

The Earthly Character of Human Existence

PHAVISMINDA Journal
Volume 8 (May 2009): 19-28.

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When we hear the statement that human existence is basically “earthly” we tend to find it rather obvious. Of course, our human existence is earthly since its ‘place’ is somewhere on the planet earth. Behind such an experience of something being obvious is a distinctive mindset, a structure of thinking. We are thinking in a structure where we as individual subjects view objects which stand in front of us. Human existence is thought of in terms of an individual human being whom stands there in front of us. The earth is thought of as a particular planet which orbits around the sun. The place of this individual human being and this earth is thought of in terms of a structure of two-dimensional or three-dimensional space. We modern humans take these structures of thought for granted and since we take them for granted we have the sense that it is obvious that the place of a human being is somewhere on the planet earth.

There is an abstract character to this structure of thought as we as subjects create concepts for physical objects and place those objects in two-dimensional or three-dimensional space. This abstractness is shown by the fact that in terms of this geographical way of thinking the ‘place’ of an object such as a human being does not affect the inner nature of that object. The ‘where’ of a human being is a designation that is extrinsic. (A man on the moon is conceived to be basically the same as a man on the earth.) Guided by this way of thinking we tend to conceive the earth as something which provides a place for human existence but which is extrinsic to that existence. It is not basically part of human existence or essential to that existence.

Such an ‘obvious’ way of thinking about our earthly existence, however, misses the rich mystery of our human existence, a mystery in which the earth plays an intrinsic role. Human life is a matter of living various ‘worlds’ or contexts and both the direction as well as the meaning of those lives arise from those contexts. Generally, however, we overlook these contexts since our mindset focuses our attention on various objects that stand in front of us. So

we need to step back from this 'obvious' structure of thought if we are to become sensitive to the worlds or contexts in the background of our lives. (Husserl would call such a 'stepping back' an *epoche*, a bracketing.) One of these contexts is the traditional way of characterizing earthly character of human existence.

1. The Centers of Human Life

When we speak of the 'place' of human existence we need to bear in mind the structure of basic human spatiality. As we humans inhabit the earth we organize spatiality in a distinctive way, an organization that is based on certain central places on which our lives are focused. It is in terms of those 'centers' that we have the basic human sense that we are 'far' or 'near', that we are 'moving away from' or 'coming back to'. (We can contrast this concrete organized human spatiality with the abstract spatiality of a map. On a map space is spread out evenly and there are no centers, no focal points. Every point on a map has equal validity.)

This center of our life can take many forms. It can be our place of work such as the workshop for a carpenter, the computer for a writer or the operating room for a doctor. Such a place of work is where these people center their lives, the place where they feel that they belong. This center can also be a place of socialization where a family or a group of friends meet and share their lives. It can be a table where a family finds its identity by eating together. It can be a room where a club meets and interacts which results that the members of the club go away from that place with a sense of identity. It could also be a holy place where an individual or a group prays and worships God. Religions are often centered on 'holy cities' and members of those religions find deep meaning in making pilgrimages to those cities. It is in such places of work, of socializing and of faith that we humans have the experience of 'belonging' and in such places we sense that our lives are more real. These spatial centers structure our lives and give added meaning to many of the activities of our lives. For instance, there is a meaning given our lives as we move toward a center or away from a center. Human life is often a matter of 'coming from' somewhere or 'moving toward' somewhere, the 'somewhere' being some form of a center of existence.

This center of human existence is frequently some form of 'home'. This home, first of all, can be found in the particular place where we grew up and where we now eat and sleep with our families. As humans 'dwell', establishing homes they set up an inner space which is different from outer space. That outer space has the sense of openness and danger whereas the inner space gives us the sense of protection, hiddenness and a place of withdrawal. The home gives humans this inner space. In order to fulfill our roles in life we need



to move out beyond the security of the home into the outside world where we live public lives. We may build walls to protect us from that outer space but we also build doors in those walls through which we move into an outer world where we work and deal with people. This venturing out beyond the home makes us liable to all the dangers of the outer world. This outer world may be dangerous but it is also an arena of meaningful challenges where we discover our selfhood.

This 'home' center of human life can also take the form of the "home-town" where we live and work with our neighbors. There is the further home that is there in the province or "homeland" that we love and value. As humans we have initially been given these various forms of 'home' but for our human existence to be full it is necessary that we develop this 'home-living'. We have received a home from our parents and clan but we are called upon to exert effort to 'make a home'. Much of our human labor is a matter of building our home. We enjoy the benefits of being part of a neighborhood or village where we grew up but we are called upon to become an active member of that 'home town'. We are blessed with citizenship in a particular nation but at the same time we are challenged to contribute to the growth of that nation. We enjoy the benefits of the earth and what it gives us but we are also inspired to care for the earth and to improve it.

These centers of human existence can be permeated with a sense of holiness. This is clearly evident when this center is a church or a holy city. As a center of life the space of a family home or a home town participates to some degree in this holiness. It gives our lives something significant as it makes us aware of certain profound values such as love and family. As we humans dwell on the earth, creating homes, we imitate what the gods did when they created the earth. This is seen in the presence of certain sacred rites and ceremonies that are connected to the making of a home.

The holiness of this human space, the home, is reflected in our human sense of the human rights connected to the home. Humans have the right to own a personal home and to defend that home against any intruder. There is need for an invitation before a stranger has the right to enter a home. Even a policeman can not enter a home without a special legal permit issued by a judge. All of this legality reflects our basic human sense of the holiness of the home. Connected to this is our sense that the guests of a human home enjoy a type of sanctuary and are to be protected as long as they remain within that home.

The importance of a home for full human existence is vividly exemplified in the case of the refugee who is forced to flee from his home, his home-town and his home-land. He has preserved his life but that life is an alienated one, one which is basically inhuman. We recognize that something essential is

missing from that life, something that should be there and we make efforts to help the refugee find a home.

This sense of human life as earthly and centered on a home is expressed in Christianity. Christianity gives the hope that God will bless His people eternally with a 'new' heaven and a 'new' earth. The eternal destiny of God's people includes an 'earthly' dimension where their lives will be centered on the new Jerusalem. They trust in Jesus' promise that He has gone "to prepare a place" for them. Those who die in Christ trust that one day they will be welcomed by Him into a heavenly home.

2. In-habiting the earth

Human existence as 'earthly' is suggested by our human languages. We speak of humans 'inhabiting' the earth, using a word "inhabit" to describe the way that we humans actively "live-into" the earth. We speak of having 'roots' in a certain portion of the earth such as a home town or home province. In using such a word ('roots') we see our human life to be like the life of a tree that puts down roots into a certain portion of land. We speak of 'belonging' to a certain earthly place, expressing by these words our experience of being 'held' by a portion of the earth. (Notice that our language is not expressing an experience of the earth belonging to us. Rather, it is an experience of our lives belonging to some part of the earth.)

We humans actively live this 'inhabiting', this being 'rooted' and 'belonging' to the earth. We see this expressed vividly in certain symbolic actions. A settler puts stakes or a fence around his property and in so doing gives himself to that property. A farmer cultivates land and plant crops, pouring his labor into that land as an investment. A land-owner plants trees, trusting in the fertility of that land and its future productivity. A family builds a residence on a plot of land, establishing a basic relationship with that land as this land becomes their home, a place where they belong. They improve that land and that home, putting their mark on it. In all of these actions humans inhabit a portion of that earth and 'root' themselves in that portion. The result of such inhabiting and rooting is that they now belong to that land.

In the background behind these explicit actions is the development of a total way of living, a lived-world. People come to live in an earthly way and to center their lives on a portion of the earth. The home and the land become the center of their lives. It is the place where your family gathers and lives as a family. It is the place where you receive your friends and share life with them. It is the place where you exhibit your personal and family heritage with diplomas and pictures. It is the place where in some way you express your religious commitment and faith. It is the place to which you have given yourself



as you decorate it in your own personal style. In all of these various ways we 'make' a home.

The result of this inhabiting of the earth and the making of a home is a type of attachment as we are drawn toward this center of our lives. 'Going home' is an event that is part of every human life, an event that gives rich meaning to human life. Children are drawn to go home after school and workers are eager to go home after a day of labor. A family looks forward to going to the home of grandparents on a Sunday. There is a further basic instinct that guides us to seek to die at home. We prefer not to die in a hospital but rather to die in our own bed and in our own home. Filipinos who work abroad instinctively want to retire and die in their homeland. There is a sense behind this instinct that their homeland is where they belong. (We humans are like the salmon in the Pacific Northwest who, at the end of their lives, instinctively return to the river where they began life, there to spawn and die.)

3. The Earth as a Source of Identity

The earthly character of human existence reveals itself in the way that our human identities are derived from the earth. When we affirm, for instance, that a certain house is my home, we are not merely affirming that that house belongs to me or my family. We are affirming that that home is me. Just as my body is the symbol of me, so this home is my symbol, revealing me. I have a sense of personal pride if the home is a beautiful one and a sense of personal shame if the home is ugly. If my home were to be robbed by a thief I would have a sense of being personally violated. My home is me.

In a similar way I am given a sense of identity from my home-town, my home province and my home-land. I introduce myself by revealing the place where I have come from and others have a sense of who I am by connecting me with place of my origin. It is as if that particular place placed its stamp on me, a stamp that stays with me and identifies me even though I move far away from that place. It seems that we humans have a sense of a mystical solidarity with a certain place. In human history the names of people have at times been derived from this place of origin. Jesus has been called Jesus of Nazareth and Inigo Lopez has been called Ignatius of Loyola.

It is interesting that the sense of identity given by a home or a home-town is a group identity. It is our home or our home-town and our 'home-land'. I share this sense of identity with others.

4. We are basically related to the world

An essential dimension of human existence is "relatedness". As we live lives that are truly human we are caught up in relationships. Among those

relationships are the ones that connect us with our families and our friends. There are also the relationships with the people of our neighborhood, of our home town and of our country. There is also the possibility of relating to the entire human family. Beyond these human relationships there is the possibility of a relationship with God. Human beings discover the fullness of their lives by living as children of God, friends of God or worshipers of God. They discover their personhood as they actively give themselves to God and receive God's blessings in return.

One form of human relatedness that we can overlook is our relatedness to the earth. We live with the earth in a type of 'symbiotic' relationship where we are caught up both in receiving as well as in giving.

First of all, being human means that we receive into our lives what the earth gives us, a receiving that takes many forms. We receive from the earth life-giving and nourishing air, air that enables us to live and to be active. We receive the blessing of water from the earth, water that contributes so much to our lives. It satisfies our thirst, it cleanses us, it refreshes us, giving vigor and newness to our lives. In various ways it is part of human play as we enjoy the lakes, rivers and seas of our planet. In our religions it serves as a symbol of purification as our sins are washed away.

The earth nourishes us and provides us with the food that we need. It gives us various grains that become the staples of our diet: rice, wheat, oats and barley. It gives us a rich variety of vegetables: potatoes, corn, cabbage, greens and carrots. It gives us a rich variety of fruits. It provides us with fish, fowl and animals that provide us with meat. It provides us with the materials for many of our human drinks with tea leaves, coffee beans and grapes. The materials for human clothing come from the earth. We think of the animal skins that were once used for clothing and the various fibers such as cotton, silk and wool that we use to make cloth to cover our bodies. The earth provides us with materials for our homes as we build those homes out of clay or stone or wood.

Many of the aspects of the earth bring healing into our lives. We immerse ourselves in water and are healed. We breathe fresh air and are purified. We expose our bodies to the healing rays of the sun. Many of the herbs of the earth possess medicinal powers. The earth heals us.

One dimension of the earth's contribution to our lives is the way that the earth inspires us. Human poetry and song are motivated to a great extent by the vitality and beauty of the earth. The fruitfulness of the earth motivates us to be similarly fruitful in our human lives. The beauty of the earth inspires us to create beauty and much of human art is an attempt to imitate the beauty of nature. (to hold up a mirror to nature) The mysterious order of the earth



motivates us to study this order in our sciences and to create technology which is similarly ordered.

The grandeur and beauty of the earth gives us a sense of the presence of God. We are led to praise and honor the one who is responsible for this glorious planet. We are led to give thanks to the one who has given us the earth, blessing us in so many ways. The great religions that have developed in human history are profoundly 'earthly'. The Hindu who makes a pilgrimage to bathe in the Ganges, a sacred river, experiences the salvific activity of God in the water. John the Baptist urged people to express their repentance by a baptism in the Jordan River. The psalmist who has led the Judaeo-Christian tradition into prayer frequently bases that prayer on the glories of the natural universe and the earth. Many religions have some form of harvest festival where they give thanks to God for the rich bounty given them by the earth. The rhythms of worship are guided by the natural rhythms of the earth as the Moslem is guided by the moon into the holy month of Ramadan and the Christian enters into morning prayer at daybreak. These rich traditions of religious life would never have developed if the human race had originated on the moon.

In our minds we have the vague sense that the earth is our mother perhaps because we feel that the earth has given us life. Our homeland is sometimes called our motherland or fatherland. Corresponding to this is the desire to return to the Earth-Mother, to be interred in one's native soil. Our human burial ceremonies reflect this desire to be returned to the earth.

Our human relationship to the earth does not only consist in receiving blessings from the earth. This relationship calls upon us to "care" for the earth, to improve it and to bring it to fullness. For the earth is an incomplete earth and it needs our human efforts to achieve a completion. We cultivate the earth to make it more productive. We beautify the earth by building gardens and parks. We organize the earth by putting up dams, boundaries, walls, fences and roads. We develop medicines to treat the diseases that plague the plants and animals of the earth. As in any relationship we sense the need to give something of ourselves to our partner, the earth.

Our modern concern for ecology is based on a recognition of this relationship to the earth. We recognize that we have failed in the past to respond to the earth in an appropriate way. We have sought merely to use the earth to satisfy our own desires. There is need for us to respect the earth as a partner and to work to bring about its well-being. We need to take care, for instance, that the earth's atmosphere is not polluted or destroyed. We need to ensure the survival of the many species of life on the earth.

5. Our lives are structured by the earth

In many ways the very structure of human life is controlled by the earth. We see this present in the way that we humans are guided to live the earthly day. It is part of our lives to sleep during the night and to be active during the day. Both sunrise and sunset are important and integral parts of our human lives, guiding the way that we live and contributing distinctive meanings to those lives. They are not just something that is happening outside of us that we can observe scientifically. There is the joy and anticipation of daybreak as we are moved into giving ourselves to the concerns, activities and tasks of our lives. There is the relief and gratitude that we feel at the end of a day as we step back from those lives. We humans may choose for various reasons to distort this structure by working and playing at night and sleeping during the day but we sense that there is something 'unnatural' about such a way of living. We may have experienced a long plane trip which produced a day of 30 hours or one of 18 hours. The resulting unpleasant 'jet-lag' revealed to us how our body is accustomed to a set rhythm of a 24 hour day. It is our nature as human beings to live 'in tune' with the rhythm of that earthly day.

Our lives are similarly structured by the seasons of the earth. The farmer is guided to plant his crops in the spring or at the beginning of the rainy season. As the farmer moves into winter he enters a period where his life goes fallow together with the earth. Such a style of living is echoed to a certain extent in the lives of all human beings. As humans move into spring they are guided into new beginnings, to make new plans and to renew their lives. Renewal is an important part of human life, a part that is inspired by the earth.

Beyond what we have spoken of above there are many earthly spontaneities that guide our existence. Just as birds, fish and animals spontaneously gather together in groups so there is a natural 'earthly' tendency to socialize. Just as the various elements in the earth move toward growth and development so there is dynamism in human existence which moves us toward various forms of development. Just as the earth creates new forms of life from time to time so humans are inspired to be creative in a variety of ways. Just as the earth's nature heals various sicknesses and wounds so there are various spontaneous healing processes present in our nature. Philosophers such as Teilhard de Chardin have discovered in the earth a basic movement toward complexity. Such a movement is present in human life as we humans are guided to become more in tune with the earth, with plants and animals and with other human beings.

Beyond such general guidance of human life by the earth we sense that particular parts of the earth guide human life in distinctive ways. People who live in the mountains are different from those who live by the sea. Country people are different from city people. Those who live in forests have a style of



life that is different from the style of life of those who live in deserts. The earth puts its mark on us and guides us in a distinctive way.

6. Roads and Traveling

Roads are an important part of human life and found in all terrestrial human cultures. These roads, however, take various forms and deal with the earth in different ways. A modern road, for instance, is not part of the natural world. It is merely a way that we get to a certain destination. When we use such roads we are merely concerned about 'getting somewhere' and those roads have no deep human significance.

However, there are types of travel that have rich meaning for human beings. For instance, there is the pilgrimage. In a pilgrimage we are not just getting somewhere. Rather, we are seeking for the fullness of our true selves as we leave our homes and reach out for something new. In this reaching out (which is so basic in human life) the traveling over the earth plays a mysterious role. The pilgrimage serves to enable us to discover the presence of God in our lives and also reveals something of our personal destiny. What is interesting here is that these discoveries are revealed to us against the background of a particular relationship we have to the earth, the relationship of traveling.

The modern human vacation plays a similar role in human renewal. It is not a practical activity but something that we do to achieve fuller life, to re-create ourselves in some way. There is pleasure involved in a vacation but what is sought is something more than that. (After all, there are many possibilities for pleasure found in our ordinary working life.) What is significant about vacations is that they usually involve travel, a travel wherein we seek in some form or other to relate to the earth. We go to the sea, we go to the mountains, we go to parks or we walk through the woods or along rivers. In all of this we are refreshed and we discover new life through our relationship to the earth.

Can we explain how this happens? There is, of course, the beauty of the earth, something that lifts us up and inspires us. But beyond this there is the sense of a revelation taking place as we travel over the earth. What is revealed here is manifold. Our own personal destinies are opened up, the deeper values of human life become clearer and the presence of God becomes more vivid.

Alienation from the Earth

The humanness of human existence is not something automatically given to us. It is not a safe property but is something that must be achieved. We human beings can fail to be human. So it is not surprising that the humanness that is found in earthly existence as we have described it above is frequently absent from our human lives. For many reasons we live lives which are

alienated from the fullness of earthly existence. For instance, there can be a type of immersion in urban existence which leads us to a style of living which is out of touch with the earth. Life in a modern city follows rhythms which are diverse from the rhythms of earth.

There can be a type of human existence which is narrowed by routine, a routine that is set up by human planning which is insensitive to the spontaneities of the earth. There can be a type of existence which is organized around a set goal and which focuses on the procedures or means which are to be performed in order to achieve that goal. The emphasis here is on the various techniques which are to be performed. There is no openness to the guidance of the earth.

There can be a type of individualistic human existence which is centered on the self-centered desires of the ego. The earth is seen as raw material which can be utilized to satisfy these desires. In such a way of living there is no true relatedness to the earth.

The achievement of the fullness of earthly human existence thus represents an achievement in which these alienated tendencies are overcome.