape encode? Does it preserve memory or repress it? Is there something like *anamnesis* possible with landscape—in other words, the “unforgetting” in which we can re-member and re-construct a coherent past out of the traces that have been left in the land?

Visually, there are many banal, and even bad, landscapes circulating in the popular media. We could mention the art historian’s favorite target, Thomas Kinkade, and his hyper-real, hyper-romanticized landscapes that have proved so popular with many Americans. Kinkade was by no means the first—Constable’s pastoral scenes were practically wallpaper in nineteenth-century England, a touchstone for the urban, industrialized Briton to recover the “meaning” of British life.

What would banal landscapes look like in other cultures? Could we recognize them? We can sometimes see such banality in tourist art (Africa is full of images of the “Big Five” as if the savannah and the veldt were reducible to them).

It is important to demystify the concept of landscape in other cultures so that it does not just stand in for older ideas about the exotic. If it is fundamental to any particular site of knowledge production that place and, particularly, landscape be engaged, then we must also allow that this engagement could be done superficially or stereotypically. Recognizing this allows one to consider what an adequate concept of landscape might be in some particular context.

And what kind of anticipation might be available in the idea of landscape, both in our own discipline and culture and in those of others? Does the landscape narrative rely on a progressive-regressive view of time and history? Or does that narrative necessitate a cyclical view of time with the future

more or less like the past? Or is there yet some other narrative of past and future as encoded in that landscape?

6 What is an aesthetics of landscape? The debt that landscape has to art means that disciplinary uses of the landscape concept have often borne echoes of its roots in aesthetics. The questions one asks about landscape are often about beauty or (given the distinctions among the sublime, the beautiful and the picturesque) about a particular kind of order. More often this order is not the stasis of form or proportion but the dynamism of motion, since one typically moves through or to landscapes. In other words, one typically *participates in* the aesthetic value of landscape.

This direct involvement means that description of landscape elements alone does not fully capture the aesthetic provenance. How does one encompass the sense of participatory movement intimated by the concept of landscape when labeling and naming seems to calcify a dynamic understanding? One solution is poetry, which can push language beyond its inherent tendency to freeze things with descriptions. Might poetry be a central means for evoking a particular concept of landscape?

Doing Philosophy across Borders

As I suggested at the start of this essay, one task of philosophy is to analyze concepts and to question the purpose and relevance of concepts for particular tasks. Arguably, philosophy's major contribution to intellectual endeavor is the analysis of concepts and the creation of concepts when needed. Philosophers have typically worked at this contribution by starting from an abstract position, draining out all particularity and emphasizing essential characteristics.

In the case of landscape, this approach is inadequate. Abstracting from the lived sources of landscape concepts expunge their significance. The result is sterile and uninformative. Much of the time, philosophers have not been particularly good with particularity. Throughout Western history, philosophical approaches have avoided particularity. For example Aristotle's *topos* did not require attention to any particular place and did not differentiate

between places. Neither did Locke's examination of place. For our purposes here, both efforts fall short.

If we are to be true to philosophy *and* true to landscape, we must recognize that we can never stop with categorizing or classifying. For philosophy to operate adequately at the edges of cultures and disciplines, it must find ways to do more than just translate. Cultures are never static. Landscape, like language, is lost and renewed, appropriated in controversial and trivial ways.

The six questions I raise here offer instances of the methods I sketched at the start of this essay. There I raised both issues of provenance and phenomenology. These questions indicate the kinds of concerns with which one must deal in any attempt to use landscape as a viable concept. I have argued that the concept of landscape is actually multiple concepts, rooted in different cultural and disciplinary spaces. As we move across those boundaries, we risk misunderstanding but also encounter a creative opening that is only available as we question the questions that produce the concepts we use.

References

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Place & Space Website

For both beginning and experienced researchers, Jantz's website, "Research on Place & Space," is an exceptional resource for exploring topics covered in *EAP*. His aim is "to incorporate as many traditions and perspectives as possible" and "to cross-pollinate the notion of place across disciplines." Website headings include:

- What should I read first?
- General websites;
- Resources on place.

To view the site, go to:

<http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~janzb/place/>