



## ***“The Equivocal Essence of the Home”: Levinas on Dwelling and Its Implications for the Plight of Homelessness***

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### **Abstract**

*Central to Emmanuel Levinas’s Totality and Infinity is an analysis of dwelling. That analysis, though relatively ignored in the secondary literature, makes the case for home as an integral basis for human existence. By showing that home is crucial to human existence, Levinas indirectly shows why it is so important to respond urgently to the plight of people experiencing homelessness. After briefly looking at more standard rights-based arguments for responding to homelessness, this essay 1) shows how Levinas’s analysis of the self’s separation from totality in the earlier sections of Totality and Infinity sets the stage for his account of dwelling, 2) presents Levinas’s account of home as constitutive of human existence, and 3) concludes by drawing from Levinas’s analysis the moral necessity of responding to homelessness.*

**Keywords:** *Levinas, Heidegger, dwelling, home, homelessness, right to housing, interiority, separation, spatiality, enjoyment, the element*

### **Is there a right to housing?**

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development’s 2017 Point in Time survey estimates that on any given night approximately 550,000 American’s are experiencing homelessness.<sup>1</sup> What are our obligations, collectively and individually, to this population? How best should we think about our responsibilities to people experiencing lack of secure housing? A dominant way in which Western ethical and political philosophies have addressed such questions is in terms of rights. Do people experiencing homelessness have a right to housing that obligates us collectively and individually to respond to their pressing need?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a United Nations charter adopted shortly after WWII, names adequate shelter as a fundamental human right. Article 25, Section 1 of that Declaration reads,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2017-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>

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Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

There is something fundamentally right about that declaration. Any decent society will meet the basic needs of its members, and housing is certainly a basic need. But is the idiom of rights as the best way to articulate this obligation? As a number of philosophers have argued, the source and status of these somewhat mysterious properties are dubious, especially in a secular and anti-metaphysical age.

In “Home Is Where the Heart Is: Homelessness and the Denial of Moral Personality,” David Schrader points us in a promising direction that circumvents such doubts. Rather than arguing directly for a universal natural right to shelter, Schrader argues that having a home is a necessary precondition for realizing our moral, political, and legal status as citizens within specific states such as the United States or Great Britain. While the source and status of a universal human right to shelter is disputed, the rights spelled out in the Bill of Rights or in English Common Law are rooted in a concrete political reality and have institutional mechanisms available to back them up. Many of those specific rights presuppose that the rights-bearing citizen has a home. Law of real property is central in the development of English Common Law, and Schrader argues that the development of that law “has moved gradually, but inexorably, in the direction of recognizing for each person a locus of authority and autonomy in the place where he or she lives.”<sup>2</sup> That is, the rights prescribed by law, recognizing each person’s title to a zone of self-determination, takes form concretely as “recognition of a strong set of privileges and immunities held by all people in the places where they live.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, many of the rights laid out in the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the US Constitution, assume that citizens have homes. This is especially evident in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, prohibiting the government from quartering soldiers in

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<sup>2</sup> David Schrader, “Home Is Where the Heart Is: Homelessness and the Denial of Moral Personality,” *The Ethics of Homelessness: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. G. John M. Abbarno (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999) 66.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

private homes without consent of the owner, and in the 4<sup>th</sup> Amendment which establishes “The right of people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures.” The notion of home as a protected sphere of autonomy also guides Constitutional jurisprudence as in “*Griswold vs. Connecticut*,” which, citing six of the ten amendments in the Bill of Rights, recognizes a right to privacy as implicit in the US Constitution.<sup>4</sup> Further, not only do we register to vote by giving an address but location of residence determines which elections we are eligible to vote in. So, our legal and political rights as US citizens only have “life and substance” (to quote Justice Douglas from *Griswold*) insofar as we have a place to live, a home. If housing is a precondition of enjoying our rights as citizens, and if protection of our rights is a primary responsibility of our government, then it follows that the government has a duty to see that its citizens are housed. We recognize a government responsibility to provide public education to all citizens since full participation in a democratic society presupposes such education. An equally good case can be made for housing as a precondition of full citizenship.

As sympathetic as I am to Schrader’s argument for housing as an indispensable condition of rights and citizenship, I still have misgivings about approaching home and homelessness in this manner. Rights, whether the natural, universal rights of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the specific legal rights of English Common Law and US Constitutional Law are typically conceived as properties of individuals, as endowments belonging to the social atoms out of which society is composed. But if, as I believe, radical resource inequality in general and homelessness in particular grows out of a problematic individualism, then an appeal to rights is potentially implicated in the very mindset that contributes to homelessness.

In what follows, I will turn away from a rights-oriented approach to homelessness toward the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas is especially interesting in two regards: 1) he offers an account of ethical obligation profoundly different from rights-oriented ethical and political philosophies that have been prominent in the modern era,<sup>5</sup> and 2) in his first great work, *Totality and Infinity*, he offers a rich analysis of how

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Morgan writes, “Levinas can be read...as an alternative critic, not concerned to protect the subject as the locus of rights and dignity but rather oriented to humanity in a different way.” Michael L. Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 118.

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fundamental home is to human existence. In a manner parallel to Schrader, Levinas shows how home is a precondition of full human existence. As William Large puts it in his commentary on *Totality and Infinity*, “Everything we think of as the highest achievement of humanity, what distinguishes us from animal existence, has its source in the home.”<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, like Schrader, Levinas’s analysis of home allows us to appreciate more deeply how great a deprivation it is to lack a home. By deepening our understanding of what home is and what it means within human life, philosophy can make us appreciate more profoundly the plight of homelessness. As Schrader puts it,

If our homes are our central bastions of autonomy, then to lack a home is to lack the recognized kind and level of autonomy that a home is uniquely able to provide. Likewise, if autonomy defines both civic and moral autonomy, then anyone without a home also lacks the place in civil society that civic autonomy establishes and recognizes through our possession of a home. Therefore, to be without a home is to lack one of the central features of our society, public recognition of moral personality. In sum, the homeless are the chief non-persons of contemporary America.<sup>7</sup>

Large, commenting on Levinas’s view of the importance of home, makes a similar point in more succinct and brutal terms: “Homelessness is not one calamity among many. It is the self reduced to almost nothing.”<sup>8</sup> But where Schrader only stresses the positive contribution of home to human existence, Levinas offers an ambivalent philosophy of home, highlighting what he terms “the equivocal essence of the home.”<sup>9</sup> Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* supports two strikingly different assertions: 1) that home is

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<sup>6</sup> William Large, *Levinas’ “Totality and Infinity”* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) 55.

<sup>7</sup> Schrader, 63.

<sup>8</sup> Large, 55. Both Schrader’s and Large’s claims are problematic as they stand. To speak of people experiencing homelessness as “non-persons” as does Schrader or as having “their self diminished to nothing” as does Large seems to deny the humanity of those experiencing homelessness. Schrader makes it clear that he is speaking of a social failure to recognize personhood when he speaks of those experiencing homelessness as “non-persons.” I take Large as somewhat hyperbolically stating that the sense of self of those experiencing homelessness is placed under extreme pressure.

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 170. Henceforth cited as TI.

fundamental to human existence far beyond its role in offering shelter from the elements, and 2) that home is a dangerous thing, prone to isolate occupants from their fellow humans, unless the cozy enclosure of home is shattered by the ethical demand of the other in need, opening the home up as a site of hospitality. The following essay is devoted to developing and applying the first claim. The second claim will be the work of another essay.

**Levinas's Discussion of Separation and Interiority as Preparatory to his Discussion of Dwelling**

Levinas's most developed account of home and habitation is a 23 page section, titled "The Dwelling" [*La Demeure*], which is literally central to his first masterwork, *Totality and Infinity*. What precedes "The Dwelling" in the first half of *Totality and Infinity* is an analysis of psychological interiority, which Levinas variously terms separation, egoism, atheism, the "as-for-me" [*quant-à-soi*] and (strikingly) "the 'at-home'" [*le chez soi*]. Thus, something over half of *Totality and Infinity* is devoted to interiority of both the psychological and the domestic kinds as well as their connections.

Despite its centrality in the text, there is surprisingly little discussion of interiority or of dwelling in the scholarly literature on Levinas. Rather, it is overwhelmingly Section III of *Totality and Infinity*, "Exteriority and the Face," that has drawn readers' attention. There Levinas lays out his highly distinctive ethical philosophy that articulates obligation not in terms of rules or results or virtues but as the authoritative demand that others in need – the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the body "naked and indigent" – impose on me when I encounter them. Levinas describes "the face to face" – his term for the asymmetrical relationship between oneself and the other in need – in such hyperbolic terms that it naturally draws more attention than earlier sections on dwelling and interiority. Given Levinas's agenda of redirecting philosophy away from its traditional amoral emphasis on ontology as first philosophy (a Greek orientation) towards the primacy of ethics (a Jewish orientation), the priority of Section III is understandable.

While the discussions of interiority in the first half of *Totality and Infinity* are not the main point of the text, they are essential preparation for Levinas's primary theme, infinity, which is his shorthand for an encounter with the absolutely other, for having an idea whose ideatum (intentional object) exceeds the idea's capacity of representation, for confronting the face of the other who shatters my self-enclosed happiness by imposing on me an absolute, non-reciprocal demand. Infinity is exteriority in all its forms. But exteriority is only possible in reference to interiority.

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Repeatedly, Levinas writes that only a subject with an interior life can hear the summons of an exterior other.

The alterity, the radical heterogeneity of the other, is possible only if the other is other with respect to a term whose essence is to remain at the point of departure, to serve as an *entry* into the relation, to be the same not relatively but absolutely. A term can remain absolutely at the point of departure only as I. (TI 36)

The I is identical in its very alterations. It represents them to itself and thinks them. The universal identity in which the heterogeneous can be embraced has the ossature [underlying structure] of a subject, of the first person. (TI 36)

Alterity is possible only starting from *me* (TI 40).

Before turning to Levinas’s section on Dwelling itself, it is important to survey his preceding development of interiority in Section I, “The Same and the Other,” and in Section II, “Interiority and Economy.” Both sections develop accounts of the self as separate. In “The Same and the Other,” separation is resistance to totality; in “Interiority and Economy,” separation is emergence out of our original immersion in the element. Since both “totality” and “the element” are used by Levinas in highly specific, technical senses, understanding what he means by separation requires unpacking the two terms.

*Separation as Breach [Rupture] of Totality*

Levinas signals the importance of totality by including the term in the title of *Totality and Infinity* and by defining the other title term, infinity, in opposition to it. As the text unfolds, it becomes clear that Levinas uses the term, “totality,” to designate any whole which subsumes without remainder its parts, any condition in which the whole is real and apparent parts are merely epiphenomenal. Totality is the absorption of the other by the same, the triumph of unity over distinction. This can take epistemological form as a rationalism that purports to comprehend all, “where the opposition between I and non-I disappears, in an impersonal reason” (TI 87). It can also take metaphysical form as in the monisms of Parmenides, Spinoza, and Hegel. Reductive naturalism, the view of nature

as a single system of material objects governed by a single set of natural laws, is another theoretical version of totality. But Levinas does not open *Totality and Infinity* with a technical definition of totality or with a focus on totality as a type of theory. Rather, he frames totality in practical, moral, and political terms, tightly linking war and totality and labeling war as an amoral zone of force that levels all difference, that obliterates all distinction. He writes,

War does not manifest exteriority and the other as the other;...

The visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy.

(TI 21)

Why this connection between totality and war? In his notorious vindication of war, Hegel argues that war, by demanding that citizens give their lives for the state, reminds those citizens that their individual lives are secondary to their membership in the collective. What Hegel theorized, Levinas experienced during a life spanning the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He survived two world wars, grinding uncouneted millions to dust (and during which he spent years in a German POW camp); he survived the Holocaust, which replaced human names with numbers and industrialized the killing and cremation of additional millions (including many of Levinas's family members). As he published *Totality and Infinity* in 1961, the Cold War was dangerously close to turning hot in a nuclear Armageddon which would have been a final statement of the nullity of individual human lives.

Like Kierkegaard, who feared that Hegel's theoretical effacement of the individual corresponded to a social-political effacement of the individuals by forces of Christendom, mass media, and political movements, Levinas offers his account of separation as "a defense of subjectivity" (TI 26), as a dogged insistence on the reality and importance of particular persons. The thrust of Section 1, "The Same and the Other," is that, "The separation of the Same [of a self that maintains itself, that establishes an identity] is produced in the form of an inner life, a psychism...The *cogito*...evinces separation...Separation is not reflected in thought, but [is] produced by it" (TI 54). That is, personal, conscious existence as an I is uniquely able to breach totality, to give rise to an existence that is not reducible without remainder to its part in the whole. What is it about the I, the subject of consciousness, that makes it uniquely resistant to totality?

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According to Levinas, the first personal character of sensory experience resists subsumption into an impersonal whole. Levinas writes, “Sensation breaks up every system” (TI 59), meaning that each individual’s sensory experience of the world is unique, distinctive, her own. As Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich poignantly puts it as he tries to come to terms with his impending death:

Had Caius [a generic name used in the syllogism that since Caius is a human and all humans are mortal, Caius is mortal] ever known the smell of that striped leather ball Vanya had loved so much? Had Caius ever kissed his mother’s hand so dearly, and had the silk folds of her dress ever rustled so for him?<sup>10</sup>

While interiority seems to be a spatial designation, Levinas also articulates the self’s separateness, its interiority, in temporal terms. To evoke a sense of the self as distinct from totality, he juxtaposes the objective, universal time of the historians (totality) with the personal experiences of time of particular individuals (separation):

Separation designates the possibility of an *existent* being set up and having its own destiny to itself, that is, being born and dying without the place of this birth and death in the time of universal history being the measure of its reality. Interiority is the very possibility of a birth and a death which do not derive their very meaning from history. (TI 55)

What is it that distinguishes universal, objective, historical time from the personal time of the separated self? Levinas turns to Descartes’ 3<sup>rd</sup> Meditation, noting the divergence there between the order of being and the order of knowledge. The first certainty of the Meditations is, of course, the meditator’s own being. On the basis of that foundational self-certainty, the meditator proceeds to prove the existence of God. But God is the eternal cause of the self, existing before that self. By means of what Levinas calls, “the posteriority of the anterior,” that is, the reversal of objective temporal order in the sequence of thoughts of the subject, a fundamental cleft opens

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<sup>10</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Ronald Blythe (New York: Bantam, 1981) 93.

up between totality and the individual self: “That there could be a chronological order distinct from the ‘logical’ order,...here is separation” (TI 54). What concerns Levinas is not Descartes’s argument *per se* but asserting the significance of the moments of personal lives, even (or especially) those lives that disappear without notice in the scheme of world history. As quoted above, he insists, “Interiority is the very possibility of a birth and a death which do not derive their very meaning from history” (TI 55). The griefs and joys, the struggles and triumphs, of countless people are not registered within the grand narrative of world history (totality), but those moments have their meaning and importance within the personal histories of those individuals (separation).

### *Separation and Enjoyment*

Working within the phenomenological tradition, Levinas shares that tradition’s abiding focus on intentionality, that is, on the relation between the conscious subject and the objects of that subject’s awareness.<sup>11</sup> While there is consensus among phenomenologists on the central importance of intentionality, there is deep division as to which mode of intentionality is fundamental. Like his teacher, Heidegger, Levinas criticizes his teacher’s teacher, Husserl, for “excessive attachment to theoretical consciousness” (TI 123). But Levinas goes on to critique Heidegger’s analysis of *Dasein* as being-in-the-world as itself a secondary, derivative mode of awareness. Heidegger’s *Being and Time* sets out to show that a disinterested cognitive awareness of objects (awareness of things as present-at-hand) is derivative from a more basic, everyday engagement with objects in terms of our concerns and projects (awareness of things as ready-to-hand). Heidegger’s famous illustration of this distinction: a worker on the job doesn’t just stare at a hammer, disinterestedly noting its features, but instead sees the hammer as the means to achieve a desired end. Levinas, in turn, critiques Heidegger’s emphasis on practical, instrumental engagement with objects as itself a secondary mode of awareness, dependent on a yet more primordial relation to the world: enjoyment. “Heidegger does not take the relation of enjoyment into consideration. The implement has entirely masked the usage and the issuance at the term – the satisfaction” (TI 134). Levinas argues that *Dasein*’s busy engagement with the ready-to-hand, with tools, remains unmotivated unless that engagement ultimately grounds itself

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<sup>11</sup> While Levinas clearly works within the phenomenological tradition, he also presses beyond its inherent limitations as when he argues that the face to face, the relation to the other, the metaphysical relation, defies analysis in terms of intentionality. See TI 109.

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in satisfaction. And that satisfaction can't be articulated in terms of the instrumental networks Heidegger makes fundamental to *Dasein's* being in the world. As Levinas mockingly notes, “*Dasein* in Heidegger is never hungry” (TI 134). Against Heidegger, Levinas sees our primordial relation to the world as enjoyment. “Enjoyment [*Jouissance*] – an ultimate relation with the substantial plentitude of being, with its materiality – embraces all relations to things...To enjoy without utility, in pure loss, gratuitously, without referring to anything else, in pure expenditure – this is the human” (TI 133).

To get at Levinas's distinctive understanding of enjoyment, it is useful to attend to the images that guide his analysis. Each of the three modes of intentionality mentioned above – representation, practical engagement, and enjoyment – correspond to distinctive metaphors. Husserl's emphasis on noetic intentionality is captured in visual metaphors, in which we contemplate objects from a distance. Heidegger's emphasis on practical engagement lends itself to metaphors of grasp, of taking a tool in hand in using it. Levinas describes the intentionality of enjoyment via metaphors of eating. He glosses enjoyment as “living from [*vivre de*],” and, while he names many things alongside food as that from which we live, he highlights the relation to food: “Nourishment, as the means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is in the essence of enjoyment...All enjoyment is in this sense alimentation” (TI 110-111). Levinas is accentuating a mode of awareness more basic than representation or utilization in which we, as embodied material beings, directly engage the material world in its full reality. As he puts it,

This sinking one's teeth into the things which the act of eating involves above all measures the surplus of the reality of the aliment over every represented reality, a surplus that is not quantitative, but is the way the I, the absolute commencement, is suspended on the non-I. (TI 129)

Already in this exposition of the metaphor of eating, Levinas points beyond it to another metaphor. When I eat, I take an exterior object into myself, making it part of myself. But in the passage above, Levinas describes the self as “suspended on the non-I.” It would be hard to be suspended on that which is entirely within me! While I take parts of the material world into myself, enjoying them and nourishing myself, the fund or reserve from which those particular “aliments” are drawn is never itself

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made interior. Rather, it surrounds me, immerses me, encompasses me. If in eating I take food within me, I, in turn, am within the material world from which the food comes. Levinas describes this immersion as “bathing in the element” (TI 132). These two distinctive, even contradictory metaphors – eating and bathing – lead Levinas into two variant but complementary accounts of separation.

The metaphor of eating suggests separation as an inward movement, a movement that gives rise to the self:

Enjoyment is a withdrawal into oneself, an involution. What is termed an affective state does not have the dull monotony of a state, but is the vibrant exaltation in which dawns the self. (TI 118)

In enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the Other, I am alone without solitude, innocently egoist and alone. Not against the Others, not “as for me...” – but entirely deaf to the Other, outside of all communication and all refusal to communicate – without ears, like a hungry stomach. (TI 134)

But if eating suggests an “involution,” a movement of turning in on itself, separating itself from its enviroing world, “bathing in the element” suggests just the opposite. It is not that the self turns out instead of in (as in the case of representation) but that enviroing nature inundates the self, overwhelming ego boundaries:

To-be-in-the-element...differs from a thought making its way outward. Here on the contrary the movement comes incessantly upon me, as the wave that engulfs and submerges and drowns – an incessant movement of afflux without respite, a total contact without fissure or gap from which the reflected movement of thought could arise. It is to be within, to be inside of...” (TI 135)

To follow Levinas here, we need to understand his distinctive concept of “the element” and its connection to enjoyment. Levinas draws on the Greek notion of the elemental as the diffuse, indefinite, eternal material principles from which particular things arise: “It [the elemental] is wind, earth, sea, air” (TI 132). Elsewhere, he invokes Anaximander, naming it “the *apeiron* [the unlimited, the indefinite]...[which] presents itself a

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quality refractory to identification” (TI 141). He also invokes Aristotle’s notion of “prime matter,” the utterly unformed and indeterminate stuff of which things are made (TI 159). Why is it that Levinas says that enjoyment puts us in contact with the element, the source from which things come, rather than things themselves? For Levinas, a world of definite things takes shape only for representational consciousness and for practical engagement. Through language, by naming things, through labor, by shaping things, through ownership, by making things property, we (temporarily) place limits on and give definition to the indefinite material that surrounds us.

Appropriation and representation add a new event... Things have a name and an identity... The world of perception is thus a world where things have identity... The identity of persons and the continuity of their labors project over the things the grill through which they find again identical things. An earth inhabited by men endowed with language is peopled with stable things. (TI 139)

In enjoyment, an intentionality more basic than thought or work, the self gets back beneath and before this grid of individuation to engage the element as element. And that engagement is delicious, for the self loves its life in the world. Against Heidegger’s description of existence as a grim domain of anxiety and labor, Levinas proclaims “life’s joyous access to life” (TI 145):

The elements do not receive man as a land of exile, humiliating and limiting his freedom. The human being does not find himself in an absurd world in which he would be *geworfen* [thrown]. (TI 140)

At its origin there is a being gratified, a citizen of paradise... Far from putting the sensible life in question, pain takes place within its horizons and refers to the joy of living. Already and henceforth, life is loved...  
*The gnosis of the sensible is already enjoyment.* (TI 145)

Enjoyment then, in Heideggerian lingo, is ontological, not ontic. Enjoyment is not, first and foremost, enjoyment of this or that but of life, of being, of our materiality in communion with the materiality of nature, of our immersion in the element.

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But if enjoyment is the first mode of our relation to being, anxiety follows close on its heels. Because enjoyment puts us in touch with the indefinite source out of which particular objects of enjoyment arise, it undercuts our faith in a world of stable, reliable, definite things, revealing that things are ever haunted by their origin and destination in the element. This awareness manifests itself as anxiety. “Enjoyment is without security...[I]nsecurity menaces an enjoyment already happy in the element, rendered sensitive to disquietude only by this happiness” (TI 142). Anxiety is typically understood as a concern for the future, and Levinas states that the self, even as it enjoys life, is troubled by an awareness that that enjoyment will cease:

[T]he happiness of enjoyment...can be tarnished by the concern for the morrow involved in the fathomless depth of the element in which enjoyment is steeped. (TI 144)

The separation that is accomplished by egoism would be but a word if the ego, the separated and self-sufficient being, did not hear the muffled rustling of nothingness back unto which the elements flow and are lost. (TI 146)

This overtly temporal anxiety also manifests itself as a spatial anxiety akin to Kant’s analysis of the sublime. While things, the definite, discrete objects we create through language and labor, are entirely bounded by sides, when we immerse ourselves in the element, we engage a reality beyond such limits:

To be affected by a side [face] of being while its whole depth remains undetermined and comes upon me from nowhere is to be bent toward the insecurity of the morrow...

The element I inhabit is at the frontier of a night. What the side of the element that is turned towards me conceals is not a “something” susceptible of being revealed, but an ever-new depth of absence, an existence without existent, the impersonal par excellence...

We have described this nocturnal dimension of the future under the title *there is [il y a]*. The element extends into the *there is*. Enjoyment, as interiorization, runs up against the very strangeness of the earth. (TI 142)

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Thus enjoyment, as delightful as it is, exposes the self to two levels of anxiety: the joy it experiences is temporally limited, it will end; the source of that joy, the element, is boundless, both spatially unlimited and temporally without being or end.

As noted above, Levinas’s two metaphors governing his analysis of enjoyment seem to point in two discrepant directions. The eating metaphor, with its focus on the self turning in on itself in enjoyment, fits obviously with the theme of separation that is a main focus of the first half of *Totality and Infinity*. But the metaphor of “bathing in the element” runs counter to separation as the self loses itself in enjoyment, dissolves in the element, drowns in the unbounded sea of the materiality that precedes discrete, separate things. For Levinas, this is not a contradiction. Rather, to be human is to find a way to live in this tension. Specifically, the challenge is to find a way to bring two modes of interiority – the interiority of egoism and the interiority of immersion in the element – together. According to Levinas, this reconciliation happens uniquely in the home.

Man has overcome the elements only by surmounting this interiority without issue [that is, inundation by the element] by the domicile [a new type of interiority], which confers upon him an extraterritoriality [an embassy, though entirely enclosed within a host country, operates as a bit of the territory of the home country]. [In the domicile,] He is *within* what he possesses, such that we shall be able to say that the domicile... renders the inner life possible. The I is thus at home with itself. Through home our relation with space at a distance and extension is substituted for the simple “bathing in the element.” (TI 131-2)

Already here in the sub-section, “Enjoyment and Separation,” Levinas sketches out main lines of the exposition of home that he will develop more fully in the next section, “The Dwelling.”

### **“The Dwelling”**

Levinas’s exposition of the home can be read as a sort of phenomenological commentary on Aesop’s fable of the grasshopper and the ant. The grasshopper gives itself over unreservedly to enjoyment of the summer – its plenteous food, its mild weather, its long, delicious days. Avoiding labor, the grasshopper fiddles the summer away, content to live joyously in the moment. As if speaking for the grasshopper, Levinas sums

up enjoyment in the motto, “To live is to play” (TI 134). In contrast, the ant, attuned to its anxiety, knows deep down that “the plentitude of its instant of enjoyment is not ensured against the unknown that lurks in the very element it enjoys,” realizes that “what life lives from can come to be wanting” (TI 144). The ant takes to heart the portentous mantra of “Game of Thrones”: “winter is coming.”

Just as with Aesop’s ant, so Levinas’s I responds to the uncertainty that menaces enjoyment by laboring. Through work, raw material is modified and collected against a future when it will be needed. In the process, it undergoes a fundamental ontological transformation. In place of the indefinite, unreliable element, matter is stabilized and appropriated as possession. “The labor that draws the things from the elements in which I am steeped discovers durable substances, but forthwith suspends the independence of their durable being by acquiring them as movable goods, transportable, put in reserve, deposited in the home” thereby establishing “a world to be possessed, to be acquired” (TI 157).

Just as the ant’s labors are oriented by the subterranean nest from which it emerges and to which it returns, so the I’s labors make essential reference to the home. Here, however, Aesop breaks down as our guide. According to Levinas, home is not just a useful warehouse, a place to put and protect the products of our labor. Rather, he sees home as the *precondition* of the very possibility of labor and possession. To labor is take up a fundamentally different relation to nature. It is to step back from immediate enjoyment, to achieve distance from the element. This distance is both spatial and temporal. Rather than abandoning itself to enjoyment of the matter immediately before it, *homo faber* engages in circumspection, seeing that matter in relation to a wider instrumental context. Rather than abandoning itself to the now of enjoyment, *homo faber* defers gratification, working to provide for future needs. How does the self achieve this distance from the here and the now in which it is immersed? Levinas asserts that the basis of this distance is nothing other than the home which “is set back from the anonymity of the earth, the air, the light, the forest, the road, the sea, the river... With the dwelling the separated being breaks with natural existence” (TI 156).

As with labor, possession is also dependent on a break with the element for the element itself is “essentially non-possessable, ‘nobody’s’” (TI 131). The home, as an enclosed, separated space, creates the possibility for the fundamentally new relationship to things involved in possession. In order to possess a thing, in order for it to become *mine*, it has to become a

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part of my being, that is, interior to me in some sense. According to Levinas, the home, as an interior space, “establishes [a relationship] with a world to be possessed, to be acquired, to be rendered *interior*” (TI 157). As a precondition of possession, the home cannot itself be a possession according to Levinas. “The home that founds possession is not a possession in the same sense as the moveable goods it can collect and keep.” Rather, the home is a locus of “essential interiority” (TI 157). The essentially interior space of the home allows for the interiorization of things within my being that possession implies.

As in the case of labor and possession, Levinas says that the very possibility of thought, as he puts it, of representation, depends on the home. He writes, “the dwelling cannot be forgotten among the conditions for representation...[T]he subject contemplating the world presupposes the event of dwelling, the withdrawal from the elements” (TI 153). Only by stepping back from total immersion in enjoyment can the self achieve a cognitive, representational perspective on the objects of its enjoyment.

Levinas brings these three distinctive features of human existence – labor, possession, and representation – together under one category: recollection. In recollection, the self gathers itself together, forging rather than discovering its identity, establishing itself as a self that maintains itself [*se tenir*] within space and across time. In so doing, the self ceases to be an animal interacting with nature to become a human inhabiting a world. And all that depends on home. “The recollection necessary for nature to be represented and worked over [and then possessed], for it to take form as a world, is accomplished as the home” (TI 152).

Clearly, Levinas attributes enormous significance to the home, naming it as the basis of distinctly human existence. As he puts it, “within the system of finalities in which human life maintains itself the home occupies a privileged place...The privileged role of the home does not consist in being the end of human activity but in being its condition and in this sense its commencement...” (TI 152). But how to understand this distinctive and fundamental role? So far, I’ve pointed to two aspects of home to account for its centrality for Levinas: 1) its being “set back” from the element, giving the self a distance from nature, and 2) the distinctive quality of its space as “essentially interior.” As suggestive as those themes are, the question remains: what makes home the indispensable basis for labor, possession and thought, in short, for all that is distinctly human? To get a deeper understanding of the centrality of home for Levinas, we need to keep in view the phenomenological basis of his philosophy. Levinas

argues for a *sui generis* awareness of home, a distinctive mode of intentionality linking the subject and its dwelling, that shines light on the fundamental ontological role it plays in our lives. That is, beyond arguing that home is essential for transcending enjoyment to achieve labor, possession, and thought, Levinas further argues that there is a distinctive mode of awareness of home over and above enjoyment, practical engagement, and representation, an awareness that lies at the very base of our sense of ourselves as separate, individuated beings. He proposes a fourth, entirely distinctive mode of awareness, “a specific intentionality of concretization,” which he describes as “the outpouring of consciousness in things” (TI 153).

“Intentionality of concretization” is, for Levinas, an indirect self-consciousness whereby the self becomes aware of itself as separate, as interior, by seeing those traits reflected in its living space. In a manner that recalls Hegel on the self’s discovery of itself by seeing itself reflected in the objects of its awareness, Levinas argues that the spatial enclosure of the home allows the dweller in that home to both achieve separation and become conscious of itself as separate. He writes,

The whole of the civilization of labor and possession arises as a concretization of the separated being effectuating its separation. But this civilization refers to the incarnation of consciousness and to inhabitation – to existence proceeding from the intimacy of a home, the first concretization. (TI 153)

The feat of having limited a part of this world and having closed it off...realizes extraterritoriality and the sovereignty of thought. (TI 169-70)

Levinas turns to a variety of expressions to capture what he has in mind by “intentionality of concretization”: it is an “outpouring of consciousness into things,” an “incarnation of consciousness,” an “effectuating” and a “realizing” of the psychological state of separation in a set of physical circumstances. One is tempted to turn to a term of literary criticism, the “objective correlative,” to speak of this relation, but that seems not quite adequate. The objective correlative is a literary device for conveying an emotional state by way of a description of physical circumstances, but, for Levinas, it is not just a means of expression. Rather, he describes the psychological condition of interiority as inextricably bound up with the its

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physical, architectural double such that the former is only real and recognized insofar as it is housed in and reflected by the latter. James Mensch nicely describes such doubling in noting that the privacy of first personal experience is given concrete reality in the opaque walls and curtained windows of the home:

[T]he home manifests on an extended level the privacy of our interiority. The Other can see a person’s body. He cannot see the seeing that takes place within it. Similarly, he sees the outside of a person’s home, but neither its interior nor the person who looks out from it is available to his gaze. In an extended sense, then, “interiority [is] concretely established in the home” (TI 154).<sup>12</sup>

Levinas makes the case for his bold claim concerning “the intentionality of concretization” by describing how the dwelling fundamentally shapes and orients the self’s relations with space, time, things, its own body, and, finally, other persons.

### *Space*

In the first page of his discussion of dwelling, Levinas describes the self as ever moving between two fundamentally different spaces: one interior and the other exterior:

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...Simultaneously without and within, he goes forth outside from an inwardness [*intimité*]. (TI 152)

With these evocative words, Levinas breaks with the regnant Euclidian – Newtonian tradition of thinking of space as singular, unitary, and homogeneous, as a sort of neutral matrix within which things and events are located. He posits instead two radically heterogeneous spaces between which we pass when we cross through doors, much as C.S. Lewis’s wardrobe is a portal between our familiar world and the magical world of Narnia. This comparison lets us grasp what Levinas means when he says that the home

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<sup>12</sup>James R. Mensch, *Levinas’s Existential Analytic: A Commentary on Totality and Infinity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015) 95.

is “set back” (TI 156) from the natural world. Normally, to be set back from something involves increasing distance between objects occupying a common space. But the “set back” Levinas associates with dwelling is removal to a qualitatively different interior space, as Raoul Moati puts it, a “radical elsewhere,” that nonetheless retains access to the exterior space of the natural world.<sup>13</sup> Herein lies the profound significance of doors and windows – the *only* specific features of the home (other than walls) that Levinas mentions. He writes,

The dwelling remains in its own way open upon the element from which it separates. The ambiguity of distance, both removal and connection, is lifted by the window...(TI 156)

The feat of having limited a part of the world and having closed it off, having access to the elements I enjoy by way of the door and the window, realizes extraterritoriality and the sovereignty of thought...(TI 169-70)

To grasp what Levinas is saying, it helps to refer to the Transcendental Aesthetic of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. There Kant asserts that space and time are not independent objective realities but rather pure forms of sensibility, that is, the grids of our sensible intuitions. Kant says that our intuitions of outer sense, that is, our sensory intuitions of things beyond ourselves, are deployed on the grid of space, whereas our intuitions of inner sense, our awareness of our own internal states, are deployed on the grid of time. For example, my experience of my copy of *Totality and Infinity* places it over there, just to the right of my keyboard, while my experience of perplexity at an especially opaque passage in Levinas is placed at a *when*, not a *where*.

Despite Kant’s radical departure from objectivist understandings of space, he describes space in terms quite consistent with the dominant tradition. Vindicating Euclid as describing perfectly the character of space, Kant insists that space is singular, unitary and homogeneous. As noted, Kant locates the fundamental cleft that runs through human experience between our outer and inner intuitions, the former deployed in space, the latter in time. Levinas, in contrast, shifts the inner/outer divide out into space itself, with space riven by the threshold of the home into two radically

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<sup>13</sup> Raoul Moati, *Levinas and the Night of Being: A Guide to Totality and Infinity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017) 93

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heterogenous zones, the interior of the dwelling on the one hand and the world beyond the dwelling on the other.<sup>14</sup>

Against the common sense notion that places the space of the home squarely and unproblematically within the space of the world, Levinas stages his own “Copernican Revolution,” interestingly parallel to Kant’s, prioritizing the interior space of the home over the exterior space of the world.

But this belongingness [the existence of the home within the world] does not nullify the bearing of the fact that every consideration of objects, and of buildings too, is produced out of a dwelling. *Concretely speaking the dwelling is not situated in the objective world, but the objective world is situated in reference to my dwelling* [my italics]. (TI 152-3)

The *somewhere* of dwelling is produced as a primordial event relative to which the event of the unfolding of physico-geometrical extension must be understood – and not the reverse. (TI 168)

Levinas is asserting here that for each person, their home, their dwelling, their domain of interior space, is their *axis mundi*, the reference point in terms of which location in exterior space is determined. I leave my home, I go out into the world, perhaps far away from home. But my home is ever-present in my consciousness as I navigate that outer world, serving as my basis for understanding where I am and orienting my movements. Levinas thus gives the lived interior space of the home priority in two regards. First, lived interior space has priority over lived exterior space, the former serving as the reference point for the latter. Second, like Husserl and Heidegger before him, Levinas gives priority to lived experience over objective reconstructions of experience embodied in theoretical knowledge, such as the natural sciences. Only on the basis of the lived space of the home can the self construct and utilize depersonalized reconstructions of space such as maps or gps coordinates.

### *Time*

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<sup>14</sup> As James Mensch puts it, “[The home] extends the ego’s interiority to a part of the objective world: the home becomes the extended 0-point.” Mensch, 95.

Levinas asserts that the dwelling shapes our experience of time just as profoundly as it shapes our experience of space. As discussed above, Levinas regards enjoyment as an immersion of self in the element, as an unrestricted abandonment of self to delight in the material stuff of nature. In such an immersion and self-abandonment, experience is all about the here and now of the immediate present. For Levinas, such experience does not rise to the level of consciousness. Rather, true experience involves a distance from the present achieved through the “deferred gratification” implicit in work and ownership. And those relations to the material world depend on the home for their possibility. Levinas writes that “ecstatic and immediate enjoyment...is adjourned and delayed in the home” (TI 156), thereby “open[ing] the very dimension of time” (TI 165). For Levinas, our very existence as temporal beings is grounded in the home.

### *Things*

For the naïve realism of the “natural attitude” (our unproblematic and unselfconscious engagement with the world), things, the furniture of the world, are objectively there independent of our awareness of them. For Levinas, both things and the world in which they take their places are accomplishments, that is, fundamental ontological transformations of brute nature, the element, the *il y a* (the *there is*). As we have seen in discussing enjoyment, the element is unlimited, lacking the defined sides characteristic of a thing. One enjoys as one plunges into the ocean – one enters a plenum that stretches out endlessly before one. Only through labor, possession, and representation (ie naming and thinking about things) does the self carve off a portion of the element from the whole, transfigure it into a humanly meaningful and useable entity, replace its Heraclitean instability with the reliability and permanence, and give it a name and a place within the world. As quoted above, Levinas writes,

Appropriation and representation add a new event... Things have a name and an identity... The world of perception is thus a world where things have identity... The identity of persons and the continuity of their labors project over the things the grill through which they find again identical things. An earth inhabited by men endowed with language is peopled with stable things. (TI 139)

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Since home, for Levinas, is the condition of labor, possession and representation, and since labor, possession, and representation are conditions for the existence of things, home is the precondition of things.

*Body*

Of all the things in the world, one stands out as uniquely intimate and significant: the self’s body. Any number of theorists of home have postulated some sort of homology between home and body: the walls of the home that separates the exterior from the interior are a double of our skin; windows are like eyes; the door is like the mouth, etc. Those who take the home as the double of the body naturally give priority to the body, the natural basis for the cultural copy. Surprisingly, Levinas denies that we can fully be said to have bodies apart from dwelling. Against Boutroux, who sees possession of objects as an extension of our primordial possession of our bodies, Levinas argues,

But the body as naked body is not the first possession; it is still outside of having and not having. We dispose of our body inasmuch as we have already suspended the being of the element that bathes us, by *inhabiting*. The body is my possession according as my being maintains itself in a home at the limit of interiority and exteriority. *The extraterritoriality of a home conditions the very possession of my body* [my italics]. (TI 162)

Levinas explains this remarkable claim by returning to the equivocal character of enjoyment. On the one hand, enjoyment is an involution, a taking of something into oneself and making it part of oneself. This is a moment of independence. But on the other hand, the self loses itself in its dependence on the element. For Levinas, the body *is* this simultaneous dependence and independence: “*To be a body* is on the one hand *to stand [se tenir]*, to be master of oneself, and, on the other, to stand on the earth, to be in the *other*, and thus to be encumbered by one’s body...their simultaneity constitutes the body” (TI 164-5). As noted, Levinas asserts that the “naked body,” that is the body in its purely natural modality is “outside having and not having.” Levinas writes, “The dwelling, overcoming the insecurity of life, is a perpetual postponement of the expiration in which life risks foundering” (TI 165). That is, only by circumscribing the body’s dependence on and vulnerability to the vicissitudes of the element does it

become properly a body I can call my own. In that sense, “*home conditions the very possession of my body* [my italics]” (TI 162).

### *Others*

To this point, my discussion of Levinas on home has “bracketed” reference to other persons, proceeding as if the dwelling could be understood simply as enclosed space separated off from the world beyond its walls, doors and windows. In fact, other persons were already implicitly present in discussions of ownership and thought as modes of relationship to things opened up by habitation. Levinas writes, “A thing does not resist acquisition; the other possessors – those whom one cannot possess – contest and therefore can sanction possession itself” (TI 162). That is, possession is inherently social. My ownership of a thing depends on recognition of that ownership by other potential users of the thing. Also, deeply entwined with possession are notions of right of exchange, either through barter or for money, with other persons.

In a similar manner, representation – the cognitive having of things – involves placing particular things under concepts, that is, categorizing individuals as tokens of general types. For Levinas, concepts arise out of language, the application of shared, mutually understood words to things. And language is essentially social. Levinas writes, “Signification arises from the other stating or understanding the world, which precisely is thematized in his language or his understanding” (TI 97). As he puts it even more succinctly, “the locus of truth is society” (TI 101). So, in presenting the home as the basis of possession and representation, the social context of home was already implicitly present.

Recognizing this, however, still doesn’t come to terms with the fundamentally social character of dwelling for Levinas. As noted, home for Levinas is a qualitatively distinctive space, a “radical elsewhere,” separate from though connected to the space of the exterior world. What makes domestic space distinctive is not just the walls, windows and doors that enclose it; after all, architecture in general encloses interior spaces but not all buildings are homes. What makes home a distinctive “privileged place” (TI 152) for Levinas is that it is always already transfigured by a human presence, by a welcoming other, whose hospitality transforms the mere physical edifice into a proper home. Controversially, Levinas identifies this welcoming other as “the feminine,” as “feminine alterity,” as “the woman.” He writes, “This peaceable welcome is produced primordially in the gentleness of the feminine face” (TI 150). For Levinas, the self comes to

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itself, recollects itself, within the intimate space of home, and this is only possible because of the restrained, silent presence of “the woman” whose mode of relationship is radically different from the face-to-face presence of the other who confronts the self with obtrusive ethical demands.

For the intimacy of recollection to be able to be produced in the oecumena of being the presence of the Other must not only be revealed in the face which breaks through its own plastic image, but must be revealed simultaneously with this presence, in the withdrawal and in its absence... And the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of intimacy is the Woman. The woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation. (TI 155)

Long before Levinas published *Totality and Infinity* in 1961, Simone de Beauvoir had already called him to task for earlier writings in which he similarly framed woman as man’s other and assigned her an essentially domestic role supporting masculine forays into the public world beyond the home.<sup>15</sup> Levinas’s statements hew so close to gender stereotypes that discomfort with his view of woman remains evident to this day. That said, many interpreters, more specifically, many feminist interpreters of Levinas resist de Beauvoir’s dismissive critique. Some defenders note that Levinas distinguishes between the feminine as a quality defining domestic space and specific female persons: “the empirical absence of the human being of the ‘feminine sex’ in a dwelling nowise affects the dimension of femininity which remains open there, as the very welcome of the being” (TI 158). Such a “metaphorical” reading (to use Claire Katz’s label) plays down the significance of gender, neutralizing (or even neutering) Levinas’s use of the term, “feminine.” Some interpreters, such as Tina Chanter, turn de Beauvoir’s critique on its head, acknowledging that Levinas does define woman as the other of man but insisting that Levinas is valorizing, not subordinating, the feminine:

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<sup>15</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1952) xix. Cited by Tina Chanter, “Feminism and the Other,” in *Provocation of Levinas: Thinking the Other*, ed. R. Bernasconi and R. Wood (New York: Routledge, 1988) 52.

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Levinas's account of the Other provides feminism with a voice that many feminists have already begun to seek: the voice of the radically Other...I simply point to a certain insistence in his work upon otherness, an insistence which appeals to what have traditionally been conceived as non-male values: gentleness, tenderness, welcome.<sup>16</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this essay to sort out whether Levinas's comments on the feminine are a baleful gender essentialism or a salubrious reversal of patriarchal values (or both). What is crucial for my project of understanding Levinas on dwelling are two key points:

First, home is always already a social space. That is, what marks home as home, what transfigures the four walls, windows and doors of a house into a home, is a human welcome, a nurturing presence of others.

Second, the specific sociality of home is distinct from the sociality of the wider world. Levinas writes,

The Other who welcomes in intimacy [ie in the home] is not the *you* [*vous*] of the face that reveals itself in a dimension of height, but precisely the *thou* [*tu*] of familiarity: a language without teaching, a silent language, an understanding without words, an expression in secret. (TI 155)

As noted, Levinas is justly famous for his searing account of the face-to-face, of the imperious demand the other-in-need, which is the focus of Section III of *Totality and Infinity*. What is less appreciated is that Levinas views the gentler, nurturing sociability of the home as the basis for the demanding sociability of the face-to-face. Only as a housed being, with all that that entails, is the self authentically capable of the ethical encounter. For the ethical encounter is, at its core, hospitality, the separated being's opening of its home and thus of itself to the other in need:

The 'vision' of the face as face is a certain mode of sojourning in a home, or – to speak in a less singular fashion – a certain form of economic life. No human or interhuman

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<sup>16</sup> Tina Chanter, 52.

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relationship can be enacted outside of economy; no face can be approached with empty hands and closed home. Recollection in a home open to the Other – hospitality – is the initial fact of human recollection and separation; it coincides with the Desire for the Other absolutely transcendent. (TI 172)

To translate this into less distinctive terminology, Levinas is saying that the nurturing, supportive sociability of the home is an essential precondition for the challenging, demanding sociability of the broader ethical sphere. Developing in the context of the former makes possible the latter. Home, in other words, makes possible our development as moral selves.

### **Implications for Our Understanding of Homelessness**

Though this essay began with the issue of homelessness, more specifically, with the question of our duty to people experiencing homelessness, its focus has been overwhelmingly on Levinas’s distinctive philosophy of home. What does that philosophy have to say of relevance to the issue of homelessness?

Insofar as Levinas establishes home as fundamental to human existence, he indirectly makes the case that homelessness is indeed a profound deprivation, one demanding a response from those able to make it. It is obvious that people need shelter. But all too often we think of that shelter exclusively in terms of physiological need – a place to stay warm, dry, and safe from both natural and human threats. Levinas helps us understand the more profound role that home plays in our lives, giving human shape to our relations to space, time, things, our bodies and others. While it is beyond the scope of this essay, it is clear from my readings on homelessness and from my personal encounters with both homeless people and those who work with them that lacking a home does indeed disrupt human lives in these very domains. While Levinas’s philosophy of home proceeds at an extreme level of abstraction, empirical study of the effects of homelessness confirms his central claims.<sup>17</sup>

The relevance of Levinas to the issue of homelessness becomes even more obvious when we call to mind what follows his discussion of home and dwelling: his analysis of obligation as the claim of the other in need –

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<sup>17</sup> See especially Robert Desjarlais, *Shelter Blues: Sanity and Selfhood Among the Homeless* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

the widow, the orphan, the stranger – on the ethical agent. Breaking with standard theories that lay out ethics in terms of results, rules or virtues, Levinas centers his ethical philosophy on the insistent need of the other. An appreciative reading of his analysis of dwelling goes a long ways to heightening our sense of how insistent the homeless other's need really is. And that makes the demand that we respond all the greater.

For Levinas, the coziness of existence at home, the self-contained contentment *chez soi*, sets the stage for the incursion of the other in need from beyond, from the exterior: “The possibility for the home to open to the Other is as essential to the essence of the home as closed doors and windows” (TI 173). That is, hospitality is as much constitutive of home as is its separation and enclosure. Home, as the site of hospitality, enables the ethical response to the other in need.

But if home makes possible ethical response to the other, it also can be the way we keep the inconvenient needs of the other out of sight and out of mind. At the opening of his discussion of dwelling, Levinas noted that *a la* Heidegger, the home can be seen as a tool, an implement, sheltering us from “the inclemencies of the weather” as well as hiding us from “enemies or the importunate” (TI 152). “The importunate” – others in desperate need who threaten my contented domestic tranquility – are precisely the focus of Section III, *Exteriority and the Face*. If the self must be housed to be ready to welcome “the importunate,” the home can equally be the means by which the self shuts itself off from the cries of the stranger, the widow and the orphan.

But the separated being can close itself up in its egoism, that is, in the very accomplishment of its isolation. And this possibility of forgetting the transcendence of the Other – of banishing with impunity all hospitality...from one's home, banishing the transcendental relation that alone permits the I to shut itself up in itself – evinces the absolute truth, the radicalism of separation. (TI 172-3)

Early in this essay, I asserted that Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* supports two strikingly different assertions: 1) that home is fundamental to human existence far beyond its role in offering shelter from the elements, and 2) that home is a dangerous thing, prone to isolate occupants from their fellow humans. Having made the case for the first point by going through the ways in which the home fundamentally shapes our experiences of space, time, things, our bodies, and other persons, I have come to the second point:

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our homes, rather than always being sites of hospitality, of welcoming openness to others, are all too prone to be cocoons of amoral self-satisfaction, capsules of comfort safe from the demands of “the importunate.” Herein, I take it, lies what Levinas calls “the equivocal essence of the home” (TI 172). The task of developing that second, admonitory message lies ahead as the work of another essay.

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