

■ Book Review

Yi-Fu Tuan. *Humanist Geography – An Individual’s Search for Meaning*. George F. Thompson Publishing, 2012. 181 pages.

The autobiographical nature of *Humanist Geography: An Individual’s Search for Meaning* captures Yi-Fu Tuan’s lifelong intellectual journey through humanist geography, a branch of geography that focuses on people and their condition by recognizing the ubiquitousness and salience of human relationships. Tuan argues that humanist geography can unearth the individual through an analysis of the various relations and tensions that permeate human experience. He embarks on the excavation of the self in an effortless narrative style more akin to an afternoon spent in friendly conversation than an academic treatise. Not only is this stylistic approach more inviting to the lay reader, but, in the spirit of humanist geography, Tuan’s tone and style initiate and nurture an intimacy with the reader that is extremely rare in formal philosophical contemplations.

Tuan proposes that the self is a product of geography. Individuals cannot mature into robust selfhood in isolation; environments, and more specifically societies, play a crucial formative role in an individual’s growth. According to Tuan, cities, which are manifestations of advanced societies, rather than natural environments, offer the appropriate social scaffolding for individuals to discover and nurture their own unique voices. This sociality gives rise to tensions that reside at the core of what it means to be human.

The first tension is found in the nature of individuality and the individual’s necessary relation to community. As varied individuals, we flourish in groups; human individuality reaches its highest potential in cosmopolitan societies, which on the one hand tend to coalesce individuals into an undifferentiated unity, but on the other, serve to empower the individual. “People bond when they recognize their individual powerlessness in the face of an external challenge, which is, first and foremost, nature” (Tuan 2012, 29). However, unlike small groups or communities, large metropolitan societies consist of a complex interaction of variously related hierarchies, which at once absorb the individual and differentiate her. Large cosmopolitan communities are conducive to the development of differentiated talents, which find their unique niches in the multilayered and varied hierarchies, thereby individuating the citizen in the process of absorbing her into the complex, and sometimes subtle, societal ranks.

The second tension Tuan points to is that the great civilizations, which nourish the emergence of meaningful individualism and selfhood, are built on the backs of the faceless multitudes, often at the price of great loss and suffering. Regarding momentous architectural projects of the past, Tuan writes: “strenuous and dangerous work is done by laborers and artisans...[e]ven today, large-scale construction may cause injury and death” (Tuan 2012, 62). Analogously, our creative activities, which in part constitute the meaning that individuates us and that marks our humanity, are results of destruction: culturally valuable activities such as writing require paper and thus the clearing of forests, prosperity and flourishing are secured by violence and war, and life itself is made possible by eating other life. Good and evil are

interlocked and underlie the very mechanisms of meaning making that human beings utilize to self-actualize and thereby self-identify and individuate; “destruction,” Tuan muses, “necessarily precedes construction” (Tuan 2012, 61).

The final tension concerns our very nature, which Tuan understands to be both divine and animalistic, refined and crude, social and biological. This contrast between the sophisticated and thoughtful on the one hand and the corporeal and at times abject on the other is, at its core, the paradoxical essence of human individuality. Tuan believes that we certainly are creative, beautiful, meaningful, and unique, but he also acknowledges that we are additionally uniformly embodied and entrenched in biologically natural, yet culturally unmentionable, processes and daily realities. Tuan paints a vivid image of humans as Janus-like, constantly transitioning between the divinely inspired and biologically grounded natures that drive the underlying mechanisms of construction and destruction responsible for the creative efforts that produce meaning in our lives. He writes: “[o]ne of the sharpest role divides is between the biological and the social; the one crude, the other refined. One moment I strain over the toilet bowl, more animal than man, and the next I read *The New Yorker* over Turkish coffee, one moment I line up with students at the urinal, and another I am the professor pontificating on humanist geography” (Tuan 2012, 63).

Although Tuan does not explicitly argue for a narrativist conception of personhood, he does point to the meaning-making efficacy of powerful narratives. More specifically, Tuan argues that the moral significance of religious narratives contributes a depth of character that geography cannot foster by itself. Just as cities, religions offer a robust infrastructure that can absorb the individual. Tuan argues that both dictatorships and democracies are sources of resentment; people resent dictatorships because such societal organization reduces individuals to merely obedient matter while democracies, in offering freedom and individuality, inevitably bring about disorientation, chaos, and isolation as people are set free to find themselves within the masses of uniquely individuated citizens scrambling to find their respective niches in the multilayered hierarchies of the democratic society. Tuan suggests that there are a number of solutions to this problem: “chemical, as in alcohol and drugs; personal, as in suicide; social, as in losing the self in a tight-knit community,” but, he continues, “[a]t the most exalted level there is the mystical, religious solution of erasing the self in Brahman, Nirvana, Oceanic Oneness” (Tuan 2012, 145).

The reason religion is an exalted solution, according to Tuan, superior even to social institutions and cities, is that entangling oneself in a religious narrative grounds individual meaning in an objective moral framework that protects the individual’s sense of self and anchors the efforts exerted in the pursuit of goodness in a self-consistent framework that is much more impervious to self-doubt than its secular counterparts. Religion protects practitioners from the rude awakening that threatens a wholly secular existence, namely the worry that those of mere secular faith are much more likely to “wake up to the full, bitter understanding of the ultimate futility of their effort” (Tuan 2012, 148).

Although Tuan’s implicit connection between narratives and selves is well taken (even if it could have been more powerfully stated in a more explicit manner by connecting to the rich philosophical literature on this subject), his argument that only religion has the power to instil

life with lasting, secure meaning does not fully succeed. It is true that religion can certainly play such a salient role in the individual's search for meaning, but Tuan's suggestion that morality must be grounded in religion to attain stability is dubious at best. Many of western philosophy's great moral theories, such as Aristotelian Virtue Ethics, Kantian Deontology, and Utilitarianism, on which Tuan occasionally draws in his own contemplations, do not premise their coherence, objectivity, or moral obligations on religion, the notion of an afterlife, or the existence of God. These moral theories are certainly compatible with religion, but they are also compatible with secularism and, insofar as they can help ground the moral beliefs of the faithful in robust, objective theoretical foundations, they can offer the same moral stability to those who lead wholly secular lives.

Tuan's book, however, can certainly serve as a compass for those in search of meaning, regardless of religious affiliation or lack thereof. Tuan's narrative approach of guiding his readers through the insights of humanist geography is saturated with the eastern quality of doing philosophy experientially, that is, of learning by doing and coming to the subtle and deep realizations Tuan unveils only through reflection on actual practices. Although this choice of transmission adds an undeniable air of artistry to the ideas he conveys, this approach can be difficult to process and at times frustrating to his western readers. Thus, whereas Tuan's easy style is commendable for its accessibility, the lack of interaction with a wider contemporary philosophical literature that would not only buttress Tuan's philosophical musings, but could also ground them in theory, is unfortunate. The absence of mention of such research programs as the now well established extended mind thesis and the emerging view of extended identity, as well as accounts of relational personhood and narrative conceptions of personal identity deprives Tuan's excellent work of the kind of philosophical depth that western philosophers might seek, the unfortunate consequence being that Tuan's book might pass under the philosophical radars of many researchers who would benefit from it and could integrate Tuan's contemplations into established as well as emerging analytic philosophical traditions.

The philosophical musings in Yi-Fu Tuan's book have grown and matured over a long time, encapsulating Tuan's lifelong lessons and contemplations. The insights contained in Tuan's book will inspire courage and a zest for life in those who are fortunate enough to interact with it. Although Tuan's instructional insights would benefit from some explicit interaction with relevant western analytic philosophical research programs, if one takes the time to truly appreciate the intellectual landscape Tuan unfolds in his book and if one has the patience to relate to it in the manner Tuan instructs, one will undoubtedly discover a rich philosophical topography that artfully equips the individual with indispensable theoretic and experiential tools for discovering one's own self and its place in the world.

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