

Home and the Loss of Home. Reflection on the Anthropological Situation¹

Keywords: the philosophical concept of home; homelessness; the ethical dimension of hospitality; the foreign as an other; care for the other; education for hospitality

Introduction

The motif of a house and home can be considered a structural anthropological element that penetrates all cultures in all times. It is manifested in expressions of folk wisdom (e.g. in sayings like “The Englishman’s home is his castle.”, “Home sweet home.”), but also in literary quotations, indicating the archetype of home, such as “Home is the place where one’s hat can be hung.” (Czech comic actor Jan Werich), “Home is not the place where you live, it is the place where you are understood.” (German poet Christian Morgenstern), “Home is the hands you can weep on.” (Slovak poet Miroslav Válek). In order to induce the atmosphere, here is a quote from Válek’s meditative poem:

We are cold here.
It is raining.
We want to go home.
Home is the cold water in a dewy jug.
Home is the hands laid on a table
In Sunday silence, after work,
Empty and waiting,
Crucial,
The only that create history.
Home is the hands you can weep on.

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Home as an Existential Topos of a Human

Home is intuitively understood as a primary experience, a life axiom that is ostentatiously abandoned in our youth only to be later, accidentally or ambitiously, found again, together with our I. Even though “I” and “home” are distinguished, they have one root – its recreation or, on the contrary, its neglect determine the life we live. Sociologists and anthropologists together with political scientists describe the functions of family and home as fundamental. They bring a number of data and essential facts that they analyse in terms of an individual as well as society and seek to contribute to the improvement of quality of life. The presented occurrence of the phenomenon of family from all possible perspectives and developmental trends based on it form a very precise, verifiable, sometimes even falsifiable image. They contain all the features of strict scientism. The research of family is complemented by analyses and descriptions of a psychological character. However, this paper does not belong to this field.

The submitted reflection has a philosophical character. Its main aim is to answer the question “What is the meaning of home for human existence in the context of the crisis of modern humanity?” Another important factor is the question of *the other*, whose presence is a constituting condition of home, its quality and meaning as well as a condition of the philosophical discourse on home.

This contemplation returns to the simple phenomenon of “home” that is the centre of our lives, where we keep on returning throughout our life, from which we set out for “conquering expeditions”, we distance ourselves so that we could experience its deprivation and come back with purified motives, being aware of its value.

Why is home visible and understandable only from abroad? How is it possible that we are aware of home only from a distance? Why does home seem precious and scarce at present to the extent that the current social policies of states place an unusually strong emphasis and invest enormous resources to the creation of home for refugees as well as domestic “nomads” searching for ephemeral homes in their own escapes? Many cured drug abusers speak of home as of the highest and the only. If we had given them home, we would have eliminated their escapes to the chemical worlds of theirs².

Human modality of existence is essentially bound with being “somewhere”. A human does not exist *sub specie aeternitatis* (outside time and place), nor *sub specie rei* (absolutely identified with place and time), but as a being who understands themselves as existing in an existential relationship with place and time. “To be somewhere” is expressed in some languages (e.g. in English) by a particular compound verb that naturally integrates the connection to a place into the act of being (human being: not only “to be”, but “to be THERE”).

² A. Hogenová, *Domov jako problem*, “Paideia – Philosophical E-journal of Charles University” 2008, 3-4/V, p. 1.

What is a place? Heidegger answers, “TOPOS must be something. When there was some water in a jug and when now there is some air in it, what else is topos than something that can be filled?”³ Topos is a magnifying glass that clarifies the meaning of being a human. “Oikos” is a particular case of topos. Oikos means “home” in Greek. In connection to the phenomenon of home we need to ask, how is the possibility to find a place where our home will be given in us in advance? In Heidegger’s ideas, home is the “fire centre of the world”. From this oikos, which later became the prefix eco- in the words like ecology, economy, ecoindustry, etc., everything that is ours runs into the world. Home embraces our life in wholeness as well as in the tiniest events. We care for our home, our environment, and thus, the ecological activities gain a positive axiological and moral connotation that we need to approve of. After all, the original meaning of the word “ethos” leads to home: it denotes practice, custom, the “usual place”. Ethos is the moral aspect of a routine, the place where we do not have to be afraid of being endangered by the strange and its demand on our adaptation. Oikos and ethos are related terms that refer to house, home, household, birthplace, home country, own, our, ...

Place is the possibility that occurs before our life movement so that it was filled by our existence. However, home is a unique place that is not a possibility dependent on our choice, it precedes our freedom by creating a space in which our roots were sown. Thus, already in advance, we are directed to a place that we fill with our own being and that determines the foundation of our further possibilities.

According to Heidegger, the existence of a human is never a pure “sein” (being), because it is always an existence in a relationship to a place, it is “Dasein”, translated as “being there”, “presence”, “existence”, “dwelling”⁴. Heidegger’s ontological concept is based on an assumption that a human is a being that lives in the world. If the existence of a human is dwelling, i.e. Being-in-the-relationship-to-the-world-at-this-time, then dwelling cannot be understood as a simple reproductive survival (such as plants and animals), nor as arbitrary and proprietary usage, but as a role and a commitment. Dwelling commits a human to such a form of stay that is marked by concern (Sorge). The ethics of concern and care will be addressed at the end of this contemplation.

The Closeness of Home

Dwelling of a human (Dasein) contains dynamics of the space. Spaciousness is a structural moment of movement and it is opened in existential closeness (Nähe) and distance (Entfernung). What is the closest to a human? Heidegger

Heidegger in: ibidem, p. 7 [tr].
M. Heidegger, *Bytí a čas*, Praha 2002.

answers: It is what can be humanly approached, i.e. to determine its place. This “approaching” is manifested mostly in a piece of work and in speech. Speech that is found by a human and in which they dwell becomes the space of home⁵. Speech is not used here as a tool to denote things; we do not use speech, on the contrary, speech addresses us, calls us, challenges us. Through speech we dwell in the world, by denoting we grasp the world as a whole.

Heidegger points out that the notion “dwelling” (similarly to “speech”) is used in dual meaning. On the one hand, as cultivation and concern for what is growing and maturing (in the sense of the Latin *colere* and culture), on the other hand, as building (Lat. *aedificare*), constructing and building up, when by the effort of a human arises something that may not otherwise arise. Building of home if it is a demonstration of empowering the world, the pursuit of merit and possessions, is not dwelling in the essential sense; on the contrary, it distances itself from the authentic dwelling on this earth. The authentic dwelling, in the existential relationship to home, is dwelling that is cultivating and caring.

We are aware of home only from a distance. Only from a distance the essence of home is shown – that is why we need to travel abroad. We understand home only based on the opposite. An authentic approach to home opens for us only from a distance, detachment, a foreign country. A realistic and substantially engaged relationship to home is acquired only from a distance, in a situation of a lasting or temporary loss of home, from abroad. Only from a distance, it is possible to spot the spring a human comes from. Only in the position of a foreigner, nomad, wanderer or the persecuted does one crave for the asylum, the sacred place that represents protection, refuge and saturation. *Asylum* represented such a sacred, indestructible place already in antiquity. Home is a holy place. In the volatility of the movement of life, it represents what springs in the depth of mother Earth, what is not possible to be touched by hands or seen by eyes. Therefore, home cannot be interchanged with a calculation of biological and social functions, as it often happens in the academic environment as well as in social policies.

Home as an initiation is always for the first time and for the last time. It never repeats in identity, it would only be a beginning always repeating at the same point. But initiation is always only for the first time. Home is the spring of that being always “for the first time”. Here, a human is as if born again, purged, revived in the original sense. It is a sacred place. And again – the biggest mistake is to understand home as functions of biological needs of a lineage or social and economical needs of a unit of productive forces.

Home is the centre of natural world, it is the place where we are us the most. Jan Patočka uses Komenský's statement that home is the depth of safety, “it is the part of universe that is penetrated humanly the most, things are so to say or-

⁵ M. Heidegger, *Básnický bydlí člověk*, Praha 1993.

gans of our life, they are TA PRAGMATA, we always know how to handle them”⁶. Home is an extended organism, it is our prolonged body. Gaston Bachelard writes, “Birth house is physically inscribed into us. It is a kind of organic custom. With a passage of twenty years, in contrast to all the anonymous staircases, we would find the reflexes of “the first staircase” again, we would not trip over a higher step. The entire being of home would spread, faithful to our being”⁷. The experience of home accompanies us throughout our life, we move within it as if subconsciously, blindfolded. In order to be able to behave like this, home has to be home, to be occupied, snuggled, furnished – that is why we suddenly find out that we cannot throw away old toys, because together with them we would get rid of a part of our childhood; or old postcards, because we would resign on relationships to people, who may not be among us anymore⁸. The close is never banal. Closeness is not given as a matter of fact; it is necessary to strive for closeness, it is always a joined work of a man and a woman, parents and children, the old and the young. Home is not only where we are physically present; even though it often ceases to be home when someone close leaves it. Home rather means: to have a place to return to; it is connected to the important feeling that someone is waiting for me there. The space of home is what opens up broader spaces; it is a meeting point of generations, occupations, friends, acquaintances. Home is thus a horizon, in the sense that it opens the world to a human in a certain way; it is an angle of view from which we understand the world and behave to it. As Bachelard states, “Before human was «thrown into the world», as the stern metaphysics declare, he was put into the cradle of the house”⁹. Home is the place of intimacy and refuge, from where the world opens up to us. Humans are beings of distances and therefore, they need home. Without home, human is a scattered being.

Fear of Losing Home

The concern for our soul is realized by a dialogue. It means that only a silent and calm dialogue of ourselves with ourselves leads to inner satisfaction, non-violent and kind attunement. The descent to the lowermost place of our own spring opens up only at home¹⁰. Home is the place where we are rooted in, where we are the happiest. We are able to adopt inner freedom, an attitude to the world only thanks to a situation that kindly opens and this situation is our home;

J. Patočka, *Prirozený svět jako filosofický problém*, Praha 1992, p. 86 [tr.].

⁷ G. Bachelard, *Poetika priestoru*, Bratislava 1990, p. 53 [tr.].

⁸ N. Pelcová, *Fenomén domova*, „Paideia – Philosophical E-journal of Charles University” 2008, 3–4/V, p. 4.

⁹ G. Bachelard, op. cit., p. 53 [tr.].

¹⁰ A. Hogenová, op. cit., p. 6.

therefore, it has a priceless meaning for each of us. Thus, everyone likes to return home after work or from their travels. And how horrid it has to be to have nowhere to return to!

The old Greeks called horror and dread “deinos”. We experience deinos when we lose certainty, shape; when we face nothingness that is associated with death. The one who knows death well, experiences deinos. Therefore, it is needed to travel and stay abroad, to meet up with otherness in such extent that we can talk about quake and horror. This quake “shakes us off” our time-space and cultural certainties, a human finds themselves perfectly alone. The loss of home with no hope of return causes dread and threat of existential nihilism.

One of the features of liberalism is liberation from everything that belongs to the past, including the bond to the roots or the spring that saturates meaningfulness. In other words, schematically understood liberalism destroys home itself. From this perspective, history and the past become only fabrications of strange chroniclers and of those who are not able to live for the future to its fullest right now. Thus, only what is new is given full authority of recognition, everything else delays and brakes. As a result, we witness evanescence of roads taken by people for centuries; suddenly, a wall, residence or shopping mall stand there. Old houses decorated with stucco profiles are being quickly demolished and modern geometric and pragmatic dwellings grow in their places. Everything is being pushed forward and there is no time to tarry with the past. Sometimes it is called “to be in!”. Such an existence has lost its initiation, it has only the beginnings of causal series, which can be controlled and falsified¹¹.

The reversed side of such “free unfolding”, which became a driving force of the postmodern culture, is discussed by several contemporary authors. Among others, it is sufficient to mention Z. Bauman, the author of the phrase “liquid times”¹². Bauman points out the current age of uncertainty, where rootlessness, the loss of the sense of oikos and responsibility for it prevail. According to him, an individual is trying to handle his situation among the non-influenceable through creating and developing his own “fear management”. Interpersonal kinship and neighborly bonds disappeared during the first wave of deregulation and individualization (the emergence of modernism) and they were supposed to be replaced by artificial equivalents in the form of associations and unions, united by common interests, routine and solidarity. The arrival of postmodernism was followed by “the second wave of deregulation and individualization”, in which solidarity dissolved and new forms of fear management arose. They are transferred from the political and public sphere to the individual and private sphere and they regard care, inventiveness and skilfulness of individuals in the midst of the market. Solidarity was replaced by competition and suddenly, indi-

Cf.: A. Hogenová, op. cit., p. 10.

¹² Z. Bauman, *Těkuté časy: Život vo věku nejistoty*, Praha 2008.

viduals remain reliant on themselves and their insufficient resources. “A contemporary human lives on the shifting sands of unpredictability. In such a society they obtain the feelings of existential uncertainty and a shattered fear of danger that lurks everywhere, necessarily of endemic nature”¹³. Bauman’s observations confirm the actual state of threat of social and cultural homelessness, to which the blinded liberalistic enthusiasm inevitably leads. Paraphrasing Kant’s second anthropological question, we ask again: What shall we do?

Guest in the House – The Ethics of the Care for Home

Martin Buber, perhaps the most famous representative of philosophy of dialogue, claims that “relationship is mutuality”¹⁴. Relationship is participation in what is mutual and thus, it is also home. But home is also what allows to share this intimate space of home with the other – this space is otherness. Home is portrayed as home only thanks to otherness, just like the visible is portrayed only thanks to the depth of the invisible, because the invisible enables what is visible – home too needs its otherness. The space of home that the others are engaged in is not only a place, time, things that are at home. It is possible to accomplish the intimate space of home only by relating to the other. The movement towards the other establishes home, not the material and emotive elements that it is marked with (fire-fireplace, water-well, land-farmstead, air-emotional satisfaction). A subject abandons the given situation in a dialogue, in speech and sets out to meet the other. Home cannot be taken control of; we cannot be its masters, because it is based on confidentiality, intimacy and generosity. “For the presence before the face, my orientation toward the other can lose the avidity of gaze only by turning into generosity, incapable of approaching the other with empty hands”¹⁵. The intimacy of home includes that we always get more than we can give back and we take without considering reciprocity or commitments, not knowing how much it will cost us; we give without having the assurance of recoverability. Only lonely thinking, turned to itself, (individualism, egotism, ipseity “me”, particularism) is economic¹⁶. Home is chiefly hospitable generosity. In this sense, home is constituted by face (Levinas). It could be even claimed that home is not anonymous, it has its face. Home is the place where time does not have the form of the line the past-the present-the future. This physically conceived time does not function here; all of the times fuse into one “homeland”¹⁷. Equally to time, spaces roll into closeness. For only immediate immersion in the

Ibidem, p. 59.

M. Buber, *Já a Ty*, Praha 1969, p. 11.

E. Lévinas, *Totalita a nekonečno (Esej o exteriorite)*, Praha 1997, p. 35.

¹⁶ N. Pelcová, op. cit., p. 5.

¹⁷ A. Hogenová, op. cit., p. 11.

close enables understanding the distance. In other words, at home the physical categories of time and space turn into “communio” in its original sense. “Communio” means here “to be accepted” in kindness and softness.

The requirement of care emerges urgently from the above indicated phenomenology of face, connected to the phenomenology of home. Concern and care are engaged in being in a human way, in being of one’s own soul, own world, own home that is the world and home of the others at the same time. From the perspective of care, the most important aspect about the phenomenon of home is the fact that we are always “accepted” at home, despite disagreements and difficulties, despite blasts of life. The original meaning of the word “communion” resides precisely in this – in acceptance of the other, even if he appears to be strange to us.

Bernhard Waldenfels identifies three forms of management of the relationship to the other – the strange: 1. appropriation, 2. expropriation and 3. interconnected experience¹⁸. Appropriation is typical of the Western rationality – it is based on separation of the own and the strange and a placement of own view angle to self-consciousness that holds invincible primacy. It is manifested in egocentrism, logocentrism, ethnocentrism and colonialism. Moral consequences of appropriation are devastating: there is no “others’ land”, we seized it through our own viewpoint, we turned their sacred symbols into weird museum exhibits. We turned our own home into a fortress in the rear, from where we run conquest raids. Expropriation is a reaction to appropriation. It is actually voluntary surrender to the strange, disintegration of reason into polysemy of interpretations and norms, setting out for a journey without home – acquisition of the approach of the postmodern nomadism. In a relationship to the other we abandon our own identity and thus, own responsibility and ethical insistence. From the position of moral indifference we leave “the others” at the mercy of their fate, our tolerance to the others stems from the lack of interest. Coping with the other and the others within the sphere “on the border”, which enables joining and harmony among the experiencing, the co-experiencing and what is being experienced, represents a way out of this opposition of unauthentic attitudes. This experience of interconnection of the own and the strange is the genuine dialogic relationship that can be expressed also as “interaction with the strange”. It does not mean a fusion in a homogeneous (and demoralising) non-differentiation, nor separatist (and discriminatory) disjunction, but a certain differentiation in a joint field, simultaneous overlapping and non-overlapping like in a fabric – the one who would like to unbraid the fabric, would destroy the pattern. The interaction with the strange is a dialogue, i.e. an alternating game of questions and answers in speaking as well as in acting. The act of speaking reaches further and deeper than the content of the declared – it is turned to the ear of the one listening, in whom we suppose

¹⁸ B. Waldenfels, *Znepokojivá zkušenost cizího*, Praha 1998, pp. 67–78.

initial togetherness despite difference. Home is precisely the place that enables dialogue with respect to the difference of identities.

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Summary

Home is intuitively understood as a primary experience, a life axiom. The submitted reflection has a philosophical character. Its main aim is to answer the question "What is the meaning of home for human existence in the context of the crisis of modern humanity?" Another important factor is the question of *the other*, whose presence is a constituting condition of home, its quality and meaning as well as a condition of the philosophical discourse on home. Human modality of existence is essentially bound with being "somewhere". A human exists as a being who understands themselves as existing in an existential relationship with place and time (Heidegger). *Oikos* (home) is a particular case of *topos* (place). Home is an extended organism, it is our prolonged body (Bachelard). An authentic approach to home opens for us only from a distance, detachment. The current age is the age of uncertainty, where rootlessness, the loss of the sense of *oikos* and responsibility for it prevail (Bauman). Bauman's observations confirm the actual state of threat of social and cultural homelessness. Paraphrasing Kant's second anthropological question, we ask again: What shall we do? Home is chiefly hospitable generosity. In this sense, home is constituted by face (Levinas). Home is precisely the place that enables dialogue with respect to the difference of identities.