

Given Together

Online Course, Spring 2016

Jack Petranker

Transition to Week 3

In the Week 2 class, I distinguished being located in space from inhabiting space. Objects are located in space, and it is natural enough to say that we are located in space in the same way. Right now, I am sitting on my chair in my office—that is my location. But there is much more going on than that, because I am not an object like other objects. Human beings are much more complicated than that. Sitting here, I have feelings, concerns, a stream of memories and thoughts and so on. To speak of my being located tells me nothing about any of that. That may be why the phrase “be here now,” which came up in the Transition for Week 2, may be inadequate to the new way of being we want to activate—does ‘here’ refer only to location. If so, it leaves out what’s most important. The current interest in mindfulness practice may suffer from the same inadequacy. It’s not that it ignores the complexity of human beings; it’s just that it doesn’t really engage it.

What do the specifically human levels of complexity have to do with space? We started to explore that question in terms of the bystander’s special way of being in space. The bystander way of being acknowledges human complexity, but it does so by cutting the bystander off from the rest of the world. To borrow Michael’s image, it is like a child gazing through a plate-glass store window at the toys inside, wishing she were inside and able to play with them. That is because the bystander model accepts an understanding of space in terms of objects that are located at one place: here or there.

In contrast to the ‘locatedness’ model, an ‘inhabiting’ model allows for the full complexity of being human without excluding us from the space in which objects (and other people) appear. We explored this model experientially through practices that invited us to inhabit space more fully and let go of the usual sense of locatedness. We focused on two, which you can do during the week:

1. Being at the center of the space you experience, without making that center into a location. This means that the center is not a distinct point that excludes other points: it is the center of the whole, and brings the

- whole with it. To emphasize this aspect, try letting your awareness of the space you inhabit expand out in all directions, as far as you can.
2. Inhabiting your body as you breathe in and out, focusing on the movement of the belly, the lungs, and the ribcage. Instead of being the located bystander who is 'doing' the breathing, adopt an "it's breathing" perspective, in which the breath is everywhere in your experience, in the same way that when we say, "it's raining," the rain is everywhere.

Because they challenge locatedness in favor of inhabiting, these practices get us going in a good direction. The next step is to challenge more directly the underlying assumptions we make about space, the ones that make it seem natural to think in terms of locatedness. To do this, we will start looking at several related 'dimensions' of ordinary space: location, distance, and separation. As a warmup for this investigation, you could simply focus in a loose, relaxed way on the distance that separates you from an object you look at, or the distance between you and the source of a sound. Do you actually experience that distance? What is the nature of that experience? The third paragraph in the essay touches briefly on this sense of distance and how it arises.