Homelessness and the Limits of Hospitality
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Homelessness & the Limits of Hospitality

Anya Daly says we'll solve homelessness only when we see it as our problem.

"No face can be approached with empty hands and closed home."

"The need of the other is my spiritual need."

Emmanuel Levinas

Coming home on the tram my gaze met that of a young man shouldering a carry-all – heavy, and torn in parts. I looked away quickly. Clearly that carry-all carried all his belongings, and, I hoped, food for the wet, icy night ahead under the bridge. I knew I was going home to company and a hearty soup. Part of me wanted to suggest he come back and share soup with us; but the greater part was fearful: he could be dangerous, perhaps a drug user, and even if neither of these, how could we then turn him out into the cold again? The limits of my hospitality – my fear.

This article explores the issue of homelessness from the perspective of someone who has experienced homelessness, as someone who has worked with the homeless and heard the stories of 'our friends on the street', as a mother distressed to see other mothers' children, no matter their age, in such dire circumstances, and as a philosopher driven to interrogate the hidden assumptions and beliefs motivating our choices, judgments, and behavior. I wish to stress that homelessness must be addressed from the philosophical perspective not only with regard to the individual, but also with regard to the individual as belonging to the 'we'. This 'we' must include all the people involved, from the homeless person laying out her swag under the bridge, to the policy-makers earning fabulous salaries. I'll propose that a deeper understanding of what's called 'double incorporation' is a crucial step towards galvanizing political will to implement solutions that have already been identified.

The first part of this article will relate my experience with regard to homelessness to provide context. The second part will examine some philosophical considerations around the notion of

‘home’. I am taking a phenomenological approach to this discussion, not an analytic approach which depends predominantly on arguments. For phenomenology, the world is not reducible to propositions, and so it depends on a wide repertoire of philosophical methods – detailed descriptive analysis and evocations as well as arguments. Philosophical understanding, for phenomenology, is as much a ‘showing’ as a ‘telling’.

The Lived Experience of Homelessness

The problem of homelessness first hit me when I was living in Paris when there was a huge housing crisis. At one point there were tents all along the Canal Saint Martin and filling the Place de la République. There were many, many beggars on the streets. I remember for the last months of one winter I would cross the canal at a small bridge under which lived an old man and a young woman. In the morning I would regularly see her preparing herself for her work day – doing her hair, putting on her make-up, and tidying away her bedding. Clearly, she had a job but the salary could not cover rent. That was shocking for me, especially when I learnt of the rich people who had many vacant apartments they did not want to rent, either because they were waiting for the rental market to give higher returns or because it was more advantageous for them to just keep the apartments empty, solely as investments.

In my fifth year in France I moved to Toulouse and there suffered a life-threatening accident. On my return to Australia I was homeless because I was unable to work. Fortunately for me, I had family and friends who ensured I always had a roof over my head. That year I lived in six different situations before gaining affordable housing. Even in the comparatively favorable situation of being cared for, I was deeply shaken in my sense of self because of the loss of independence, because I had no base that was mine. So once I had regained my health I volunteered with the Salvation Army, raising funds, and also with the Orange Sky Laundry, a mobile laundry service for the homeless established by two young Brisbane men and run entirely with volunteers. It now operates in fourteen cities in Australia.

The service is as much about the conversations as getting the laundry done. The site I worked at in Melbourne was in the posh part of the central city, in what is known as the Paris end of Collins Street. In fact we parked the van and set up our chairs directly outside Dior, adjacent to a small terrace area that the homeless people had taken over. They called it ‘the community kitchen’, since from there they organised collections of food donations from the various cafés around the inner city. Of course the businesses were not happy about this – these destitute people were occupying prime real estate – and eventually the city council cleared out all their belongings, removed the seats, and installed plant boxes. So what had been effectively the equivalent of a home-base for them was destroyed. Some were given emergency accommodation, but most had to find another place to doss.

It felt good to be doing something. The practical aid, the solidarity, and the sympathy were clearly appreciated; and, I must confess, it did help to somewhat relieve my own distress and guilt about their desperate and, more often than not, deteriorating lives. To an extent, we are all complicit in this terrible injustice. We have allowed the neoliberal agenda to override our consciences, to override our fellow-feeling, and to allow us to conveniently ignore the core value of ‘fair play’. Most certainly we can say that some of these people have contributed, sometimes

significantly, to their own wretched situations; but nonetheless, the systemic injustices are pervasive and pernicious. The paths to sleeping rough are numerous: domestic violence; sexual abuse; debt; psychiatric problems; unemployment; underemployment; the bank foreclosing on the home or farm; PTSD following military service; incapacitating accidents; drug and alcohol addiction; not having the means to get back to a home country; having relied on the support of friends and family one time too many; family break-up; housing which is dangerous because of drugs and violence, etc. This is clearly not a 'one size fits all' problem; it is various and multifaceted.

In August 2016 I participated in a one-day workshop titled 'Homelessness and Housing Insecurity'. One observation from the only participating anthropologist was the need to consider factors upstream from the outcome of homelessness: nothing less than critiquing the economic system which has without question set the stage for it, and for many other social injustices which in turn feed into the injustice of homelessness. But in my view we need to go even further upstream to look for causes in our conceptions of *ourselves*; specifically, in the persisting delusion of our radical separateness from others. This individualistic view of self underpins the sense of entitlement of many (not all) of the wealthy, who refuse to help. While the opposing view of *interdependency* is slowly gaining currency, it has yet to filter through to tangible outcomes with policy-makers, politicians, the big end of town, and the general public. Homelessness is not just a problem for the individual enduring it. It has direct consequences for the wider society, including for you and me. And simply, we must ask ourselves, what kind of society do we want to live in?

So with this in mind, in the next part of this article I wish to venture into the philosophical questions concerning the nature of the self with regard to this issue of homelessness. I will do so by drawing on the work of key figures in the phenomenological tradition – notably Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, and Scheler.

Self, Place, Belonging & Hospitality

In his book *Totality and Infinity* (1961, trans 1969), in the chapter titled 'Dwelling', Emmanuel Levinas offers an extended meditation on the notions of 'dwelling, habitation, home and hospitality'. For Levinas, hospitality operates in two domains – the ethical and the political. Within the ethical domain, the individual has a moral obligation to give shelter under their own roof. In the political domain, as citizens of a country, to be hospitable we must welcome all those who truly seek refuge into our homeland.

Levinas sets out various conceptions of 'home'. Home is *an implement* which offers protection from the elements and enemies; as an implement it may also be *a source of pleasure*, such as when using a good tool can provide immense satisfaction. Home may also be considered *a possession* which is convertible into money. Levinas also describes home as *the place of recollection* – a place of gathering the self, thus providing our launching place for our activity in the world. Finally, home is *a place of interiority* – of safety, intimacy, and welcome. It is home in these last two senses that I wish to explore: home as the shelter from external threats, and as a place to recollect the self – to revive and to gather resources needed to venture into the world and contribute to society.

As Levinas writes: "To dwell, is not the simple fact of the anonymous reality of a being cast into existence, as a stone one casts behind oneself; it is recollection, a coming to oneself, a retreat home with oneself as in a land of refuge, which answers to a hospitality, an expectancy, a human welcome" (p.156). Here we can see Levinas expressing a view common to many philosophical and psychological traditions, of home as being a symbol for the self. And there is an inside and an outside to this self. He says: "Man abides in the world as having come to it from a private domain, from being at home with himself, to which at each moment he can retire… he goes forth outside from an inwardness. Yet this inwardness opens up in a home which is situated in the outside – for the home, as a building, belongs to a world of objects" (p.152).

Like the embodied self, the home has both an interior and an exterior; and as there are doors and windows for the home, so too there are also the self's expressive doors of face, gesture and language. Neither the home nor the self are impenetrable interiorities, entirely separate from others and the outside world.

These challenges to the interiority and exteriority divide are also key to the thought of another French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who argues for an intrinsic interdependence between self and other.in his book *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1962). For Merleau-Ponty, subjectivity is an *intersubjectivity*, and *otherness* is a category both internal to and constitutive of the self. It is due to this self-alienation internal to the subject that other selves, alter egos, and all interactions with other people, become possible.

This way of thinking about our intersubjectivity can provide a useful means of inquiring into homelessness. It is clear that something philosophically interesting is going on in our profound distress with regard to the plight of the homeless. I propose it is because the sight of homeless people challenges our sense of entitlement and also our sense of self and belonging. It makes us recognise how fragile these things in fact are; that we too could potentially become victim to any number of the misfortunes, such as have been visited on those living under bridges and on streets.

There is also the fear of those living an unrooted life, without community and therefore without the demands and constraints of social belonging. The homeless person becomes truly alien. As philosopher Anthony Steinbock has proposed in his article 'Homelessness and the Homeless Movement' (*Human Studies*, 17 (2), 1994), drawing on the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, our own 'homeworlds' are co-constituted by the 'alienworld' of the homeless. The homeless do not belong to our community; they do not share our culture, our values, our social etiquette, our ways of eating and urinating. This is why our efforts are usually inadequate to addressing the problems of homelessness: one of the dangers for any intervention is that the homeless person becomes a project of the helper intervening; and then what inevitably comes into play is an almost coercive normalizing of the homeless person. The challenge is to offer support in a way that does not violate their autonomy, nor render them predictable, controllable, and acceptable according to our own standards.

The Double Incorporation

Here I want to engage with the key phenomenological idea that, just as Merleau-Ponty asserted, subjectivity is an intersubjectivity; or as the German phenomenologist Max Scheler describes the double incorporation of the 'I' within the 'we' and the 'we' within the 'I' in *The Nature of Sympathy* (1913, trans 2009): "community is in some sense implicit in every individual, and that man is not only part of society, but that society and the social bond are an essential part of himself: that not only is the 'I' a member of the 'we', but also that the 'we' is a necessary member of the 'I'" (pps.229, 230).

This view rejects the idea of the isolated, atomistic subject, and instead says that in the core of our subjectivity is both the 'I' perspective and the 'we' perspective. When identification centers solely on the 'I', the person is dominated by individualism and competition. However, when the sense of self embraces the 'we', the values become collective ones and the orientation is characterized by cooperation. The more the circle of 'we' is widened, the more the subject is available to others. The subject with the 'we' orientation identifies as being one among others, as belonging – whether at the level of family, community, species, or at its most expanded, as one sentient being among others. Empathic responsiveness is not guaranteed, however, because if the 'we' is defined narrowly and constrained only to certain others – to family, race, the religious community, etc – the excluded do not arouse any sense of fellow-feeling, and in fact they may rather incite fear, aversion, hatred and aggression. We see this also with the stigmatization of the homeless. Despite their tragic circumstances, they are not recognized as deserving of a place, of belonging: they are excluded. And it is this alienation even more than the physical discomforts of sleeping rough and the challenges of survival that leads to the psychological deterioration of the homeless. They are living within a society to which they do not belong, and from which there is no welcome. This, I propose, because of the double incorporation, is a violence towards them at the most basic level of their sense of self. And this is why so many homeless people display symptoms of compounded trauma, combining the impacts of whatever led them to the streets in the first place with their rejection and exclusion from the wider society.

So the question is, how can we get especially the politicians and the big end of town to expand their sense of 'we'? Albert Einstein captures exactly the core of the issue when he writes:

“A human being is part of a whole, called by us ‘universe’ – a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest… a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

(Letter from Einstein to a father on the death of his son, 12/02/1950.)

Homeless people are citizens with rights to vote; but their other basic human rights are not being respected: the right to a home, a shelter from the elements and from external threat, a base from which to carve out a place in the working world and the social world. Homelessness is my problem and your problem. Solutions to homelessness lie not just in social action, policy, or economics, but most fundamentally in our conceptions of ourselves and our society. When we can break out of the prison of the delusion of our separateness, and meet these others in solidarity, then the political will to address homelessness, and many other social injustices, will be found.

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