HOMESICKNESS: AN UNSETTLING WORD

EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND ECOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF AN ETHICS OF CARE

Amélé Adamavi-Aho Ekué[230]

> "Home is memory and companions and/or friends who share the memory. But equally important as the memory and place and people of one's personal home is the very idea of home."
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> *Toni Morrison*[231]

> "À force de regarder les arbres, je suis devenu un arbre.."
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> *Aimé Césaire*[232]

Introduction: Homesickness, an Unsettling Word

Where are we at home? This question may lead us to an enquiry of ourselves, of our roots and stories. In brief, it may open the field for an

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[230] Amélé Adamavi-Aho Ekué, Academic Dean, Globethics.net.

[231] Toni Morrison: *The Source of Self-Regard: Essays, Speeches, and Meditations.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019: 17.

[232] Aimé Césaire: *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1983 (original 1939): 28.

investigation into identity: who is human, what defines humankind and where can human history be located? This sequence of queries describes the classical epistemological trajectory associated with reflecting upon self-understanding, emerging from being/feeling at home. There has always been an intellectual consciousness for the frailty of this association. What defines human identity cannot be restricted to a location, to a place called *home*. Human history rather, hints to innumerable instances of *dislocation* – physically leaving one's home or cognitively questioning the unity of being at home and at ease with oneself. This is stimulated by external situations and internal processes, contributing to such an exploration into the meaning of human existence and self-understanding in the world. Thus, more often than not, it may rather be the contrary experience of *not* being/feeling at home, which allows tapping into deeper existential dimensions of who we are as human beings – individually, together with others, and with what surrounds us in the world.

In these recent times, the notion of home has revealed its complexity at even more differentiated levels. Confined at home during the pandemic lockdown, people became sensitive for the ambiguity of being/feeling at home in the world. This disruptive experience not only led to re-arrangements at a phenomenological level, but also in family, work, cultural, economic and political life. More significantly, it created a new consciousness for relationships and modes of connection in a world that suddenly revealed its vulnerability. This is not to say that this vulnerable state of the world is a new phenomenon. The critique of lifestyles, production and consumption modes, and in general, of living consciously in this world, is first and foremost a critique of human action and agency to the detriment of a sustainable life of all created living beings. However, the novelty of the current situation may reside in the simultaneity of a disruptive experience of dislocation for all people – the world may no longer be called home, at least not in the

classical sense of the understanding. It seems that the global health pandemic has contributed to a paradigmatic shift. People's particular experiences of being/feeling at home (and their contrary), often disconnected and exacerbated by the deferment of historical phases, are now made visible, and more clearly seen as interconnected. The stories we narrate about our longing to be/feel at home somewhere, and in relation to others have become the stories of all. Humanity interrogates itself afresh: *where are we at home?*

Against this background, homesickness can be read as an unsettling word. It may not solely designate the longing for a specific and physical location, nor a sentiment associated with such a real or inner journey, which may render a person or a group sick. Rather, it may gain relevance for an exploration on how the world as a home has become *sick*. In other words, the world has become impaired and imbalanced, requiring more thorough methodological investigations on how humans can contribute to healing the world through restored relationships.

This chapter aims at providing a framework for these methodological investigations, in the context of an ethics of care. The motivation for such a contribution arises from the observation of frequently sharp juxtaposed categories, criteria and domains. The actual situation also helps unveiling some of these misleading contrasts: anthropology and ecology, safety and quality of life, freedom and protection, to name a few of them by way of illustration.

In this chapter, we will first embark on exploring the revisited notion of homesickness as a theoretical and practical terrain for an ethical investigation from a holistic perspective. In three consecutive sections the theme will further unfold. First, the question of being/feeling at home in the world will be examined, before the meaning of eco-vulnerability in its double bind of ecological and societal imbalance will be deciphered. The last two parts will be dedicated to offer contours of an ethics of care, which reposes on the understanding of the world as

both a non-spatial metaphor for home, and a method to engage the multifaceted eco-vulnerability.

Revisiting Homesickness as a Theoretical and Practical Field for an Embodied Ethics

What is homesickness? It is traditionally anchored in psychology[233] and medicine, [234] where it is perceived as a state of mind characterised by a longing for a place, which procures stability and a sense of belonging. Absence from this place is accompanied by a series of symptoms, ranging from sadness, to melancholy and depression. Empirical studies situate homesickness mostly to individual experiences of detachment and up rootedness after migration, and undertake to frame it as a psychosocial phenomenon. Van Tilburg, Vingerhoets and Van Heck develop the definition of homesickness as "the commonly experienced state of distress among those who have left their house and home and find themselves in a new and unfamiliar environment."[235] In their study, the researchers point out the particularity of the experience and the way it manifests in various forms of mental health states. These are exacerbated by encounters with new societal, cultural and linguistic environments, thus simultaneously providing the seedbed for different processes of acculturation, 'culture shocks' and coping mechanisms. Life sciences take the real situations of displacement and their effects on

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[233] See Dieu Hack-Polay: "When Home isn't Home. A Study of Homesickness and Coping Strategies among Migrant Workers and Expatriates", *International Journal of Psychological Studies* 4, 3 (2012): 62-72.

[234] See Miranda A. Van Tilburg, Ad J. Vingerhoets and G.L. Van Heck (eds): "Homesickness. A review of the literature", *Psychological Medicine*, 26 (1996): 899-912; S. Fisher: *Homesickness, Cognition and Health*. London: Erlbaum, 1989; Marjorie Baier/Martha Welch: "An Analysis of the Concept of Homesickness." *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing,* 6 (1992): 54-60.

[235] Miranda A. Van Tilburg, Ad J. Vingerhoets and G.L. Van Heck, *ibid.*, 899.

individuals seriously, and lead inquiries on how homesickness can impact personal wellbeing and state of health among specific strata of the population. It is important to highlight the value of these investigations for the understanding of home from within a defined contextual experience, which gains more and more attention in an age of global migration and forced displacement.

The vested interest of this contribution is to offer an alternative reading of homesickness, which neither denies the validity of these experiences, nor of the aforementioned scholarly interpretations. However, it endeavours to propose a critical re-lecture of homesickness, in order to stimulate an ethical debate of actual relevance. The current global COVID-19-related situation may not only be understood narrowly as a public health challenge, but more so as a systemic crisis unveiling fundamental deficiencies in thinking of, and acting in the world. Confronting and emerging from this crisis will therefore require a threefold approach: First, the concept of the world as home will have to be spelled out afresh.[236] Secondly, it will have to imply a critical introspection into human agency and, ultimately, a new anthropological definition, which includes the relationship between human and non-humans. Last but not the least, such a revisited understanding of homesickness may serve as a propitious lens for anchoring the ethical debate in times like these anew. The world becomes a home in a non-spatial and non-ideological sense, not in the sense of the *one world* metaphor, which blurs the disparities for the benefit of a totalising and harmonising ideal of human cohabitation. What we propose here aims rather at developing a methodological category, opening the space for moral re-imagination of how people can live together under disparate

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[236] See Michael Jackson: *At Home in the World*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 1995.

conditions and environments, [237] and how they can create and restore relationships within and beyond the human realm.

The working definition of homesickness we propose reposes on the assumption that homesickness creates – the genuine state of distress – is not so much related to the feeling of the loss and the longing for a home that renders an individual sick, but more so to *the world as home that has become sick*. With this approach, home is decidedly not taken as synonymous for a place or a location of cultural and societal belonging. What we endeavour to stress is the pedagogical, political, ethical and creative dimension of the world as home. Furthermore, it is about the permeability and mutual enrichment of different discourses and practices, contributing to normative negotiations about what holds life and the imagination about future life together at local and at international levels.[238]

Framing the understanding of home and homesickness in this manner brings about a critical shift in perception and opens a new terrain for theoretical considerations. Home is not bound to exclusive spatial connotations, nor does it become vulnerable for subtle ideological intrusions. Home in this sense becomes a discursive and relational category, withstanding the temptation of any domestication. It genuinely stands for the ambiguity and the non-coercive character of life and of being alive. It remains impossible to think of life in a compartmentalised way, now more than ever before. Life led in one part of this globe is entangled with life in another region even if the form, the cultural inventories and conditions may differ. We may investigate

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[237] See Tim Ingold: *The Perception of the Environment. Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London/New York: Routledge, 2000.

[238] Achille Mbembe has coined the term of 'world archives' for such a circulating, international process of mutual consultation and negotiation on knowledge, meaning and interpretation. See id. : "The Power of the Archive and its Limits", in: Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris et al. (Eds.): *Refiguring the Archive*. Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publisher, 2002: 19-26.

home as a methodological continuum, which offers us new lenses for the understanding of other aspects and serving as hermeneutical key for interpreting our current situation of entanglement. The following focal threads may serve as a starting point, not as an exhaustive list of such theoretical anchoring points, but for further reflection.

Focal Thread 1: Living on the Brink – The Fragile Home

The first paradigm of the 'fragile home' leads us to consider homesickness as related to dealing with the uncertainty of time and place, without falling into the pitfalls of idealism and inward-orientation. Considering the world in which we live as a 'fragile home' means realising the disparities – the real contrasts in living conditions, the injustices and the diverse forms of exclusion, which render life unliveable for large portions of the world population. Homesickness in this context of understanding takes a concrete shape: it manifests itself as "plural and performative bodily resistance"[239] of those who do not feel at home, because they are denied fundamental rights of social and political participation, are exposed to structures which denigrate their bodily existence, and per extension, their rights to fully enjoy and benefit of societal integration. *Living on the brink* seems to describe these forms of experience, of being alive and yet considered less. It is a radical expression for telling a story with a double bind. Living on the brink of poverty, or unemployment, or sickness, means living with the constant fear of its full realisation, which inhibits and hinders creativity. Simultaneously, it encapsulates a glimpse of inner resistance,

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[239] Judith Butler: Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance, 2016: 4. http://bibacc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Rethinking-Vulnerability-and-Resistance-Judith-Butler.pdf (Accessed 20.07.2020); See also: Idem, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London/ New York: Verso, 2004.

perspective and hope that things may not come or remain as they are foreshadowing.[240]

Focal Thread 2: Living in Transition – The Mobile Home

The second theoretical anchor we propose here is that of the mobile home.[241] Homesickness introduces us to the acceptance that home is not denoting a permanent but a transitional location and place of dwelling. Homesickness does not assist in restoring what was once lost or what may be the object of a sentiment of longing. Homesickness provides a framework for living in transition, which means accommodating changes, and integrating the paradoxical dimensions of our existence. This also has an influence on the formation of identity and self-assertion. How does the human recognise herself/himself? The response to this question may be found less – or not in its entirety – in what humans recognise to be in a certain place, under certain circumstances and at a particular time, but in the 'space-in-between.'[242] Homesickness, in this perspective, would also bear a significant ethical meaning. It would consequently hint to necessary spaces of normative negotiations: *how and on the basis of which values do we want to live together? How can we create a home as spaces of ethical imagination?* Julia Kristeva

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[240] Brother John of Taizé: *Life on the Edge. Holy Saturday and the Recovery of the End of Time*. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2017: 17, spells this out in the context of a compelling theological comment on the Easter narrative and reflects expressively: "Are we still in the time of waiting, or have we already crossed over into a new age? The apparent indeterminacy and hiddenness of this 'time out' suggests that there may be more here than meets the eye."

[241] I wish to recognise Upolu Luma Vaai for inspiring me to develop this focal thread through his reflections on the 'portable home' in the context of a Pacific ethics of relationality. Communication at Globethics.net Conference Building New Bridges. Strengthening Ethics in Higher Education after COVID-19, 25 June 2020.

[242] See Hans Blumenberg: *Beschreibung des Menschen*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2006: 253.

unfolded a scenario of "an emerging paradoxical community"[243] in modern-day multicultural societies, in which people who identify themselves as essentially strangers to one another, learn to practice and cultivate an ethics of mutual respect and solidarity in the face of their "radical strangeness."[244]

Focal Thread 3: Living in Expectation – The Creative Home

The third focal thread brings to the fore the dimension of homesickness as *living in expectation*. We identify, here in particular, existence, a 'being-at-home'. Reflection on this being-at-home includes an unending meaning-making process, not the conclusion or the nostalgic reference to home as a category of achievement and perfection. This viewpoint can be unfolded in two main directions. First, it constitutes an important ethical stimulation to think of home as something to be created. It would represent a kind of permanent construction site, which demands the perpetual efforts of all. This common creativity, to carve out the contours of what it needs to live together, would be coupled with a compulsory layer of the unexpected. The home, according to this understanding, will have to be built over time and space, in recognition of the fact that a missing piece, a complementary part will be added apart and beyond the individual and collective efforts. Homesickness in this perspective orients us towards what *may be*, rather than to what *is* or what *has been*.

The second direction this focal thread may take us is into the area of what Jeffrey Alexander so poignantly developed in his theory of cultural

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[243] Julia Kristeva: *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*. Paris: Gallimard, 2017 (First Edition: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1988): 290.
[244] *Ibid.*

trauma.[245] He states about the importance of trauma, not only as psychological but as cultural category whereby

> "…social groups, national societies, and sometimes even entire civilizations not only cognitively identify the existence and source of human suffering but 'take on board' some significant responsibility for it."[246]

He stresses by assuming this moral responsibility people would be able to "define their solidary relationships in ways that ….allow them to share the suffering of others."[247] He touches upon sensitive areas of how communities constitute themselves in the wake of experiencing violent disruptions, and of communities reacting and responding to traumatic histories in their midst, which includes all shades raging from denial, silence, repression, to interrogation and affirmation of these occurrences and deep-seated experiences. This is so critical to recognise in the reflection of homesickness as it expands the traditional notion of longing for a home, linked to the formation of identity within a specific community. It is the beginning of posing the question, as per Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Is the suffering of others also our own? In thinking that it might in fact be, societies expand the circle of the we."[248]

Living in expectation as a theoretical thread for revisiting homesickness hints therefore to the need for deepening our analytical perspective, also with regard to what makes the home unliveable. This is opposed to a unilateral concentration on the defining home, and the individual and collective reference to home on the harmonious and liveable dimensions.

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[245] See Jeffrey C. Alexander: "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma", in: Id., Ron Eyerman et al. (eds): *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley/ Los Angeles/ London: University of California Press, 2004.

[246] Jeffrey C. Alexander, *ibid*., 1.

[247] *Ibid.*

[248] *Ibid.*

Discussion: A Plea for Locating Homesickness in the Context of an Embodied Ethics

If these aspects constitute valid entry points for explorations on home in the context of a world that poses challenges and offers methods of enquiry at the same time, it would also bear significance for the understanding of homesickness. It would move it away from a strictly psychological to a more political-ethical notion, which describes an 'in-between-status', and values it as critical for unleashing the full creative potential towards changed relationships and structures. Homesickness is thus not denoting the inner mental state of individuals in search of restoring identity through longing for a home – new or old –, but rather the bewildering realisation that the home as space and notion is elusive and is subject to a fundamental characterising frailty wherefrom there is no escape. Embracing the tension that arises from this diagnosis, and developing avenues on how to deal with it, represents a task of an *embodied ethics*. An ethics that takes both the epistemological, meaning the knowledge and thought-creating, and the political-active challenges of our times seriously.

An *embodied ethics*[249] means recognising the real presence of bodies as legitimate locus for the formulation of criteria of engagement with the world. As an analytical approach, it is both conventional and non-conventional. Conventional because it takes the existential dimension seriously – being in the world can primarily only be experienced by way of physical encounters, or at least the realisation of being physically existent. At the same time, it is a non-conventional approach, as it disrupts the human tendency to rationalise being-in-the-world as aiming

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[249] Embodied ethics, as proposed here, goes beyond an ethics of the body as, for example, Margrit Shildrick and Roxanne Mykitiuk (Eds.): *Ethics of the Body. Postconventional Challenges*. MIT Press, 2005, suggest insofar it evokes an ethics that takes the body not only as subject area for ethical investigation, but endeavours to build a methodological framework at the intersection of reflective and applied ethics.

at being in an ideal status. Homesickness understood not as a longing but more so as the discovery, that brokenness and strangeness belongs to a genuine human experience is a profoundly ethical discovery. It unveils that the true ethical solicitation consists in offering a non-invasive response to 'the Other' (the created and non-created), by way of establishing a relationship that seeks complementary rather than harmony and uniformity.

Some Practical Considerations

After these more theoretical explorations, it will be necessary to highlight selected practical considerations. What are the salient questions homesickness invites us to pose? One of these, undoubtedly, takes us into the heart of the current public debate on what it means to be human and to being alive. This question can be articulated in at least three different versions –cultural, political and a societal. The cultural version of the question addresses the complexities of human existence at the intersection of experience, ideology and representation. The facets of race, ethnicity, sexuality and gender constitute, depending on the ideological and academic standpoints, constructions or real life locations of asking *what it means to imagine oneself inside and in-between bodies?* [250]

Another area of practical application of our considerations is related to the question of *who we are and who we want to become?* It is tied to the identity politics and the way they play out in political representation. This applies not only to the political parties, but to all spaces, also in civil society. People seek to articulate their claims of belonging (cultural and national identities) and of economic and political participation

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[250] See Brian Bantum: *Redeeming Mulatto. A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016 (first 2010), for a specific disciplinary contribution on this topic. For a broader, practically oriented discussion, see Anneliese A. Singh: *The Racial Healing Handbook*. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2019.

(cultural, social and economic rights) in the given society and in the world at large. Homesickness – in a distinct ethical perspective of feeling a caring responsibility for a common home that has become unbalanced – will help to revisit the fallacy of a worldview that antagonises global and local concerns. It will assist to redress the interrelation between the preoccupations and experiences in the regions and broader, universal concerns.

Last but not the least; homesickness constitutes an urgent interpellation to revisit the constructed boundaries between the spaces of all created beings, and to accentuate their eco-relationality,[251] their interrelation. Homesickness contributes to refocus the attention on overlapping spheres of responsible care for all life, not only human life. Home denotes in this line of interrogation the non-spatial location of the moral imagination to be reflected upon and put into practice in acts of mutual consideration around the question of *how do we want to live together without jeopardising the future of the generations and species to come.*

A Provisional Working Definition

Homesickness emerges as a radical, subversive notion. It can be described as a rebellious word, which disrupts the comfort of convenient images, thoughts and representations. Homesickness challenges the conventional perspective of wanting to restore something lost for the benefit of reimagining something new from within a bodily experience, which incorporates nuances of in-between and strangeness, an ethos of expectation, which warrants creativity and moral imagination. At the same time, it stands for a permanent invitation to develop a practice of

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[251] See Upolu Luma Vaai: *"We Are Therefore We Live" Pacific Eco-Relational Spirituality and Changing the Climate Change Story*. Toda Peace Institute, Policy Brief No. 56, October 2019. https://toda.org/assets/files/resources/policy-briefs/t-pb-56_upolu-luma-vaai_we-are-therefore-we-live.pdf?v=0 (Accessed 10.09.2020).

caring responsibility for all life and for relationships with all who are created.

Unveiling Eco-Vulnerability: A Home That Has Become Sick

Against the background of this provisional working definition, we shall now embark on reflecting how homesickness can be indicative of an eco-vulnerability, a vulnerability of an eco-system, which can be translated at an initial semantic level by *a home that has become sick*. However, we have to ask in which manner the world as home has become sick, and consequently, what impact this has on the understanding of relationships on earth. What are the possible attitudes and actions to address it, if at all, and repercussions on the ethical fabric and the moral imagination.

I shall begin with a vignette from one of the most recent and fascinating research contributions in the field of the human plant interface, and the ethnography of the other than human.[252] William Ellis' empirical research on milkwood trees (*sapotaceae*) in Southern Africa[253] reveals mostly unrecognized connections between plants and humans that are highly instructive for an investigation in eco-vulnerability. Ellis studies trees not as objects, but as living subjects and co-creational elements bearing amnestic capacities in a colonial context. He writes in reference to a tree on which the indigenous *Khoisan* people were once lynched by the Dutch settlers taking their lands:

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[252] See Jane Bennett: *Vibrant Matter. A political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

[253] William Ellis: "A Tree Walks through the Forest. Milkwoods and other Botanical Witnesses." *Catalyst*, Issue 5,2(2019):1-4. https://catalystjournal.org/index.php/catalyst/article/view/32837/25425 (accessed 15.08.2020).

"I imagine the excrement of the executed and how their urine and faeces at the roots nourished the tree. Thus, the essences of the dead, the unnamed colonial dead, are still with us in the flesh of a tree that is a witness to their deaths and a site for their remains."[254]

William Ellis' observations and interpretations of milkwood trees as a "vast rhizomatic, vegeto-neural network that discursively, symbolically and epigenetically retains events and evidence,"[255] may direct our thinking on eco-vulnerability in three main directions.

First, one of the salient contributions of this research resides in the attention for the agency of the other than human species at the intersection of human and vegetal history. The cognizance of the evolution of milkwood trees, whereby young trees are growing from within the trunk of collapsed, old trees, supports the hypothesis of a kind of connection and continued bearing of witness in these trees through the ages. The example of the milkwood trees introduces us to one facet of eco-vulnerability in the sense of a dual-way permeability: the suffering of human species finding a commemorative repository, an 'authentic monument' or a 'marker of a curated outside', as William Ellis names it, in the trees, and the plants in turn are no longer vegetal substance and functional essence alone, but genuine bearers of a double identity.

The second learning on eco-vulnerability in the context of homesickness prepares for a greater attention to the definition of vulnerability itself. There is an observable shift in the humanities from understanding vulnerability as human characteristic of being at risk to external influences.[256] Such as environmental and other structural

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[254] William Ellis: ibid.

[255] William Ellis: ibid.

[256] See Daniel Engster: "Care Ethics, Dependency and Vulnerability", *Ethics and Social Welfare* 13,2 (2019): 110-114; Id.: *The Heart of Justice: Care Ethics*

factors, to a broader semantic meaning, this entails resilience, and hence accentuates agency over against a passive bearing of an incident. Martha Albertson Fineman's contribution[257] on vulnerability as a constitutive of the human condition has been widely and controversially discussed. Can we speak of vulnerability as a universal human trait without sacrificing the recognition of individual and particular experiences of vulnerability? The question is neither comfortable nor straightforward. Albertson Fineman discusses vulnerability in the context of legal considerations and public responsibility, and proposes to understand vulnerability as an "enduring aspect of the human condition that must be at the hart of our concept of social and State responsibility."[258] Furthermore, she states that "vulnerability initially should be understood as arising from our embodiment, which carries with it the ever-present possibility of harm, injury and misfortune…,"[259] and draws our attention to the insight that: "Understanding vulnerability begins with the realization that many such events are ultimately beyond human control."[260]

Perhaps this constitutes our third dimension of reflection, one of the lessons to be learned from the experience with the invisible coronavirus. It escapes our control, despite the attempts to regulate societal interactions and to provide adequate measures of public health and protection at national and international levels. This is not to say that humanity has not been exposed to large-scale viruses before, and has survived despite major losses, but more so because it calls for a radical

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and Political Theory. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007; see also Estelle Ferrarese: "Vulnerability: A Concept with Which to Undo the World As It Is?" *Critical Horizons*, 17,2 (2016): 149-159.

[257] Martha Albertson Fineman: "The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition". *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 20, 1 (2008): 1-23. https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yjlf/vol20/iss1/2/ (Accessed 10.09.2020).

[258] Martha Alberston Fineman, *ibid.*, 8.

[259] Martha Albertson Fineman, *ibid.*, 9.

[260] *Ibid*.

shift in perspective. Realising that our home, the earth, has become sick is not a diagnosis that calls for a symptomatic cure. Intervening at the level of the symptoms would mean in the actual situation we live in the confirmation of a status quo. This status quo originates, and has been perpetuated over generations, from an anthropocentric perception, which holds the human at the centre of the ecological system. Intertwined into this perception is the asymmetry of relationships within humanity leading to incessant patterns of domination and subsequent disparities. Being vulnerable can therefore constitute a crucial disposition, an attitude through which this anthropocentric perception can be critically engaged. Eco-vulnerability is therefore not merely part of an environmental ethics, but needs to be elevated to a transversal perspective that allows investigating critically the different domains, in which we experience that our home has become sick.[261]

The current global pandemic may be read against the background of such an approach to vulnerability, which carefully unveils it, not in relation to a stigmatising categorisation of specific groups or individuals, but as a systemic lens by which the human existence is understood within an ecological system of relations. An existence that is characterized by being-related-with and not one of being-in-isolation.

At Home in the World? On the Semiotics of Knowledge and the Pedagogy of Being-Related

Revisiting the understanding of homesickness cannot be restricted to the materiality of the world as whole inhabited earth, but needs to take

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[261] See Ernst M. Conradie: *An Ecological Christian Anthropology. At Home on Earth?* London/New York: Routledge, 2016, who has spelled such an approach out for theology. His explorations are valid contributions on a methodological level, beyond the discipline of theology, as he emphasizes the necessary dual perspective of critiquing the cultural habits leading to environmental destruction and the ecological critique of the worldviews and religious traditions.

into account how the inhabitants of a home in misbalance can engage in conversation on new relationships to be built. This entails language and languages, and the manner knowledge is created, shared and transferred. Thus it relates to the semiotics of knowledge (meaning to which areas in the real world knowledge refers to, and from what kind of cognitive or bodily experiences knowledge is created), and to a pedagogy of being-related as a form of laying the foundation for an ethical conversation.

Why is this relevant? Habitually, language conditions human experience of the world, and vice versa, human experience of the world conditions what can be expressed through language. Given the plurality of existing discourses on how the world is experienced and how meaning and knowledge is created. It seems to be crucial not to assume the same lenses and to prepare an ethical conversation, by way of laying accountability to one another about the different frameworks of plausibility in which ethical reflection and action is embedded.

This is also valid, as we have previously seen with regard to the way home and homesickness is conceptualized. Home cannot be reduced to a geographical location. It is a notion that has to be carefully guarded against the subtle intrusions of ideology, against the construction of home as an exclusive sphere, and against the "politics of home", as Rosemary Marangoly George states, and to endeavour

> "…to read more than the domestic into representations of the home, to keep the location from being reduced to a geographic place on the map and politics from being reduced (or elevated) to nationalism."[262]

In realizing this conditionality, the contours of an applied ethics needed for times like these are drawn: thinking, believing and/or

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[262] Rosemary Marangoly George: *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996: 3.

imagining, and acting at the intersection of how the world as home *is* and how it *ought to be*. Thinking, believing, imagining and acting are not neutral and distant modes of engagement with the world as home. They expose us to more than the plurality of experiences and discourses. The disparities of our living conditions are a constant reminder of the asymmetries and hierarchies that influence relationships, at global and regional levels. The habitual societal stratification categories of ethnicity, class, culture and religion are only one aspect related to this observation. In this context, the postcolonial and de-colonialist discourse offers us ample discussion points. Walter Mignolo has asked poignant questions with regard to racism and epistemology, and remarked that: "Geo-politics of knowledge goes hand in hand with geo-politics of knowing."[263] He advocates vigorously for an epistemic de-colonial, de-linking from Western patterns of knowledge creation and as a consequence, as per Mignolo, from the definition of what is considered as human.[264] It is necessary to gain deeper insights on how our living in the world is shaped and informed by ways in which we articulate these experiences, and are able to create knowledge and share it with others. Haifa S. Alfaisal has contributed to a critical engagement with postcolonial proposals for an epistemic de-linking. Alfaisal commented on the fallacies of the latter by pointing to the marginalisation of indigenous epistemologies in postcolonial theory, based on a lack of self-criticism and the adoption of an underlying and totalising modernity and colonialist pattern, which in itself would deserve to be decolonised.[265]

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[263] Walter D. Mignolo: "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom", *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 27, 7-8 (2009): 1-23: 2.

[264] See Walter D. Mignolo: *ibid*. 3.

[265] See Haifa S. Alfaisal: "Indigenous Epistemology and the Decolonisation of Postcolonialism." *Social & Political Thought*, Vol. 19 (2011): 24-40; see also Linda Tuhiway Smith: *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London/New York: Zed Books; Marie Battiste: *Reclaiming Indigenous*

What needs to be made fruitful for our endeavour to revisit home and homesickness from this debate is the attention to how knowledge is created and transferred, and how this informs ethical reflection, discernment, decision-making and practice. It appears to be of a paramount importance to liberate knowledge creation from its ideological entanglement, and to encourage and advance a debate on how dispositions, attitudes, in brief, an *ethos of learning* can be fostered within a broader understanding of human existence in relation to all living. Such an ethos of learning would be part of a pedagogical framework of being-in-relation- with others human and the other-than-human. It is important to underline that this pedagogy of being-related has not to be comprehended from an exhortative standpoint, nor a prescriptive stance. The imagery and the explorations of a deconstructed homesickness lend themselves to create awareness for the need to anchor what we know about the world, in the different manners it emerges, into modes of how we can share about it in mutual respect of the intrinsic value and dignity of all life. Homesickness thus becomes a way of turning to the other, beyond the self, in an attitude of creative imagination for a home, the world, to which all belong.

Caring Responsibility: A Transformative Perspective on Ethics of Care in Unusual Times

The *ethos of learning* and *pedagogy of being-related* consequentially leads to a reflection on the internal and external implications for applied ethics. Both internally and externally, an ethos of learning will help to prevent tendencies of domination and foster a much needed qualitative approach to an intercultural ethical conversation. As long as humans are

Voice and Vision. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000; Deepika Bahri: *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics and Postcolonial Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

disposed to learn, they will recognise their limitation, their potential of growth, and their dependency on co-creation of knowledge together with others. This would constitute a methodological starting point of thinking of ethics as an ethics of care based a non-invasive, non-dominating value of caring responsibility. A caring responsibility would have to be thought in a framework of reciprocity, that prevents perceiving care/caring as an asymmetric act vis-à-vis others. It is not so much about the care *for* others, but the care *with* and *about* one another that has to be brought to the fore of ethical thinking and practices.[266]

The unusual times of the current COVID-19 era may offer us various fields of practice in which this caring responsibility can be exemplified and tested.[267] The restriction of space, the velocity of changing and diverse models of political responses and public health measures will leave a deep mark on societal life, including the economy, health care, education, research, culture and religion.

These times, deemed unusual, are decisive in terms of clarifying foundational approaches and attitudes to human life in a wider web of relationships. In this sense, the unusual times will become transformative, in as much as they unescapably invite to reflect upon acquired and habitual patterns of practice and cohabitation. Up until this historic juncture, the anthropocentric vision of humankind directing and exploiting the earth has remained deep-seated and dominant over against local counter currents proposing more sustainable life-styles. Richard Sennett with his trilogy around craftsmanship, cooperation and urban design and living, proposes what he calls the 'homo faber project', that

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[266] See for this crucial distinction: Nel Noddings: *Starting at Home: Caring and social policy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

[267] See the instructive contribution of Esteve Corbera, Isabelle Anguelovski, Jordi Honey-Rosés, Isabel Ruiz-Mallén: "Academia in the Time of COVID-19: Towards an Ethics of Care." *Planning Theory& Practice*, Vol. 21, 2 (2020): 1991-199.   https://doi.org/10.1080/146449357.2020.1757891   (Accessed 10.09.2020).

"does have an ethical centre, focused on just how much we can become our own masters."[268] Sennett's preoccupation as sociologist is to observe and to describe how people cohabitate, cooperate and, more precisely, develop skills for "…responsiveness to others, such as listening skills in conversation, and on the practical application of responsiveness at work or in the community."[269]

Written a few years prior to the current pandemic situation, one would like to make Richard Sennett's contribution fruitful for reading the signs of the time as period of re-arranging, refocusing and learning of new ways of cooperation and being related. Perhaps his emphasis on cooperation demanding skills (*techne*) and skilfulness leads into a possible misinterpretation of a technocratic mastery. However, the proposition of looking more closely into what it takes to live, work and create together is relevant in an ever polarizing and broken world, not only with regard to human relationships.

The perspective of an ethics of care could assist broadening the understanding and practice of living together, as well as its ethical underpinnings. The ethics of care has first been brought into the ethical conversation by Carol Gilligan as a 'different voice,'[270] juxtaposing moral thinking around the self and the relationship with others, to

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[268] Richard Sennett: *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2012: 8 (hereafter: Together); The other two volumes of the trilogy include: Id.: *Craftsman*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2008; Id.: *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City*. New York: Farrar, Straus& Giroux, 2018 (hereafter: Building).

[269] Richard Sennett: *Together*, 7.

[270] See Carol Gilligan: *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Harvard University Press, 1982; See also Nel Noddings: *Caring, a feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984; and revised edition: Id.: *Caring. A relational approach to ethics and moral education*. Berkeley: University of California Press, rev. 2 2013.

deontological and consequentialist approaches that accentuate universal standards and their general applicability.

Carol Gilligan's assumption of ascribing women and men different moral views or different approaches to moral thinking may be debatable from an empirical standpoint and challenged in its attempt to simplify gendered ethical reasoning and discernment. However, rethinking normative ethics from the standpoint of relationships and responsiveness to vulnerability constitutes a worthwhile intellectual and practical endeavour, against the background of our reflections on homesickness and the ethical solicitation of a world perceived as *a home in need of care*. It may be a valid entry point for an intercultural conversation on such experiences for the world as our home in relational, non-dominant ways and on the values that may support and sustain related thinking and practices. As per Virginia Held,

"… the central focus of the ethics of care is on the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility."[271]

It seems that a constructive bridge could be built between an ethics of care and the classical ethical schools, by relating care/caring with universal norms and value sets such as justice and responsibility.[272] A caring responsibility as an ethical perspective could come to bear in a series of practical fields of high societal and political relevance: the

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[271] Virginia Held: *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2006: 10.

[272] See, among others, particularly Michael Slote: *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*. London/New York: Routledge, 2007; and also Deane Curtin: "Toward an Ecological Ethic of Care." *Hypatia*, Vol 6, 1 (1991): 60-74; and the seminal work of Ivone Gebara on eco-feminism, see id.: *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*. Fortress Press, 1999.

ability to build peace *on* earth and peace *with* the earth, or the capacity to deal with plurality and living with differences.

Furthermore, an ethics of care could offer a transformative perspective by way of an opportunity to outline not only fields of ethical application, the external dimension, meaning how norms and values can be applied to a situation, but also contribute to deepening methodological considerations. How do we achieve an ethical conversation in a world marked by diverse living conditions, experiences, worldviews, and approaches? A question which links back to the aforementioned pedagogical task of creating spaces of awareness for caring relationships and attitudes.

Conclusion

Where are we at home? This was the initial question the present contribution posed. The starting point of this investigation was the deconstructive assumption that homesickness, if detached from its narrow psychological and psychosomatic context, would offer a valid avenue for the development of an ethics of care that takes both account of the normative grounding in universal standards and rights, and of caring and responsible relationships.

Homesickness is presented in this contribution as an unsettling word in as much as it allows to spell it afresh – in contract to a restorative and nostalgic understanding of regaining a lost or imagined location – as a longing for being in relationship with others, human and other than human. We proposed to decipher home as fragile, mobile and creative, and therefore as more adequate paradigms of understanding life in relationships, also against the background of current experiences in the global pandemic.

This chapter also constitutes the modest beginning of developing a conceptual framework, in which my attention to human life is connected with a kind of *ecology of meaning-making*. It is about asking questions

on how sense, meaning and orientation in human existence can be experienced and articulated in relation to *all living*, transcending the habitual boundaries of human/non-human, nature, culture and history. This *ecology of meaning-making* relates to my proposal to describe the contours of a contemporary, embodied ethics not so much from the perspective of its *contents* (i.e. the normative prerogatives), but more so from the perspective of *form and methodology* (i.e. what it enables to perceive in view of arriving to an informed ethical response).

My explorations on homesickness and an ethics of care were guided by the insight that overcoming the divisions in our in many ways broken world would not entail glossing over the differences (by way of an universalizing approach), nor to understand ethics as a possibility to develop a kind of blue print for globally applicable solutions. Rather, as per our proposal, the recognition of the simultaneity of vulnerability , and dignity of all life at the root of all ethical reflection and practice would lead into a non-invasive, and non-dominating considerateness for all life, human and other-than-human, from within an ethos of care and empathy.

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