1. Introduction

In “Of Other Spaces,” Michel Foucault suggests that “our own era…seems to be that of space. We are,” he argues, “in the age of the simultaneous, of juxtaposition, the near and the far, the side by side, and the scattered.” Foucault’s analysis is echoed in prominent discussions of space and place across the humanities and social sciences. Along with explorations of the body, the local, the regional, and the global, there is considerable inquiry into gendered spaces, embodied spaces, subaltern spaces, political spaces, cultural topographies, cyberspace, architecture and social action, nomadism, contested spaces, spaces of desire, monumental spaces, forgotten spaces, the production, practice, and performance of space, etc. The overturning of the temporocentrism associated with several centuries of European thought has been broadly termed the “spatial turn.” Questions of space and place are also at the heart of much recent educational theory and practice, which has seen its own spatial turn.

The spatial turn in education is manifest in the research on how learning and school communities are conditioned by architecture, local social structures, and the natural environment. But the spatial turn is perhaps most evident in the growth of place-based pedagogies—also known as “community based” learning, which includes “service-learning”—that have entered the mainstream of North American educational theory and practice. According to David Sobel, place-based education is

the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum. Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students’ appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens. Community vitality and environmental quality are improved through the active engagement of local citizens, community organizations, and environmental resources in the life of the school.

While place-based pedagogies have seen significant growth across the humanities, as well as the social and natural sciences, philosophers have been exceptionally slow to explore the pedagogical resources of local places. Perhaps this is because philosophy has often been regarded as an attempt to transcend the limitations of embodiment and the particular places that nourish us. Novalis suggested that philosophy is a kind of homesickness; according to this model, the pursuit of wisdom is motivated by a desire to be everywhere at home. This cosmopolitan desire, to be free from the prejudice and bonds of particular places, makes philosophy an unlikely candidate for place-based pedagogy. One might wonder, then, is there any value to place-based pedagogy when teaching philosophy? What does philosophy have to offer place-based learning? And what are the possibilities of place-based pedagogies for teaching philosophy? My purpose in this chapter is to address each of these questions. I will begin with a brief introduction to place-based education. Then I will turn to the ways in which
philosophy courses can contribute to a deeper understanding of place. Finally, I will explore the possibilities of place-based pedagogy for critical reflection on significant philosophical questions, drawing on my own teaching experience as well as resources that have inspired me. I do not intend this chapter to be a rejection of philosophy’s cosmopolitan aspirations—place-based education is simply one of a variety of pedagogies that may be helpful when teaching philosophy. However, I do believe that place-based pedagogy in philosophy courses can contribute to the ideal Kwame Anthony Appiah describes as “rooted cosmopolitanism”: guided by critical reflection, a commitment to world citizenship—intellectually, morally, and politically—accompanied by a commitment to engaged living in singular places. While all my courses are grounded in textual analysis and discussion, it has been my experience that assignments which engage students outside the classroom, when appropriately employed, consistently deepen students’ sensitivity to the nuance, complexity, and value of the philosophical questions under consideration.

II. Place-Based Pedagogies

Place-based education seeks to overcome the divide marked by classroom walls through grounding learning in lived experience via the exploration of local cultural studies, nature studies, real-world problem solving in the community, internships and entrepreneurial opportunities, and induction into community decision-making processes. It has its roots in John Dewey’s progressive education. According to Dewey, the dominant school model undermined the integration of students’ experience outside the classroom into their education and made it difficult to apply what they learned in school to their daily life. Place-based pedagogies are proposed to bridge this gap by contextualizing knowledge in students’ lives: history students research the stories of local places and people, perhaps interviewing elders in the community; language arts students document people and events in their places; social studies and government students observe their local governments in operation and the communities and people government decisions impact; science classes monitor local environmental conditions; etc.

Place-based education, however, is not just motivated by a desire to overcome the divide between conceptual knowledge and lived experience; it seeks to address some of the varied ways in which we are connected to our places and communities. Place-based education is often presented as one part of the solution to the problem, widely diagnosed, that too many of us in North America have lost the necessary knowledge and love of local places to nurture and sustain healthy human and natural communities. According to this diagnosis, disconnection from singular places constitutes a significant cultural condition of the dissolution of community fabric as well as the degradation of ecosystems. Moreover, because many of us are disconnected from the sources of our food, water, energy, entertainment, and much else that sustains us, we fail to see the consequences of our actions that are inflicted on other places. As Wendell Berry writes,

Most people are now fed, clothed, and sheltered from sources toward which they feel no gratitude and exercise no responsibility…We are involved now in a profound failure of imagination. Most of us cannot imagine the wheat beyond the bread, or the farmer beyond the wheat, or the farm beyond the farmer, or the history beyond the farm. Most people cannot imagine the forest and the forest economy that produced their houses and furniture and paper; or the landscapes, the streams, and the weather that fill their pitchers
and bathtubs and swimming pools with water. Most people appear to assume that when they have paid their money for these things they have entirely met their obligations.¹¹

According to David Orr, our educational system bears significant responsibility for the failure of imagination Berry describes. Orr argues that “a great deal of what passes for knowledge is little more than abstraction piled on top of abstraction, disconnected from tangible experience, real problems, and the places where we live and work.”¹² The knowledge students acquire in college is generally unrelated to their place; it is a universal expertise of no-place. Place-based education, Orr suggests, with its emphasis on local knowledge, needs, and communities, can teach us how to live well in place, how to nourish and sustain our human and natural communities.¹³

While Orr’s account of place-based pedagogy generally emphasizes environmental sustainability, much contemporary community-based learning is also motivated by critical pedagogy, with its attention to structures of oppression based on race, class, and gender.¹⁴ Stephen Haymes, for example, in Race, Culture, and the City: A Pedagogy for Black Urban Struggle, draws on spatialized critical social theory to propose a pedagogy that enables Blacks to understand the ways in which power relations are inscribed in urban spaces and how to transform these relations.¹⁵ Some recent theorists of place-based learning have resisted what they regard as a romantic nostalgia, an antimodernism in the discourse of “connection to place.” As Claudia Ruitenberg notes, “place’ means much more…than the natural environment alone. Each place has a history, often a contested history, of the people who inhabited it in past times. Each place has an aesthetics, offers a sensory environment of sound, movement and image that is open to multiple interpretations. And each (inhabited) place has a spatial configuration through which power and other socio-politico-cultural mechanisms are at play.”¹⁶ A radical or critical pedagogy of place teaches students to attend to the conflicting interpretations of their places, and the multiplicity of meanings they have for others. It teaches students to attend to who lives, works, and plays in which spaces, and why, and who benefits and who loses from the different modes of emplacement.

There is ample evidence of the benefits of place-based pedagogies, including engaged pedagogies such as service-learning.¹⁷ These pedagogies enable students to play an active role in recognizing and analyzing phenomena, to draw on theories with which they are familiar, and also to gather evidence with which to critique theories they have studied. For many students learning is more likely to take place when they are excited by their work and when they can connect it to real world challenges and their own lives. When students are able to choose which problems they will address, they are more likely to become emotionally invested and take responsibility both for their own learning and for the particular issue in their community that they are investigating.

While much of the early development of place-based pedagogy took place at the elementary and secondary level, many professors in post-secondary education are now employing place-based pedagogy as they recognize the ways in which it augments the relevance of their discipline as students are motivated to apply their conceptual learning to real-life problem solving, with all its nuance and complexity.¹⁸ Today, Campus Compact, an organization of colleges and universities in the United States committed to “campus based civic and community engagement,” has over 1,000 member institutions—private and public, large and small—committed to integrating service learning into the curriculum. Encouraged by school leadership, as well as the desire of many faculty to contribute constructively to the wider
community through their research, teaching, and service, service-learning and community-based research have become commonplace in colleges and universities.  

III. Philosophy and Place

What role can philosophy play in place-based education that is engaged locally? Perhaps the first—and by no means inconsequential—contribution philosophy can make to place-based learning is a careful consideration of emplacement that allows students to become aware of the multiple ways in which human experience is embedded in and shaped by place.

Early in their career, philosophy students may not be inclined to recognize the philosophical significance of place. One of the seductions of philosophy is that it can be understood as an activity that is, or ought to be, free from local conditions. This view may very well be strengthened in an introductory course, where students read Plato’s argument that knowledge is located outside the realm of becoming in a world beyond sensation, accessible only to reason. For Plato, the project of philosophy is to liberate the soul, to enable its escape to pure forms from the cave of shadows, the physical plane of singular places. Later in the semester they may read Descartes’ arguments for considering the realm of knowledge wholly distinct from the realm of things and places.

Students who make it past their introductory course on Plato and Descartes, however, are likely to encounter philosophers who emphasize the ways in which we are always situated in local conditions, that there is, in Thomas Nagle’s words, no possible “view from nowhere.” Indeed, one can argue that at the heart of much philosophy of the last two centuries is the insight that we are always some place, inescapably embedded in history, class, language, culture, nature, and our own singular psychobiographies. In contrast to the view of philosophy that lifts us out of the particularity and singularity of place, philosophers have been devoted to understanding our emplaced condition, and how this situatedness influences the production of knowledge. More recently, philosophers in working in epistemology, metaphysics and ontology, ethics, and other fields have explicitly emphasized the significance of place.

Lorraine Code, Evan Thompson, Mark Johnson, Andy Clark, Christopher Preston, Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, and others have argued for the epistemic import of place. For some epistemologists, the project of naturalizing epistemology has meant rooting our understanding of knowledge in natural and cultural conditions that are embedded in particular places. As Preston argues in *Grounding Knowledge*, “Thought, knowledge, and belief are not products of mind alone but expressions of its integration and participation with the physical world that lies around it. Recognition of this cooperative relationship brings knowledge firmly back down to earth.”

Other contemporary thinkers, inspired most prominently, perhaps, by Martin Heidegger, have made place a central concern of metaphysics and ontology. According to Jeff Malpas, throughout his life Heidegger was concerned with understanding “the ‘placed’ character of being, and of our own being, so much that we may describe the thinking that is associated with the name ‘Heidegger’ as a thinking that does indeed consist, as he himself claimed, in an attempt to ‘say’ the place of being—as a topology of being.” Heidegger understood his own philosophical thinking to be rooted in the Black Forest outside of Freiburg where he wrote; it was, he insisted, no less connected to his place than the work of the farmer and shepherd to their places. Heidegger’s emphasis on enrootedness has been problematized by some, for instance Emmanuel Levinas, as the embrace of an intimate relationship between “blood and soil,” which ultimately leads to the distinction between the native and the foreign other who does not belong,
who is excluded from the home place. For Levinas, then, and many other thinkers, questions of place and dwelling are central concerns of ethics and political philosophy.

By disclosing the epistemic, metaphysical, ontological, and ethical significance of our embeddedness in singular places, philosophy courses can provide a deeper understanding of our relation to the local. Moreover, philosophers can also offer place-based education a critical concern for the dangers of nativism, a wariness of all the ways in which connection to place can justify exclusionary violence. Unsurprisingly, however, it seems more challenging to actually practice place-based pedagogy when teaching philosophy than to philosophize, more generally, about place. In the spirit of sparking the imagination more than offering prescriptions, in the following section I share some examples of place-based pedagogies as elements of philosophy courses.

IV. Philosophy and Place-Based Pedagogies

Service learning, perhaps more than any other place-based pedagogy, has made some inroads in philosophy departments. In my own forays into service-learning I have been inspired by Beyond the Tower: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Philosophy. This collection begins with chapters on the philosophical frameworks and foundations of service learning, especially in the context of teaching philosophy. Part II consists of a series of ideas for courses and course narratives for ethics, political philosophy, critical thinking, philosophy of art, logic, philosophy of sport, feminist philosophy, environmental philosophy, philosophy of law, existentialism, etc.

As only a brief perusal of Beyond the Tower confirms, service learning in philosophy is most easily imagined in the various fields of applied ethics. Students in a medical ethics course, for example, can work with local medical care providers or advocacy groups, or even participate in a medical ethics discussion group at a hospital. Working with patients may deepen student engagement with philosophical theory, for this experience discloses the complexity and nuance that often complicate the seductive clarity of theoretical models. For students studying animal ethics, working at an animal shelter—which may be overwhelmed with unwanted dogs and cats—or a small organic farm—where chickens or cows may be treated with care—could complicate general rules against killing nonhuman animals, and will certainly give the theoretical questions discussed in class a sense of gravity rooted in experience. Similar arguments can be made for service learning as a component of courses in environmental ethics, legal ethics or philosophy of law, business ethics, human rights, political philosophy, etc., where working in the community can challenge and inspire students to deeper philosophical engagement.

Dan Lloyd, who teaches at Trinity College, in Hartford, Connecticut, describes what is perhaps the most creative course in Beyond the Tower. In Lloyd’s philosophy of art course—“Art/Hartford”—students work with and observe “the artworld,” or rather “artworlds,” in local institutions such as galleries, public arts organizations, a senior cultural center, a prison arts program, etc. While also studying the usual suspects in the canon of philosophy of art, Lloyd’s students are able to observe and participate in decisions about what is art, what distinguishes good from bad art, how aesthetic values are related to other values, and develop more nuanced understandings of the cultural and economic dimensions of artistic production and aesthetic experience. Lloyd echoes other contributors, and indeed many colleagues who have described their own service learning courses, writing that his “experiments with service-learning in several philosophy courses, including Art/Hartford, suggest that service learning is inherently philosophical. While it does contribute to the welfare of the community and also increases the
civic engagement of students, neither of these outcomes is what I value most. Rather, it is the reflective connection students make between what they read and what they experience. The encounter is inevitably Socratic, as students discover the incompleteness and falsity of their assumptions, and it is equally Aristotelian, in the sense that their encounters lead them to a richer, more articulated description of the world around them.36

While service learning is growing in popularity, even in philosophy, I have also found simpler, and less logistically demanding engagements with local places to be philosophically significant for my students. For example, in my own philosophy of art courses, the students are assigned papers which require them to visit local galleries and museums, choose a particular work of art and write about it in the context of texts discussed in class. Does the work provide good evidence for a theory of art or is it a counter example? This assignment encourages students to look at artworks in a way that is informed by philosophical theory and also to draw on their aesthetic experience to evaluate different theories of art. Additionally, the students become more familiar with the art that is being shown—and sometimes produced—in their own community. They are often surprised at how accessible the art is, and how much they enjoy going to a gallery or museum they may have walked by—but not into—for several years. Because I generally teach some environmental aesthetics, I also have the students write about their experience of places on or near campus, experiences that can be analyzed in light of the readings, and serve as evidence for or against specific arguments. I show the Andy Goldsworthy film, Rivers and Tides, and then give the students an opportunity to create their own environmental art and reflect on their experience in writing. For the students, seriously considering the natural and built environment that surrounds them and engaging with local artwork has been philosophically fertile and deepened their relationship to place.

Courses in environmental ethics or environmental philosophy readily lend themselves to place-based pedagogies. No community has an equal distribution of environmental goods; thus every place offers fertile opportunities for reflecting on questions of environmental justice. And most communities have disagreements over how to use—or not use—lands and resources. These disagreements over policy and values invite philosophical analysis and reflection; they are ultimately grounded in the very metaphysical and ethical views that constitute the subject of most environmental philosophy courses.37 It is sometimes tempting for students to make facile moral judgments concerning what is right and wrong in environmental contexts. Engaging with local efforts—for example the restoration of salmon or the reduction of campus carbon emissions—in my observation, increases sensitivity to economic, political, cultural, and ecological conditions that must be taken into account when making good arguments in environmental philosophy. Over the years students in my environmental philosophy courses have applied readings from class to a wide variety of local issues, and used these issues as examples to justify or critique one theoretical approach or another. And every student has considered their own life and practices—for example, the sources of their food, clothes, and energy—and come to a new, more nuanced and still morally inflected, self-understanding.

To accompany readings on place I have sometimes assigned students to choose an accessible place to which they can regularly return and then reflect, in writing, on their own relationship to that place. Similar assignments that engage students with their local places may be appropriate to a wide variety of courses. When I teach Martin Buber’s I and Thou, in which Buber argues that it is possible to have an I-Thou relationship with a tree, I assign students to spend fifteen minutes contemplating, in proximity, a tree. Again, my hope is twofold. I do want the students to engage, with attention, the trees around them. But I also hope that the students can have their own experience that can justify either agreement or disagreement with Buber’s
claim. And when I teach phenomenology I assign students various kinds of phenomenological descriptions, including descriptions of their experiences of familiar places.

As Edward Casey demonstrates in *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, space has been an important, if not always primary, theme for much of the history of Western philosophy. Nevertheless, it seems that there are numerous courses in the history of philosophy or contemporary thought that do not lend themselves to place-based education. My point, here, however, is that place-based pedagogy can be integrated into many courses, even if in a modest and small way. In my experience, students find even relatively small assignments that allow them to engage the texts under discussion with their own life-world, when approached with care and rigor, to be philosophically fruitful and personally enriching.

Success in philosophy courses generally depends on what Howard Gardner—whose model of multiple intelligences is widely employed in educational theory—calls “verbal-linguistic” intelligence and “logical-mathematical” intelligence. Engaged pedagogies may allow students who are not as strong in these particular kinds of intelligence but may have strengths in other areas, to flourish in philosophy courses. For place-based learning engages students both cognitively and affectively. This holistic engagement leads to deeper and stronger connections between knowledge and responsibility. For these reasons place-based pedagogies have entered the discourse of cultivating a renewed “sense of place”—what Gary Snyder refers to as “the real work.” This is the work of learning to live well in one’s place, or, as Wes Jackson describes it, “becoming native” to one’s place. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly for teachers of philosophy, place-based pedagogies, if used well, facilitate deeper, more nuanced engagement with philosophical questions.

3 For an excellent systematic account of space and place in the history of Western philosophy, including the significance of place in recent thought, see E. Casey (1997), *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*. Berkeley: University of California Press. For an accessible introduction to the history and production of space and spatial practice and performance, see D. Gregory (2008), *Spaces*. London: Routledge.
5 All of these terms, along with “experiential education,” “problem-based learning,” and “collaborative learning,” are often understood to intersect with one another as forms of “engaged” or “student-centered” pedagogy.
7 Sobel, *Place-Based Education*, p. 7.
In addition to the essays on education in Ecological Literacy, see also D. Orr (1994), Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect. Albany: State University of New York Press.


See Colby, et. al., Educating Citizens.

For a discussion of the theory of engaged pedagogies and how they are being applied in higher education, see Colby, et. al., Educating Citizens.


See, for example, the special issue devoted to ‘Epistemology and Environmental Philosophy: The Epistemic Significance of Place’, Ethics and the Environment, 10 (1).

Preston, Grounding Knowledge, p. 2.


For an account of service learning in philosophy see Drew Leder’s chapter in this volume.


Casey, The Fate of Place.


For an account of the significance of emotions in teaching philosophy, see Brendan Larvor’s essay in this volume.


W. Jackson (1996), Becoming Native to This Place. Washington, DC: Counterpoint.