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Borders, Phenomenology, and Politics: A Conversation with Edward S. Casey

Edward S. Casey Interviewed by Michael Broz

Interview

Michael Broz (MB): It is my pleasure to be speaking today with Edward S. Casey. Casey is an Emeritus and Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Stony Brook University. Beginning his philosophical work as an undergraduate at Yale University, Casey went on to earn an MA and a PhD from Northwestern University. He has since published dozens of articles and several books on edges, emotion, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, spaces, and art in philosophy, to name a few ideas. He is also one of the founding members of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP) and was selected for the Dewey Lecture by the American Philosophical Association. Casey has written extensively on many subjects. What interests us today is his work on borders and boundaries. Casey is now retired from teaching but remains active in the North American philosophical and phenomenological scene. Thank you for speaking with me, Professor Casey.

Edward Casey (EC): Thank you for inviting me, Michael.

MB: I want to start out by talking about how you first got involved with boundaries and borders. Your most illuminating work for me was your chapter “Borders and Boundaries” in *The World on Edge* (2017). Can you give us a run-down of the nature of borders and boundaries and how they are described phenomenologically? Are they an abstraction or a physical reality?

EC: Let me start with the distinction between borders and boundaries, to which you refer yourself, and which is the opening chapter in my book *The World on Edge*. That itself is a strategic move on my part; *The World on Edge* begins with a chapter on borders and boundaries. In other words, to open up this vast array of edges to which human beings are subject and some of which they themselves create, I thought that I should address this particular difference, which turns out to be all over the place. Very vast. More so than you might think if you heard the word “border” or “boundary” alone. It’s much, much more extensive.

Borders and boundaries are two main forms of edges—edges that actually have everything to do with how human beings, animals, and plants occupy space and the worlds they inhabit. Edge is not merely the limit of a solid. That

phrase “the limit of a solid” is Plato’s, and my interpretation of edges is more dynamic. I instead argue throughout this book that edges, like borders and boundaries, have a life of their own, a historicity, a power, a dynamism—that allows them to be regarded as anything but static.

My effort here is to argue that borders and boundaries are formative factors in human lives, and far more so than has been usually admitted by philosophers or even by geographers. So just to give a flavor of where I come from on this, I’m going to quote from the first chapter of my book, *World on Edge*. I’m not trying to sell the book, but there it is. It gives a sense at least of the difference that I’d like to talk about with you:

Borders are clearly demarcated edges that serve to distinguish one place (region, state, territory) from another. An international border, such as the one between the United States and Canada, is an obvious instance, but so is the footprint of a building, the building’s precise profile on the ground. The precision of borders, the fact that they can be traced out by a simple line (the “borderline”) is a function of their having a shape regular enough to be describable in geometric terms (as straight, curvilinear, and so on) while also being easily projected (for example, envisioning a given borderline as traversing rugged terrain). (7)

I will come to the examples, in this case, the US and Mexico and Palestine and Israel.

I continue:

Thanks to this dual aspect, the one ideal and the other imaginary, borders often approach a certain formal perfection, as when the founders of a city decide just where the city limits should be. Borders are often the basis of such representations as maps afford: for example, a map of the state of Kansas after its statehood was established in 1861, as it borders on Colorado to the west and Missouri to the east. Cartographic representations make clear that the comparative abstractness of both the imaginary and the ideal dimensions of a border readily invite literal delineation, the exact determination of where public or private lands (or bodies of water) begin and end. (7)

I’m going to quote here another passage, as it sums up this basic difference: “borders serve to delimit and to define, whereas boundaries act to ground, to receive, and to open out” (15). The paradigm cases of boundaries are really the edges of natural phenomena for us. Such as meadows or forests.

MB: Something like the Rio Grande—a river or a mountain range, or another type of imposing geography?

EC: Yes, I take up the case of the Mississippi River, which has a peculiar character, as the Rio Grande does, of being both a border and a boundary. These major rivers on maps act as borders—borders between the US and Mexico in the case of the Rio Grande. Or, in the case of the Mississippi, between two American States: Mississippi and Arkansas.

The Mississippi River delineates and literally bifurcates two landed areas, and yet, even though this river shows up as a line delineated on maps, in perceptual reality it is anything but a line. That is, if we put ourselves at those rivers or in those rivers, we find something else: amorphous, ever-changing, and altering edges that change with the seasons, change with age, change from flooding or the opposite. They are thus incredibly variable. As boundaries, they are saying that we comprehend a given river, such as the Mississippi, as a coherent single natural entity.

This river happens to be the longest in the United States, so it's quite a major river. The Rio Grande, or the only part of it that's relevant to what we will soon discuss, is between Brownsville and El Paso. But in that stretch of the Rio Grande is found both the border between the US and Mexico and a perfectly natural boundary of its own. This is found in its twists and turns, thus in its own idiosyncrasies and vagaries.

MB: Its mutability changes over time but that change isn't necessarily due to humans, as would be the case with a border. A boundary responds to the natural formations driven by movement, animals, plants, etc.

EC: Yes, exactly. That's right. The Mississippi has a life of its own, and a world of its own. We humans unfortunately have the habit of interfering and intervening in natural boundaries. As, for example, when we cut down a forest and the edges become completely amorphous, then no longer can we say this is a forest. You could say it was once a forest, but it's no longer such.

The comparative autonomy and self-generation that natural boundaries have do not apply to borders, which are subject to changes both historical and political in character. In the case of the Rio Grande, we have an incredibly overdetermined, fiercely ferocious circumstance, where, as you know, to cross it is to incur not only danger, but arrest, detention, expulsion, deportation, or worse—involving direct physical violence as is happening in Texas, under governor Greg Abbott, who, tellingly, put barbed wire right at and on the border. This was to assert the autonomy of Texas. This is to call into question the federal government and its role there. Well, you know about this, it's even part of the world that you have experienced yourself as I recall.

Borders and Borderlands

MB: I did! I grew up in Texas when the cartels were, you know, shooting over the border, and there were all these violent actions happening and things like that. The US government told us not to go to Mexico, at least don't go to the border towns. We were told that if you're a white person who goes to a border town, you're going to be kidnapped and held for ransom. But I would like to point out that the danger is overblown. It feeds into that kind of xenophobia again. Nonetheless, there was a very real threat there that we kind of lived with growing up in a border state and understanding that border towns were not safe places to be, even if they're on the US side of the border.

EC: In other words, it really is a matter of local history. It changes, and, as you yourself say, is more dangerous at certain points, less intense at others. Therefore, it takes on the characteristic of any boundary, which is to be variable by its very nature, whereas a border, as I understand it, is fixed once it's determined, as with the US-Mexico border regarded as a line that goes down the middle of the Rio Grande. This border cannot be changed. The river may flow over its banks or even cease to exist. And yet, that line, imaginary though it may be, in fact delineates the different perimeters of the US and Mexico, and will do so until another treaty comes along after the 1848 treaty that established all this. Until that happens, the border will actually remain at certain longitudes and latitudes in its curving course.

No matter what happens to the river, it is a convenient carrier of the border—a carrier not only visible, you know, but something literally tangible that you can touch. But its fate as a carrier is highly, highly variable, as you know better than I having lived down that way. The Rio Grande is subject to drought and flooding. It is sometimes quite wide, sometimes very narrow. So, we have an extraordinary situation here if you think about it. Many just take it for granted as when we say casually, “Oh, the Rio Grande. Well, that's just the border between the US and Mexico.” Well, it's more than that. It's a very complex boundary between two landmasses as they are made contiguous through a body of water that courses through them—at least when the weather allows for that to be the case, and it doesn't dry up even though it has dried up in certain historical periods. That's okay. Yeah, it can dry up, but the border will remain.

Here we have an extraordinary situation where there are two kinds of edges, between them bearing an incredible amount of historical and political force. And a border is always mappable in one sense or another—that is, projectable in two dimensions, whereas boundaries are always three-dimensional. They obtain for concrete beings, live bodies, human or not human, it doesn't matter which, so, in their case matters are always three-dimensional.

Borders have a strange way of being just one-dimensional and this gives to them, ironically, an authority and an ideology that makes them ideal for drawing national state difference with a stroke of a pen. Between these two kinds of edges, the difference is massive. Boundaries take centuries to evolve over time, and they're always changing, depending upon the actual state of the natural phenomenon we're discussing. They can be established and determined in a few minutes by rain. The people who gathered in 1848 at the end of the US-Mexico war were in a kind of cabinet situation, and they discussed whether the border should be determined in language, thus in something altogether human, regarding something that was meant to be an international, lasting, permanent difference, a literal de-lineation between two major countries, the US and Mexico.

This was a very powerful historical act if you think about it. We are still living with the consequences of this. Just last week both [Donald] Trump and [Joe] Biden visited the border. It was a wholly symbolic action. Neither one had anything intelligent or interesting to say about being there, but nevertheless they considered it important that they bring their bodies, their actual physical

bodies, down to the border to witness it from and in their live body perception—[Maurice] Merleau-Ponty would call it its “lived reality.” In fact, Trump and Biden know very little about the border and its history and are only focusing on it for the sake of gaining political credit. Here we have an example of something very tenuous, a fragile one-dimensional line. Nevertheless, it has had massive effects on the history of the two countries, and it’s by no means resolved, it will probably not be resolved in this particular case for a very long time. We know that.

I’m going to pause here and ask you, Michael, whether you want to say more about this border/boundary difference that I really consider incredibly central to understanding the current immigration situation—including international, local, and state politics—and much more.

MB: Yeah, I mean, if I’m understanding you correctly, there’s something very human about borders. And if I can clarify, if you don’t mind: would you say that borders and boundaries are categories of edges (edges being like an umbrella term) or are they something completely separate and different?

EC: I would call them two major kinds of edges that nevertheless coinhere and collaborate with one another—and with historically, existentially, and politically highly significant results.

MB: On that point, I personally find your US-Mexico border analysis fascinating as someone who grew up being told to be afraid of immigrants who cross the US-Mexico border and watching politicians demonize those coming for a better life. That said, I think *Janus Unbound* readers would love to hear about how borders and boundaries apply to the ongoing Palestinian and Israeli conflict, and maybe some of the lessons we could learn from the US-Mexico border. Clearly, there are important differences, not least those that concern a kind of traditional colonialism that we don’t see on the US southern border. Palestine’s borders have been continually subverted to build settlements for the Israeli state, and I am hoping we can talk about not only the geopolitical cost these levies have on Palestine but also the psychic and cultural destruction wrought on Palestinians in Gaza. How do we understand borders and boundaries in a situation of settler-colonialism?

EC: If you start with the difference between borders and boundaries, it seems rather abstract. It is abstract. Particularly since borders are abstractions. They’re abstractions from lived history, including war. They, in some sense, reflect (although in an incredibly economical and compressed form) the juxtaposition of two countries—two countries whose differences drive them to war.

This is the paradox: something as tenuous, as fragile, as an edge manages to be definitive in the juxtaposition, the common fate, of these two countries. And that continues in the case of Palestine and Israel. Here’s a contemporary example of a situation where within the state—whether Israel or Palestine—there are many boundaries formed by natural formations, mountains, orchards, but

olive gardens in particular. Olive gardens are prominent in Palestine—I have been there and witnessed this, and this means, of course, that they have many gardens. We can say that an olive garden has a boundary for its edge. It can't be entirely abstractly mappable because it can grow over the edge. It has its own autonomy.

And yet it features in contemporary politics in a powerful and tragic way. I'm just now reading a remarkable article by Shane Bauer (2024) in *The New Yorker*. Titled "The Israeli Settlers Attacking Their Palestinian Neighbors," it refers to Palestinians in the West Bank who are being displaced by settlers, focusing on a particular case of one family whose father was killed at random as he was culling his olive trees—peaceably, in no way breaking any rules—just working in his garden. He was killed in an arbitrary shooting by an Israel settler, leading to a devastated family scene in that circumstance.

We can say that the differential histories of Israelis and Palestinians are colliding at the edge in this case, an edge that is a boundary. In and through that boundary violence was enacted in a way that had tragic consequences, although in this case, this particular case, it's a story of the effect on one family only. And this incident was not in Gaza, but in a West Bank area of Palestine.

I'm here arguing that there's something uncannily extensive and powerfully generic about those two edges that I call borders and boundaries. They are, as it were, complimentary to each other, even as they differ from each other. And if you think about it that way, you begin to see that both are needed, you can't do without some sense of border, so that in the American West we used to talk about *borderlands*; but these same borderlands featured many naturally given boundaries.

"Borderland" is a very interesting term. If you think about it, the term actually combines borders and boundaries in one expression. "Land" belongs to the world of boundaries, as I have here been arguing. But borders configure these same boundaries, notably in the American West. So, it's as if this compromise—this ambivalence about the question of the expansion of this part of the world—had everything to do with breaking through established borders and setting up new and artificial ones. This was due to the local power and ambitions of settler colonies, as with my own ancestors who moved to Kansas in 1851. These ancestors, I'm pretty sure—though there were no surviving family stories—literally ran out the Kaw, an indigenous people who were dominant in that part of Kansas.

And they dispossessed them! Here we have an important word. The *dispossession* of land settled over many centuries now taken away by new settlers. Think of it as Palestinians, on the one hand, and the Kaw Indians in Kansas on the other—both being dispossessed of that to which they can argue they had a very special kind of right. This right had to do with their cultivation and care, and living on a land that was not quantified or considered up for sale.

As we know from the famous saying of chief Seattle: "the earth cannot be sold." When you turn it into a quantity that has a price, notice what you're doing, you're actually invoking monetary borders. Dollars and cents. These are delineations within a vast capitalist game. So they count in my language as bor-

ders—monetary borders, which do not cohere with the boundaries of the lands both Native Americans and Palestinians can be said not to own, but where they have a right to remain. To stay, to continue the lives that have depended upon the cultivation of that land one way or the other. We're dealing here with a rather vast phenomenon where we can see that the Israel-Palestine conflict re-enacts what's been happening for a long time—at least in the Western world as well as in many other parts of the world. This is a dislodging of native peoples from land on which they have lived for centuries.

I take land to be the surface of the earth. Land is where native peoples are grounded literally and metaphorically. It has a powerful hold on human beings, particularly those who have cultivated it over generations. Much of one's empathy for Native Americans and for Palestinians has to do with respecting the way they have tended the land beneath their feet. This is not just a matter of manual labour: what we call "agri-culture" in a limited sense. This is a profound connection between human bodies and the earth. And it's exactly the converse of John Locke's notion of the labour theory of value where you can be said to own land when you have simply stuck a shovel into it. This basic action establishes your right to own it and therefore eventually to sell it.

We can see something like this happening in Israel, where the whole notion of settlement on the part of Israelis is linked to Western capitalism because it has to do with owning or claiming to own a certain piece of land, including a house on that land, all of which is a very different thing from cultivating the land itself. The long arm of Western capitalism reaches right into the Israel-Palestine tragedy and has for a very long time, and has now come to a climax in Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

Dispossession is paired with destruction, as we can see all too vividly in the case of Gaza—where we witness the destruction of human habitations and of human beings themselves as part of a single mono-maniacal struggle on the part of the Israelis. From dispossession to destruction is a short step and all too easy to take.

I'm going to pause there for a moment because I've been covering a lot of territory. (Note that "territory" derives from *terra*, meaning earth.)

I hope that I've been developing a coherent point of view whereby if we distinguish between boundaries and borders, we can enter into both prior and contemporary history in telling ways. Not because it gives us all the answers. It doesn't. It's a matter of being descriptively adequate and this, of course, is the aim of phenomenology, a form of philosophy that I have espoused and pursued in my written work and teaching.

Borders and boundaries are quite central to what is happening in a given historical period and in a given part of the earth. Let me add that *frontiers* are edges of exploration that have not yet become known to those who are invading or wishing to own and possess land. They are the first gate through which settler colonialists establish themselves.

It really refers to American imperialism. Israel's violent seizure of land in the West Bank is continuing today at a very high rate. Indeed, a tragic amount, which gets a little covered over by the violence and manifest destructiveness of

Gaza. It's been going on almost under the cover, so to speak, of the manifestly cruel and violent war that's now occurring in Gaza.

If *frontier* is one term that we need to add to our vocabulary here in this discussion, another is *territory* itself. Territory really has to do with something that is not only to be entered, to attract dispossessing invasions, as a frontier does, but a territory is something that has become comparatively settled, or settled enough, to have a rough map made of it. I'm thinking, for example, of the Kansas-Nebraska territory which was established in 1854 before the two parts of it became separate states in the 1860s. Territory is something that is mappable and yet retains amorphousness and indefiniteness, and is what turned out to be very attractive to settlers, like my own Swiss ancestors in Kansas. They heard that you could go there and simply claim land for yourself, and that's exactly what they did, I'm afraid to say. And this happened along with millions of other early settlers in the American West.

A third key term is *borderland*. We've touched on this before. Borderland is a very interesting term. It has to do with a margin that is lingering at the outer edges of something that is better known and is likely to be already mapped and/or mappable. A borderland can become a scene of generation of activity that can be creative, but it also can be very violent. In many instances borderlands become areas that are comparatively protected. To which one can retreat and feel safe. In this case, they become a kind of natural sanctuary around land that's better known and better described and mapped than frontiers or territories. So they're very important. *Regions* refer to any landed world, but borderlands can become the very center of creative activity, or violent activity—and sometimes both together. Yet notice that like frontiers and territories they combine borders and boundaries in a unique mix that makes them elusive and difficult to pin down, difficult to map. Nevertheless, one has a feeling that if it weren't for borderlands, we wouldn't have the world as we know it. They offer a special kind of creative edge.

This is part of my general thesis on the power of edges in human life, and, indeed, in non-human life as well. Edges are not merely endpoints, limits, but they have, as it were, a force, history, and efficacy of their own. Think of them in terms of Russia invading Ukraine. Russia wishes to add Ukraine as a constitutive outer edge of its empire. It wants to conquer it, take it over, and call it its own territory. Apart from the particular political, economic, and military goals, it has to do with recognizing, and in this case to disastrous effect, the power of expanding edges of nation states. One could say that [Vladimir] Putin's obsession with invading Ukraine, conquering it, and adding it to the Russian world, has to do with his own obsession with *edge aggrandizement*.

Being a nontrivial, very powerful human motive as in this case particularly, and in many other cases, can have disastrous effects for those who live on the edge. As with both Palestine and Ukraine, thanks to the battles and the militarism that has become part of any contemporary means of warfare.

MB: Well, there's a lot here to ponder. In particular, I find myself returning back to Israel and Palestine and asking: can you weaponize borders? Is that

what Israel is doing with settlements when they bulldoze everything to build settlements and then call it another extension of Israel's border? So I guess my question is, can you weaponize a border and make it amenable to your needs, depriving others of theirs?

EC: The answer is, sadly, yes. The declaration of borders that serve the interests of the invading force is definitely a case of the inflation and expansion of those edges we call borders. In this case, the borders of Israeli settlements. The many thousands of borders that crisscross the whole West Bank are established, often by very violent means, on the part of new settlers and, as you know, they have been quite militaristic. And after October 7th, unfortunately thousands of arms have been distributed to these settlers by the Israeli government. These have not been used to fight Hamas and they never get to Gaza, but they're used locally to expand and inflate the borders of where people think they have a right to live and that because of a certain history and a certain Zionist belief that Israel is their homeland and it is in principle all theirs to possess, to cultivate, and to dominate.

We have here an incredibly powerful circumstance—it seems almost mythical, but it's also a very real set of beliefs—that claims biblical sanction, such as the Holy Land being that which properly belongs to Israel, not to Palestine. One of the most revealing things to me from my visit to Palestine and Israel a few years ago was the fact that many Palestinian villages—long before the current struggles—many ordinary towns in Palestine had no water supplies whatsoever. Their water had been cut off or siphoned to the larger cities. This left the Palestinians with a very heavy obligation: water had to be literally purchased by current citizens of Palestine from central sources in Israel. This was both expensive, but even worse it was a way of being belittled—begging at the feet of the major power. This, by the way, is still continuing. Water supplies are still cut off, and those Palestinians who do remain are forced to buy it at very high prices. We're talking about ordinary water here, not anything fancy. It's one sign of the way settler power can infiltrate and dominate the lives of ordinary people, even short of military violence.

It's a form of control and a form of domination. Here in reference to a perfectly natural, plentiful—well, fairly plentiful—resource that becomes an instrument of power. It's an extension of the power claimed by Israel in that part of the world. This was very striking to my partner and I, and as we traveled around, we saw dilapidated and impoverished villages, and this had nothing to do at that point with any war or any particular active violence. October 7th was far in the future. And Palestine was again being dispossessed: this time of water. It's an extraordinary form of control through the deprivation of a natural element.

We see here how the natural world can be employed in the pursuit of power and be manipulated and moved in directions that have nothing to do with peaceful inhabitation of the land itself. Well, the story goes on from there, you see, but it's a striking thing to see. This is outside of Jerusalem; this is way out into Palestine. My partner and I could see worse coming. There was a sense of

tension and of drama about to unfold; we felt it. Nothing in detail, but we felt catastrophe was lurking.

Again, I return to my obsessive theme: it's a matter of the position and the authority granted to borders and boundaries in a given geographical area, and how these are determined and have everything to do with the political disposition, the fate of lands in the Middle East.

I'm trying to bring the discussion around to you, Michael, because some of your suggested topics really had to do with contemporary politics, and I think that the phenomenological distinction between borders and boundaries has relevance and clarifies much. It doesn't alter the tragedy, it doesn't even give us any political solution. It's not that that we're talking about. We're talking about the phenomenological force of edges in human lives. Hence my argument in my 400-page book, arguing that the world is on edge—indeed structured by edges and continually changing in terms of new edge structures, whether these are proposed by capitalism or those recognized by Native Americans: both being very different edges, but edges nonetheless.

There's no other term in my vocabulary other than "edge" to describe this particular dimension of the life world that human beings sustain. I would add animals along with plants: my most recent book is on the fate of plants on our planet. Co-written with Michael Marder, it is called *Plants in Place* (2023)—a phenomenology of the vegetable world. It's easy to overlook when we focus ourselves entirely upon politics and militaristic dramas. But we must pay attention to this pre-human dimension. It helps to explain why I was so very struck by what I consider an archetypal act of settler-colonialism in Israel: an ordinary Palestinian man, 40 years old, carrying no gun, just culling olives from his own orchard, was shot for no good reason by a settler who had a long-distance rifle. Note that the Palestinian was interacting constructively with the plant world. He wasn't engaging in anything related, even remotely, with violence in the human world, and yet he was gunned down. I single out this incident in contrast with the vast destruction of buildings and hospitals in Gaza. These are, naturally enough, preoccupying images and realities that we are confronted with today and probably for a long while.

Politics and Philosophy

MB: Yeah, I don't mean to change gears, but we're coming up on this subject, so I was going to ask: these issues, like the US-Mexico border, Israel and Palestine, and even Ukraine and Russia, have all been oftentimes played out in exclusively political and economic terms. But as somebody who has been observing and working with it from a philosophical perspective, I'm interested in your take on philosophy in situations like this. Specifically, if you don't mind, I ask that we focus on European continental philosophy because I think that has an interesting arc to it that we can get into.

EC: Yes, thank you. I think that continental philosophy has a lot to say—not about the directions of the next two weeks in the war in Gaza, but something quite different. It isn't topical, and doesn't pretend to be. What it does pretend

to do is to single out structures of the life world that have everything to do with the dramas that unfold on the surface of the earth.

These are structures—call them Essences as [Edmund] Husserl did—or essential structures, combining the terms. And regarding which as philosophers, we need to make responsible and comprehensive descriptions. To do justice to something that otherwise gets passed over as trivial. Edges for me are the perfect example of this, given my preoccupation with them over the last ten years. It's something many take for granted, something we think is the literal end of something material. Or, for that matter, something conceptual, after which there's the abyss. There's nothing. You fall off the edge, and you are plummeting into the unknown and into the unknowable. I am trying to reverse all this as a phenomenologist and argue that we are always existing at the edge, even when we think we're in the center of things, the center of power and domination, as when we claim the right to possess lands that properly belong to others. Such a claim fails to respect the way native populations have been living and working at the edge creatively long before settler-colonialism and capitalism invaded them and took them over. I'm thinking here of the way in which Native Americans in New England, as is described in the great book by Lisa Brooks called *The Common Pot* (2008), lived by moving between the edges of forests, fields, and other parts of the natural world. Not to dominate, not to claim property rights of any sort whatsoever, but to make creative use of largely agricultural edges. This is tied in with the nomadism that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have brought back to our attention in the form of what they consider the true nomad—someone who moves from area to area and edge to edge in ways that are creative and life-sustaining and not destructive.

Native Americans were nomadic in the sense that they moved seasonally and did not simply settle in a given place lastingly, as Europeans and those of European descent tend to do. Many of these populations seek to settle in a “perfect” place, or at least a place they can call their own—where “place” signifies a home, a city, a district, or a neighborhood. This embodies a failure to pay attention to the creativity of moving between edges. Operative here is the search for security, tranquility, and permanence. Edges complicate this search. Think about painting and how the most creative painters of a given generation can be said to be working at the edge of the current state of their media.

Such artists are not trying to make something merely familiar, but to disconcert, attract, and captivate precisely because their work is edgy. We can take inspiration from this in philosophy, which is far too often centrist. This has everything to do with the critique of presence as given by Martin Heidegger and especially in Jacques Derrida. Presence really means settled fact or a settled theory—settled anything, including land that has been settled. How to live as it were *between* settlements—at their edges—instead of settling into settlements: this becomes the challenge. I don't mean necessarily uprooting yourself and literally moving from one place to another. That's one way to do it. You yourself, Michael, have experience of moving recently from the far east and north of Canada to Toronto. That's one edge world to another, I'm sure. The difference

has been challenging and inspiring and doubtless difficult sometimes, but that's part of what living on the edge brings with it.

MB: When I first read your book, and now talking to you, I see it more readily that there's something rather revolutionary at stake here, right? Like the idea that maybe borders can be expanded at will, as with the settlements in Israel. But, you know, I think it's interesting that even despite the fact that Palestine is at least, militarily, nothing compared to Israel, posing no real military threat, yet they continue to fight back anyways.

EC: Yes, that's true, I think.

MB: It speaks to a kind of rejection of the myth you were discussing earlier, and I think it has something to do with the fact that with the very creation of Israel, there were 750,000 Palestinians displaced overnight. So, I guess what I'm saying is I think it's impressive that Palestine continues to fight when, once again, in terms of military supplies, they're far, far outnumbered. But for them, it isn't a matter of math. It's a matter of something far more significant, which is the power of a truly reflective border: a border that reflects the wish to dominate and subdue.

EC: Yes, very well put—I like the term “reflective border”—as opposed to a dogmatic static border. Living on the edge creatively is something that Palestinians have been doing for a very long time. The Israelis who surged forth in 1948 put them on edge, unfortunately the edge of catastrophe and destruction. But since then, they have been living on the edge. You're certainly right about that. This is really extraordinary. They've survived as a people with a real commitment to creative and family life. For example, the same story that I keep referring to from *The New Yorker* is all about such disruption, as with the family whose male member was killed. And this, of course, is replicated now thousands of times in Gaza.

Here a kind of disaster Israel is visiting upon the Palestinians not just in Gaza, but long before that everywhere in Palestine. Not just by way of military invasions, but in daily life in which there is deprivation of water (and other necessities). It's extraordinary. Palestinians are interested in peace and in having a government of their own. The Palestinians are a people from whom we should really take many lessons. Let's hope that this will become true and that they survive in some viable way.

The invasion and destruction of Gaza is the larger drama that is circling around us in this very conversation. I think philosophers have an obligation to pick out the elements and factors that really make up such a tragic circumstance. There is no question that a lot of it has to do with the misalliance, misunderstanding, and misuse of the edge world. But it would take another book to spell this out adequately, Michael.

MB: Hahahaha.

EC: Maybe *you* can do it! I'm writing only short books now, and I'm only writing them with other people. Because I'm in my retirement years, I'm no longer interested in being the sole author of books as I was in my more ambitious youth. I just want to write things with others, as with the book *Plants in Place*, to which I referred earlier. I'm now writing another book with a colleague in the philosophy department at Stony Brook University, which has the puzzling title *Thinking in Transit*. It's about the creative thinking that occurs when you are in between places, traveling between or walking between places. We have tried to single out many contexts where you're disrupted from sedentary life and have creative thoughts that would not otherwise occur. Both books are instances of thinking on the edge.

MB: You have just retired from teaching. Looking back, are there any ways your career has changed over time? I know you love the classroom, but how are you staying busy now that you aren't teaching? Is there anything you would have done differently?

EC: Yeah, I think I should have been more politically active than I was. I think I sublimated and displaced political activism into philosophical writing and into teaching itself. I've tried to correct that more recently, Michael, even while I was still teaching in the last few years. I created a group at Stony Brook University that is helping asylum seekers in the Northeast. And now in Santa Barbara I'm working as a tutor of English as a second language for Mexican migrants.

So those are things I have been doing, Michael, and I am now moving in these directions at the very end of a career in which I have been teaching for the last 50 years. I think philosophers should be in the front ranks of those who come forward actively to address issues in the larger political and social world.

MB: Thank you so much for your time and insight, Professor Casey. It has been an absolute joy to speak with you today. Everyone at *JU* wishes you a wonderful retirement!

Biographies

Edward S. Casey is Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, emeritus, SUNY at Stony Brook. He is the past president of the American Philosophical Association (Eastern Division) and has given the annual John Dewey lecture at the same Association. Chair of the philosophy department at Stony Brook, he is the author of 12 books: among them are *Imagining*, *Remembering*, *Getting Back into Place*, *The Fate of Place*, *Representing Place*, *The World at a Glance*, *Up Against the Wall* (co-author), *The World on Edge*, and *Plants in Place: A Phenomenology of the Vegetal* (co-authored).

Michael Broz is a doctoral candidate at Memorial University of Newfoundland. He has published articles and book reviews dealing with Marx, Capitalism, and

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