The Nature of At-Homeness

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Introduction

Why should we be concerned with elucidating the experience of "at homeness?" Is there any experience more familiar to us than the experience of our home: the experience of being at home; being away from home; or being on our way home? And do we not have a wide knowledge of homes: of good homes; bad homes; and even broken homes? Probably we do, but how often do we stop to really reflect on what it is that makes a particular place or house a home? Do we ever stop to wonder about that being we speak of when we talk about being at home or being away from home? Or to reflect on the significance of our home for our everyday existence?

While I sit here trying to prepare for this paper about the experience of being at home, I can easily recall the first days my family and I, soon after our arrival in Edmonton after a tiresome journey from Iceland, spent in the house we expected to become our home for the next few years. As we happily walked around the house, finding places for the few things we brought with us, finding closets for our clothes and deciding where we should have our bedroom and where our son should have his, one central thought occupied our minds: soon this house will become our home. As it was lived, nothing seemed more natural than this kind of thought. Only through a suspension of this natural attitude does the question of what makes such a thought possible arise. What for instance, allowed us, after we actually moved into this house, to make such a distinction between a house and a home? What is the relation between these two? When does a house become a home? Or even, when does a home become merely a house? Does it become a home when we have got all the things in it that we need? When we have lived there for some time? Or when we have been there long enough to get to know the neighbours? In short, what are some of the conditions upon which anyone can truly say that she/he has a home?

What we are trying to get at is the nature or essence of "homeness," or the "whatness" of a home. By doing so we are looking for the common structure of the experience of at-homeness. We are looking for the structure we intuitively grasp when we hear people say "how good it was to get home after that terrible day," or even when the word is used in derived senses as when we say that someone is at home in this or that, or when philosophers speak of our age as the "age of the homeless mind." All these expressions seem to refer back to this intuitively understood structure of experience. William Goyen must have had the mystery of this being in mind when he wrote:

That people could come into the world in a place they could not at first even name and had never known before; and that out of a nameless and unknown place they could grow and move around in it until its name they knew and called with love, and call it HOME, and put roots there and love others there; so that whenever they left this place they would sing homesick songs about it and write poems of yearning for it, like a lover.[1]

However, the difficulties we are confronted with when we begin to ask such fundamental questions about the nature of the experience of at-homeness is the closeness or
nearness of what is asked about. Hence, what is called for is a radical approach to overcome the nearness, or taken-for-granted understanding of at-homeness—radical in the etymological sense of going to the roots of what is talked about. Therefore, our approach is phenomenological. It is phenomenological because phenomenology tries to get at the roots, that is, to that which makes a particular experience possible in the first place. So we intend to return to the experience of at-homeness in a radical sense, not as articulated in theory or interpreted by our common sense, but as lived.

Always Somewhere in Relation to Our Home

When we start to reflect upon our experience of home we first of all come to realize the spatiality of our home. When we speak of our home we usually speak of a country, city, street or a house. So, as the phenomenologists who have for long pointed to our lived body as the absolute zero-point form which all lived space is organized into here, there, up, down, small, large, we may just as well posit our home as such a central point within our lived world. Are we not always somewhere in relation to our home? We are either on our way home, away from home, or at home. The meaning of "home" in this context may depend on our situation so that sometimes home refers to our country, sometimes to our city, and sometimes even to our street. But primarily, I believe, it refers to our house or some place of residence.

To speak of a house or place of residence in relation to our home is not to be materialistic in any sense; neither ordinary usage of the word nor lived experience allows for any real distinction between these two. As the English proverb puts it, "A man's home is his castle." And we only need to look back on our childhood home in order to see the significance of the house for the feeling of at-homeness. Who does not remember our careful exploration of the surroundings of our house? Who does not remember in detail all the special places of our house: where we slept, where we ate, where we hid when we did something wrong, where we went to daydream, and the places where we were not supposed to go. Or the stairway to the cellar we always went down and the stairway to the attic we always went up? And who does not recall those days when we sat at the window during bad weather, watching the rain and the lightning or when we lay in bed listening to the thunder thinking about the poor animals, cats and dogs, who did not have a house? In memory, then, our house is a place of protection and security where we are safe, where we withdraw, and where we find comfort.

Home as a Place to Be

When reflecting on our experience of at-homeness it soon becomes evident that our home is fundamentally different from most other places; it is a unique place in some way. The Icelandic word we use for the English word "home" in the dictionary sense of "a house or other dwelling where one lives," is the word heimili. The word is derived from the world hemur or "world." So etymologically, in my linguistic tradition, home means a world, the world of the home. But what sort of world is the world of the home? According to Webster’s Dictionary home refers to "a peaceful or restful place" and being at home refers to being "relaxed and comfortable," or "in harmony with the surroundings" and "on familiar ground." Has this something to do with the presence of special things? Particular social relations? Specific activity, or perhaps all of this? In attempting to pursue these questions further, we like to ask more concretely what people have to say about their homes, what they look forward to on their way home.
after a hard day or when they have to stay away from home, say, when travelling and they have to stay in a motel or a hotel? Eddie, Stephen and Kerry can perhaps give us some hints here.

Eddie, for instance, a man in his fifties, married with two children, says that what he looks forward to when going home in the afternoon after a long day at the university, is to talk to his wife and children for the first time since morning. He also looks forward to "sitting down in a comfortable, familiar, atmosphere, having a cup of coffee and reading the newspaper. A kind of relaxation and comfort," he adds. Stephen, a student at the University of Alberta, married with two kids, says that it is wonderful to be able sometimes to work at home. At home, he says. "I can take nice breaks, take the kids for a walk, help my wife get a cup of coffee or if someone is watching television, then look at what they are watching and ask about it. But of course," he adds, "it can become too noisy to work at home." Kerry, on the other hand, chooses to live alone although she does not intend to live alone in the future. She likes to come home in the afternoon or in the evening, make tea, change her clothes and lie down in the living room with a book or watch TV.

The home thus allows for some mode of being we do not usually experience in other places. Writers and poets often try to catch sight of this experience by comparing the home or the house with animal shelters. Gaston Bachelard, in The Poetics of Space (p. 91), quotes a painter, living quietly in the country who wrote:

The well-being I feel, seated in front of mv fire, while bad weather rages out of doors, is entirely animal. A rat in its hole, a rabbit in its burrow, cows in the stable, must all feel the same that I feel.

While it may be absurd to attribute animal qualities to humans, the comparison may have its significance. We tend to see the nest as the bird’s warm home, carefully made by the owner to prepare for its young. Henry David Thoreau tells of a green woodpecker that took an entire tree for its home. He then compared the woodpecker’s confidence in the shelter of the tree in which it had hidden its nest to the joy of a family that returns to live in a house it has long since abandoned:

It is as when a family, your neighbors return to an empty house after a long absence, and you hear the cheerful hum of voices and the laughter of children, and see the smoke from the kitchen fire. The doors are thrown open, and children go screaming through the hall. So the flicker dashes through the aisles of the grove, throws up a window here and cackles out it, and the there, airing the house. It makes its voice ring up-stairs and down-stairs, and so, as it were, fits it for its habitation and ours, and takes possession.

Thus, insofar as the nest is the bird’s corner of the world, in which the bird withdraws into its own, secure world, the comparison with the human home may have its merit. Bollnow (1971, p. 181) makes the point that by building a house, man "carves out of universal space a special space and to some extent private space and thus separates inner space from outer space." So, in contrast to outer space of "openness, danger and abandonment," the space of the home provides a protected and hidden area, "an area in which he [the human being] can be relieved of continued anxious alertness, into which he can withdraw in order to return to himself" (p. 181). This returning to oneself seems to
be of particular importance here. As van Manen pointed out, at home we are no longer a university professor, graduate student, and so forth, but truly ourselves. Frank Buckley (1971, p. 205) has characterized this “I’m where I can be myself” feeling as the feeling when there is no need to explain our actions to anyone nor any need to feel on guard towards the misperceptions of others, as, for example, when getting home tired in the late afternoon, I feel free to kick off my shoes and lie down flat on my back in the middle of the living room floor and close my eyes. So perhaps we can say that at home we do not have to play the “games” of the outer world: talk for the sake of talking; act happy when we feel sad; in short, to be what others we hardly know expect us to be.

Home is Where We Have Our Things

An intrinsic part of the wellbeing we experience at home is undoubtedly due to the fact that at home we are in a familiar, well-known, environment, surrounded by personal things. Household things, tables, desks, chairs, pictures, books, and candlesticks, are familiar and they are ours so they are much more than merely “things.” Jean-Paul Sartre, in Being and Nothingness, makes the following point in his discussion of things as part of our being in this case, being-at-home:

My lamp is not only that electric bulb, that shade, that wrought iron stand, it is a certain power of lighting this desk, these books, this table; it is in a certain luminous nuance of my work at night in connection with my habits of reading or writing late; it is animated, colored, defined by the use which I make of it; it is that use and exists only through it. If isolated from my desk, from my work, and placed in a lot of objects of the floor of a salesroom, my lamp is radically extinguished; it no longer my lamp; instead merely a member of the class of lamps, it has returned to its original matter. Thus I am responsible for the existence of my possessions in the human order. (1966, p. 753)

Most items of the home have their story and are thus pregnant with the meaning of the being from which they emerged. “This postcard is from a friend in Mexico.” “This doll I bought when we went to Greece two years ago.” “This picture was taken of Brynjar and Baldur in Calgary last summer.”

The experience of moving temporarily away from home makes us particularly aware of the importance of personal things for the “homeness” of our home. Who does not recognize the careful selection of items which we intend to take with us to the new place? Each item, a picture, a book, a toy, and so forth, is sparingly selected in the anticipation of the new home we intend to create in the new situation. Sometimes we realize, as my wife did after we moved into our house in Edmonton, that something was missing. She felt that she “really had to” get a couple of tiny statues she used to have in the living room, so these things had to be sent all the way from Iceland.

But things do not merely “lie around.” Heidegger speaks of the “arranging” (Einraumen) of space in this respect; things must have their “own place” to be ready for later use. The construction and gardening tools belong in the garage; the hammer belongs in the toolbox, and so forth. And who does not recognize the feeling when coming home and the kids, your own or others, have been messing around in your room and left things out of place? Or in earlier times when your mother just put the things in your room “in order” but that just wasn’t the right order? This book belongs on the bookshelf while that one is supposed to be on the desk. Again the experience of moving may provide an illustration.
here. It probably took my wife and me couple of months or more to find the right places for the things we brought with us or the things we bought after our arrival. Again and again things were moved from one place to another before they were seen as belonging there.

Hence we can say with Sartre that the totality of our possessions reflects the totality of our being. By choosing our household things, and by ordering them in the way we like, our way, we synthesize what Sartre calls "creation" and "appropriation" in the choice of our being. Therefore, Sartre concludes, "I meet the possessor in and through the objects which he possesses" (1966, p. 750).

Finding Your Place at Home

Every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw into our selves, is a symbol of solitude for the imagination; that is to say, it is the germ of a room, or of a house. (Bachelard, 1969, p. 136)

But it is not only things which have their place at home; activities have their places and people also find their place in the home. There are places to sleep and eat, places for hide-and-seek, places for daydreaming, places to read or think and talk, places to be when others are at home, and so on. "Let's go to the kitchen to talk." There are even different places to do the same thing in the daytime and in the evening. I have, for instance, recognized in my own case that everywhere I have lived over some time I have made my own "cosy corner," usually consisting of a comfortable chair, usually in a corner, and table large enough to hold a lamp, a cup of coffee and a book. This is my place, not always and not as a property, but particularly in the evenings when there is an opportunity to sit there and read.

Eddie has his study room upstairs, which is really a general purpose room, but where he goes and withdraws when he needs to be by himself. "It is quiet," he says, and "I can shut the door," he adds. "This is where I go when other people are around, the radio is on, TV is on, and when people are talking downstairs." But when Eddie is alone he will "go downstairs to the dining room which has two windows, two big windows, one facing south and one facing west, so there is lots of light, natural light, and sunshine, and it is a bigger area so I like working down there. It is also close to the kitchen if I want a cup of coffee." Eddie adds.

Kevin also mentioned that he has his favorite place at home, particularly for studying. He always sits in the living room when studying, "in a comfortable chair with the radio by my side so I can turn it up if I hear something which interests me." Sitting there, "under a large and light window, alone in the apartment, I find very nice," Kevin says.

Whether such places are in the living room, the kitchen, the bedroom or somewhere else, and whether they are primarily used for reading, writing, sewing, watching TV or something else, is a secondary question in this respect. The question is rather whether this kind of arrangement of space in our home is peculiar to the experience of at-homeness.
"Homely" Relations with Others

In our description of the experience of at-homeness we have on several occasions come across the significance of other people in the experience of the home. The question thus naturally arises of how others enter into the experience of homeness. Would we say that others are required for a true experience of a home, and that a home without others is somehow less of a home than a home with others, or is there some other way of making sense of the relationship between others and the home? For most people, the experience of homeness is probably closely related to the experience of others. Most of us grew up with others in a home, and many of us still live in a family. All the places of our childhood home are in some way related to others. The hiding place was where we hid from someone or looked for someone; the secret place was the place we did not want others to know about, and so forth. And if we are still living in a family, as we saw in Eddie’s case, there are quiet places because there are others around. Hence, for many people, home and others are inseparable. Bob feels like that. He is a man in his early thirties who lived alone for about eight years before coming to the University of Alberta. After living for some time in the university residence Pembina, where he lived alone in a small room, he has moved into his girlfriend’s apartment. "I had almost forgotten," he said, "how different it is to live with someone else. Not just something, but everything, changes. Coming home, being home, eating, sleeping, just everything." Bob contrasted this new feeling of homeness with the feeling of living alone in his own apartment at home, which he hardly ever called a home: "To go to my house was nothing interesting, far from that. And I tried to stay at the school where I worked as long as I could in the afternoon. There was nothing which ‘called,’ nothing but the few things I had there. I usually stood in front of the school and desperately thought of someone I could visit. To go west was in fact my last choice." But Bob acknowledges that he had done nothing for his apartment and that if he had put more effort into making it more like a home he would probably have spent much more time there.

But the simple observation that people live alone and still have their home clearly shows us that the presence of others is not a necessary condition for the experience of at-homeness. For those who live alone, home also calls. Although they do not have someone waiting at home, they have something waiting. The home is their place, with their things, their chairs, tables, books, pictures, and so on, and at home they feel the same security and comfort as anyone else. And if they want to listen to someone, or talk to someone, they may turn on the radio or call a friend. As Kerry said, "When I feel lonely at home I keep the TV on during the day without looking at it. Only to hear some voices," she explains. So, for some, the home is exactly the place where you can be alone and be yourself. A place where you do not have to talk or listen. To live alone is one way we can choose to be at home.

What, then, is the relationship between the home and Others? If we attend carefully to our lived experience we may discover that it is not so much a question of whether someone shares, or does not share, the home with us, as it is a question of the sort of relationship we have with others at home. Home does not require other people, but it requires specific kinds of relations to others. As Kerry said, "I do not want just anyone in my home, only good friends or relatives." Perhaps the reason we can truly be ourselves at home is exactly that, in living with others, we are allowed to be ourselves. As Bollnow says, we are given space to be. But although the home does not necessarily need others, say a family, a family needs a home. In other words, the home is the family’s place. For
instance, we may not care so much about having a home when we are young and single, but as soon as we, for instance, expect a child we start thinking about a home for it.

Home is thus a place which calls for *homely relations* with others. When reflecting on the home as a place which calls for certain kinds of interpersonal relations, I recall a talk with a fourteen-year-old girl who had attempted suicide. At first she was quite unwilling to speak about herself but when she finally did so, she spoke about her home: a home which had all the material conditions for wellbeing. To my mind, her story confirms our conclusion. Although I do not recall all the details of her story I shall never forget how she described the way most days began. The day would begin with her father shouting from downstairs that she has to hurry, she is getting late for school as usual. When she gets downstairs, her mother is usually still sleeping and it is dark in the house except for the light over the table where her father sits behind the morning paper. There they sit in silence and eat their breakfast. Usually no word is spoken and when she leaves for school she often has to say goodbye to her father two or three times before she gets any answer. The real tragedy of her story was how aware she was of the fact that it was not supposed to be like that. She often referred to her best friend’s home where her friend was woken up by someone her mother or father, coming into her room and saying something pleasant to her. Then all the family had breakfast together, it was light in the house, and the family discussed their plans for the day or something of that sort. While this little part of her story may not be looked at in isolation from the story as a whole, there is not doubt, in my view, about the meaning of her experience: the total lack of authentic communication meant the absence of a true home.

**At Home We "Grow Older"**

Until now we tried to point to the concreteness of the experience of our home; household things or family members are not merely examples of general types, but *my* things and *significant* others. The same can be said about the temporal structure of the homeness. Our home is a place we can always return to. Whether I am staying at a motel or in a cafe, as soon as my business is over I rise and go home. This notion of returning home is common to the old mythologies of many countries; man needs to go away in order to learn, see new things and meet new people, but finally he has to return home. Our home is the fixed place in the stream of time and space. As Bollow writes: man "needs a firm place if he is not to be dragged along helplessly by the stream of time" (1971,p. 543).

But the home also has its own inner temporal structure. When, after a long and tiresome day at the university, I come home and shut the door behind me, I feel as if I am entering a place in which the succession of events has different rhythms than in the outer world. Although my experience in both cases carries a horizon of the past and a horizon of the future, that "first things become first" so to speak, there are some radical differences. At home, time seems to slow down and become more concrete and personal. In the outer world, time seems to be imposed in a calendar style, as fixed and inevitable. I have only forty minutes until next class. At five o'clock Errol is coming to see me. Or, I have to have this paper in before next Monday. At home, however, dinner is when Daddy comes home, and sometimes he comes home earlier than usual. Time for bath is after dinner and time for bed after bath. For the parents the temporal structure is more dependent upon what the priorities are, what we like to do, or what we
need to do. "I am too tired to wash the dishes now so let's sit down and talk" or "Let's put the kids earlier to bed tonight because John and Mary are coming."

But there is also an aspect of the home-world time which transcends these day-to-day experiences. At home we grow older; here we make our plans for the future and here we see time go by. Suddenly Brynjar needs a larger bed and Baldur needs new pants. Is the mark on the wall really a mark of Brynjar's size from last year? Have we really been here for three years?

We are perhaps reminded quite often in the outer world that time goes by, but nowhere, I believe, is it done in such a concrete and meaningful way as at home.

Final remarks

The previous analysis should in no way be taken to imply that the experience of at-homeness is as discrete as our discussion has been. On the contrary, the experience of being at home is something which comes together in lived experience as a whole. Sitting here, for example, trying to put an end to this paper, I am aware of my immediate environment. my desk, books, and so on. I hear the noise of my boys playing in the children's room and I hear the kids playing outside as well. I look at my cup and I know that there is some coffee left downstairs, and I smell my wife's cooking from the kitchen. All this comes together in what I know to be my home.

At this point, however, we need to ask about the significance of asking about the nature of home experience. Although the previous analysis is nothing but a sketch towards a phenomenology of at-homeness, if it is successful, one thing may have been accomplished. This description may have brought to awareness something about being at home which was previously taken for granted or went unnoticed, and thus contributed to a fuller understanding of the meaning of this particular way of being. If we turn our back too long on the calling of the home, the danger is that its meaning may become seriously transformed. In times when great masses of people are uprooted, either from economical necessity, voluntarily in a search for new opportunities, or driven out of their homes and resettled in strange places, the meaning of the home may easily become distorted. Instead of being a place of safety and comfort, structured by familiar things and/or human relations in which the individual can truly be- perhaps best described in Heidegger's words as a place in which to "Dwell, Think, and Build"-homes may turn into merely "houses" in which people "invest" in order to pass by, to eat, and to sleep. Similarly "homes" can become places of terror or anxiety for battered women or abused children. In such cases "home" is not really home at all.

So, in doing this, that is in attempting to elucidate what we really mean by home we may not only increase our understanding of the ways we are at home but also of the ways we are in the world. While it is true that to be at home is simultaneously to be in the world, it may turn out that the being we speak of as being at home speaks of something much more fundamental than merely "staying at home." It may well turn out that the way we are at home illustrates largely the way we are in the world, the way we relate to others, to things, and ourselves. Or, even if that is not the case, our homely relations may serve as paradigmatic for our relations to the world. In this way, a phenomenology of at-homeness may constitute the beginning of an inquiry into the ways we want to be in the world.
References


Notes


http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/articles/baldursson.html
It should be said at the outset that at the time of writing, the hypothesis I advance here is not, as far as I know, accepted by anyone in the academic world of consciousness studies (with the obvious exception of myself). Therefore the book is organized as a polemic. First the basic hypothesis is introduced and its origins in ancient philosophy are shown. The aim of this book is to lay the foundation stone for a scientific theory of the nature of conscious experience. When I first started thinking seriously on this question about five years ago, I had no clue as to what such a theory would look like. All I did know was that in order to be counted as scientific, it would have to have certain characteristics.