

# TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGY OF DWELLING

• Holger Zaborowski •

“No one truly dwells who lives as  
if he could move again at any moment.  
But at the same time no one truly dwells  
who lives as if he were going to dwell  
forever and ever exactly where he is.”



## 1. *Philosophizing—Thinking—Dwelling*

Philosophy is concerned with fundamental and comprehensive questions. It deals with the great questions, questions concerning the whence, the what, and the how of things, the destiny and purpose of our life, questions concerning the why and what-for, the reasons [*Gründe*] and mysteries [*Abgründe*] of what, for lack of a better term, we call reality, questions concerning being and nothingness, the open paths and errant trails of thinking, willing, feeling, and acting. In the face of such questions, is it not true that philosophy often appears as the arduous, Sisyphean—indeed, impossible—art of posing questions that admit of no definitive answers? But doesn't the philosopher in this apparently hopelessly insecure situation nevertheless find himself always with a roof over his head? Can he not always manage to settle down somewhere and feel at home? Or does he remain a nomad, a pilgrim, who has always already placed every holy destination in question and feels compelled to go further? Would it not in this case have been better, more comfortable, and more

certain to remain in the cave of pre-philosophical life? For either the philosopher entangles himself in long, laborious reflections that can hardly ever be brought to a conclusion and thus remain always provisional, or he never manages to reach beyond platitudes, the wisdom of proverbs and general sayings—and thereby betrays his proper vocation.

The best thing, not to say the only thing, the philosopher thus seems able to achieve is the most precise possible formulation of questions. And the notion that philosophy is in the end just this, an art of questioning, is something that not a few, if not in fact all, of the great thinkers of the history of philosophy have claimed and exemplified more or less radically. But are we then, in the presence of that about which one in the end can say nothing definitive, left with nothing but either a humble or a restive silence? Philosophy feels constantly threatened by the possibility of losing its voice and settling into a quiet and peaceful corner, but without for all that being able to give up thinking and speaking against this silence. For it is precisely the great thinkers who have always gone further and have sought out ever new approaches to finding answers to the great questions. The very act of questioning serves in this case as a distinctive point of departure: for every attempt to formulate a question presupposes an initial, and perhaps often a merely preliminary, intimation of an answer.

These reflections reveal that philosophy possesses a characteristic that separates it from other disciplines, namely, that the gods have placed the sweat of self-reflection in a peculiar way before the labor of answering, that the question about what a philosopher actually is must be posed always anew. For it is only when the person who reflects on what he is in fact doing when he poses one of the great questions, and thus on how philosophical thinking is carried out and what happens in this thinking, that he is able to arrive at answers that can be called philosophical. It is only on the foundation of self-reflection, and in his own radical asking of the philosophical question, that he can be truly open for answers. In philosophy, a person can answer questions always only in his own person—and this presupposes that one has in fact begun to question in his own person. Philosophy is an activity, a philosophizing, and as such an activity it is an act of freedom.

But what is philosophy about more specifically, and what is asked in the great questions? Here we come upon a tension in the philosophical act, which has to do with the peculiarity of the

questions that are posed in philosophy. Philosophy is concerned with something great and difficult, but at the same time with something small and simple, with something general and at the same time quite individual. Precisely in the great questions, philosophy sometimes has the simple task of recalling the trivial, of recalling what we somehow always already know. To philosophize means in the first instance to recall, to become aware of what is always already the case, and to allow what is the case to become questionable—not, however, in order to place it radically in question, but in order to see better and to understand more profoundly what is in fact always already the case. It was for this reason that Ludwig Wittgenstein begged God to “give to the philosopher insight into what lies evident to all,”<sup>1</sup> that is, insight into something that is already there and already seen, but which cannot be fabricated or made. In this respect, philosophy is not only an art of questioning, but also, and at a deeper level, an art of seeing and, from this perspective, an art of questioning and understanding, of being open in a sympathetic and alert way for reality, of concerning oneself with reality.

But this being open also requires time—and indeed in every case our own time. It is necessary, in questioning and answering, to remain in a tensed attentiveness and to persevere in it. There are thus no quick answers in philosophy. To be sure, there is—again and again in fact—the suddenness of insight. But such insight is genuinely possible only if the ground has been prepared and if we have in some sense already taken time, if we have made ourselves familiar with and have sought to attend to what we see. The notion that thinking and therefore philosophizing is possible only in an abiding with the “matter” that belongs to it finds expression in the fact that the English verb “to dwell” means both “to inhabit” and also “to think” or “to meditate on”: thinking is an abiding dwelling in reality, a being at home within and a familiarity with the great questions in a continually renewed attempt to engage these questions in a responsive way in our sphere of thinking and in the places that are opened by it. It is precisely for this reason that a comparison so quickly suggests itself between architecture and philosophy, and that architectonic metaphors lie so near at hand: as Wittgenstein put it, “The work of philosophy—just as in many ways the work done in

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<sup>1</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, ed. Georg Henrik von Wright in cooperation with Heikki Nyman (Oxford and Frankfurt am Main, 1977), 121.

architecture—is in fact more a work on oneself. The work of comprehending oneself. Of comprehending the way one sees things. (And what one demands from them.)”<sup>2</sup> And Martin Heidegger emphasized the close connection between building and thinking in relation to dwelling,

that in every case thinking itself belongs in the same sense as building, but only in another way, to dwelling. . . . Building and thinking are always in their own way indispensable for dwelling. Both, however, are also inadequate for dwelling to the extent that they carry out separately their own tasks rather than listening to one another. This they are able to do when both, building and thinking, belong to dwelling, remain within their own borders, and know that each one, like the other, comes out of the workplace of a long experience and unceasing practice.<sup>3</sup>

But not only because thinking in a certain sense is also an abiding dwelling and because there is therefore a close connection between dwelling and thinking, or because thinking is ordered to dwelling just as building is, but also because dwelling belongs to those self-evident realities that philosophizing is able to recall ever anew and—particularly in ages in which this self-evident knowledge is increasingly or already forgotten—*must* recall, philosophy stands before the task of reflecting explicitly, and not only self-reflectively, on what it means to dwell.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Dwelling—Living—Remembering

Now, human beings, even when they are not (or no longer) sedentary, live in some place and in some manner. Sometimes in caves, in tents, in igloos, in houses, whether they be made of wood, stone, or metal, or also on boats, under bridges, or in trees. The fact

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 38.

<sup>3</sup>Martin Heidegger, “Bauen Wohnen Denken,” in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 9<sup>th</sup> printing (Stuttgart, 2000), 139–156; here, 156. [English: “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 319–339; here, 338–339].

<sup>4</sup>In relation to the understanding of philosophy developed in this section, cf. Robert Spaemann, “Die kontroverse Natur der Philosophie,” in *Philosophische Essays: Erweiterte Ausgabe* (Stuttgart, 1994), 104–129.

that we, as human beings, live in some place is a trivial assertion—as trivial (or so it seems initially) as the assertions that we have two eyes, that we walk upright and have the use of language, that we are able to speak and to sing, that we die and know that we die, or that we live in communities, are religious, or eat and drink and fashion these activities in culturally differentiated ways. Dwelling seems to belong to the basic themes of any anthropology. And as far as we know, only human beings dwell, only human beings build, move into, or renovate houses, reside in a home, settle comfortably in, desire to live somewhere nicer, live in common, share houses for the most varied reasons, found communities of common life, or seek places to live and hold out for a good price in the housing market. Human beings live in a home [*Obdach*, i.e., “shelter”], which is why, when they find themselves in the abnormal condition of lacking one, they are given a particular name: “homeless.”<sup>5</sup> The fact that in German one speaks of being “homeless” rather than “houseless” points to the fact that what is at issue is not only the lack of a concrete place in which to live, but concerns instead a complex psychological and social phenomenon: to dwell, to have a home, means, as we will show below, more than having (or renting) four walls.

Animals inhabit but do not have a home. They have nests, burrows, dens, or caves. It is—once again—language that offers the first path to philosophical reflection: dwelling is a human act. To be human means to live somewhere, to be at home in a particular place, to be able to make a place for oneself, to set up one’s own system of coordinates, to have one’s own relation of near and far, familiarity and distance, or height and depth. Man dwells as long as he lives—and even longer. For what else do the burial rites and representations of the afterworld in many religions and cultures express other than the image of a change of place, a journey that sometimes passes through a series of transitional stages into a new home that is made for man, as countless religions affirm?

We have begun recalling something quite trivial. But, in spite of these preliminary reflections, we must once again ask: is it at all necessary? Are we not all aware of the fact that we dwell and that this belongs to human existence as much as sleeping, eating, drinking, and many other fundamental human activities? Yes and no.

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<sup>5</sup>[The German word for “homeless” is *obdachlos*, meaning “without a shelter,” or more literally, being without a roof (*Dach*) over (*ob*) one’s head—Tr.]

For that which is obvious, that which is in fact immediately always already the case, is perhaps precisely what we tend to forget in the busyness of everyday life, in the flood of trivial information from the media, and in the self-alienation that pretends to be more and more self-fulfillment. According to Heidegger, there is a “real plight of dwelling,” which lies in the fact “that mortals ever search anew for the essence of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell*.”<sup>6</sup> For as much as modern houses provide shelter, Heidegger believes, as “well planned, easy to keep, attractively cheap, open to air, light, and sun” as they may be, it is nevertheless uncertain whether “the houses in themselves hold any guarantee that *dwelling* occurs in them.”<sup>7</sup> It might in fact be the case, he continues, “that man still does not even think of the *real* plight of dwelling as *the* plight.”<sup>8</sup> As we will see, there is still reason today to grapple with what Heidegger is describing here.

Not the least of our obligations today is to learn once again what it means to dwell and to understand the plight of dwelling as *the* plight, since we live in a time that is characterized by the ideal of scientific knowledge. At first glance, there is in itself little to say against this. The critics of modern scientific civilization overshoot their target in ways similar to their opponents who affirm science and its knowledge in an absolute sense. But this already shows to what extent the idealization of scientific knowledge can become a problem: it is characterized by an increasingly evident tendency to absolutize itself and to marginalize or forget other modes of access to reality. We scarcely need to point out explicitly the other aspects of reality that are completely inaccessible to the sciences and their methods, or accessible only from a distorting perspective, aspects that thus get lost and are forgotten. And these often include the most fundamental traits of human beings, which not only cannot be explained on a strictly scientific basis, but have to be seen from the inside, and have to be actively shared in, with empathy and recollection; they require a patient and attentive abiding with.

In this culture of forgetting, philosophy has an important, but in fact quite modest task: to recall what has been lost from view, the

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<sup>6</sup>Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” 339.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 324.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 339.

richness of reality. With Heidegger, we could speak about the task of attending to the silence in speech. For, according to Heidegger, in the course of human history the fact that dwelling is the proper meaning of “building” has fallen into oblivion:

At first sight this event looks as though it were no more than a change in meaning of mere terms. In truth, however, something decisive is concealed in it, namely, dwelling is not experienced as man’s Being; dwelling is never thought of as the basic character of human being.

What is at issue in this process? Heidegger interprets this process in the following way: “Language withdraws from man its simple and high speech; but its primal call does not thereby become incapable of speech; it merely falls silent.”<sup>9</sup>

Insofar as philosophy attends to the silence within speech, it provides an example of the thinking that lingers, abides, and rests; in short, the thinking that dwells. One of the most important tasks of philosophical thinking is therefore the development of a hermeneutic of the silence within speech, a hermeneutic of the forgotten, of what is not said or not sufficiently expressed, of what however needs greater attention, of the hidden and suppressed levels of meaning and reality, of that which is no longer in language, that which has lost its self-evidence and must justify itself, since it no longer satisfies the criterion of a determinate concept of knowledge and reality. This recollection, this option for the forgotten and suppressed, is not an end in itself; the point is not to find an alternative to a particular culture, it is not a vulgar romanticism or a naive plea for the restoration of lost roots, of the “groundedness” that we long for or of a connection to our origins that we have been missing, but—beyond archaism—the point is to discover a corrective, another, more original and profound vision, for the sake of seeing more—because there is simply more there to be seen. Philosophy is therefore the effort to recover a lost innocence and naiveté in our relation to the world; it is, as Robert Spaemann has described it, an “institutionalized naiveté.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 326.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Robert Spaemann, “Philosophie als institutionalisierte Naivität,” *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 81 (1974): 139–142.

It is also, as we have said, obvious that we dwell. In philosophy, dwelling has admittedly had a rather inferior significance. Reflection on the meaning of dwelling, according to Hermann Schmitz, the founder of the “new phenomenology,” has been neglected, in spite of the fact that dwelling represents such a central aspect of human life:

Nearly every man intends to dwell. What does that mean? The first thing that comes to our minds with this term is having a home, and all of the things that implies, namely, eating, sleeping, loving, raising children. There are particular rooms for these things in modern houses (kitchen, dining room, bedroom, children’s rooms), and then there is, in addition to these, the living room [*das Wohnzimmer*, i.e., “the dwelling room”—*Tr.*]. What do people do there? They dwell. What does that mean? Nearly all of the activities of life apart from those that are normally carried out in private (for example, sexual intercourse or discharging one’s waste) are suitable in this room: homework (at the desk), chatting, secluded family life and visiting with guests, indeed, even idleness. What specifies “living” or “dwelling” in this case cannot be grasped in such an enumeration of things. It is something we experience as obvious, without being able to say what it is, without even knowing where one would go to acquire it.<sup>11</sup>

It is twentieth-century philosophy, and especially phenomenology, that first engaged in critical dialogue with the essential and fundamental presuppositions of modern philosophy, and that opens up a new approach to the spatial dimension of human life and

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<sup>11</sup>Hermann Schmitz, *System der Philosophie*, vol. 3: *Der Raum*, part 4: *Das Göttliche und der Raum* (Bonn, 1977), xv. According to Schmitz, the approaches to dwelling that have been developed by twentieth-century philosophy are problematic and insufficient: “Only recently have certain philosophers and philosophical doctors—Bollnow, Heidegger, Minkowski, Zutt—taken up dwelling in their reflections, without feeling a need to get beyond mysterious intimations, the gathering of copious and sometimes compelling material and partial data, meticulous considerations of particulars, to achieve a discipline capable of producing theory” (ibid.). Schmitz intends to provide for this deficiency by developing a “new discipline . . . the doctrine of dwelling or philosophical etheology” (ibid.). In this context, we unfortunately do not have the room to assess Hermann Schmitz’s judgment, since it would have to be evaluated within the general context of his philosophical system.



therefore also to dwelling.<sup>12</sup> The thought of Martin Heidegger plays an important role in the philosophical elucidation of dwelling, insofar as he seems to be regarded as “*the* thinker of dwelling.”<sup>13</sup> To be sure, this new approach to dwelling does not represent merely a criticism of the philosophical tradition or a filling in of its gaps. For the fact that dwelling has so rarely been thematized in the history of philosophy, if it has at all, shows that dwelling had not yet become the problem that it appears to be today. Dwelling was in a certain sense still something too much to be taken for granted for people to have to recall it; it was obvious that and how we dwell. For this reason, Heidegger offers a concrete example of what “dwelling *has been*” by pointing to a Black Forest farmhouse and “how *it* [namely, the dwelling of previous times] was able to build”—without thereby linking it with the demand “that we should or could go back to building such houses.” Heidegger describes a handicraft that itself springs from dwelling, from a rustic dwelling, and therefore not only stands in close connection with peasant life, but in fact the peasant’s life, his understanding of the order of space and time, expresses itself therein:

Here the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter *in simple oneness* into things, ordered the house. It placed the farm on the wind-sheltered mountain slope looking south, among the meadows close to the spring. It gave it the wide overhanging shingle roof whose proper slope bears up under the burden of snow, and which, reaching deep down, shields the chambers against the storms of the long winter nights. It did not forget the altar corner behind the community table; it made room in its chamber for the hallowed places of

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<sup>12</sup>Cf. on this point, moreover, Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Mensch und Raum*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Stuttgart, 1984), 13–16 and 125. On Bollnow’s reflections on dwelling and the home, see his *Neue Geborgenheit: Das Problem einer Überwindung des Existentialismus*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Stuttgart, 1979), 168–202.

<sup>13</sup>Burkhard Biella, *Eine Spur ins Wohnen legen. Entwurf einer Philosophie des Wohnens nach Heidegger und über Heidegger hinaus* (Düsseldorf, 1998), 9. For a positive reference to Biella’s thesis concerning the significance of Heidegger in relation to the philosophy of dwelling, and for another approach to the development of a philosophy of dwelling with and beyond Heidegger, see Remmon E. Barbaza, *Heidegger and a New Possibility of Dwelling* (Frankfurt am Main, 2003), 4. For reflections on dwelling in connection with Heidegger, see also Jacques de Visscher and Raf de Saeger (eds.), *Wonen. Architectuur in het denken van Martin Heidegger* (Nijmegen, 1991).

childbed and the “tree of the dead”—for that is what they call a coffin there: the *Totenbaum*—and in this way it designed for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time. A craft which, itself sprung from dwelling, still uses its tools and frames as things, built the farmhouse.<sup>14</sup>

Philosophy is always the philosophy of its time. Moreover, it always deals also with the questions and the problems that belong to what is always its own particular time. For this reason, the fact that dwelling has become a theme in twentieth-century philosophy is a very telling sign. It suggests that there is a close connection between dwelling and the questions and problems of today. Dwelling itself has become a question and a problem. This state of affairs says something about man’s place in the world. More precisely: about the loss of place, man’s homelessness in the modern world, which has often been a theme of discussion. Man has lost his home, he has lost the place that belongs to him. “In truth,” says Theodor W. Adorno so significantly, “it is no longer possible to dwell.”<sup>15</sup> In an age of homelessness, dwelling, being at home, becomes a problem. The very absence or lack shows us with all desired clarity what once was the case, and in the pain of loss, in the wound that an evacuated presence opens in us, in the discomfort we experience in a culture that first makes itself autonomous and ultimately turns against itself, here, in this inhospitable place, we learn what it is that we are missing: homeland, a home, a house in which we are able to dwell and to be at home, at the very least the possibility of an immediacy in our most fundamental activities. “Does there exist any more a peaceful dwelling of man between heaven and earth?” asks Heidegger. “Does there exist any more the homeland capable of receiving roots, in whose earth man stands firmly [*steht ständig*], i.e., is on solid ground [*boden-ständig*]?” Heidegger’s answer could not have been any clearer:

Many German people lost their homeland, had to abandon their villages and towns, were driven from the land of their home. Countless others, for whom the homeland has been preserved, nevertheless leave, fall into the busyness of the big cities, have to

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<sup>14</sup>Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” 338.

<sup>15</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (= *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 4), 42.

move to the desolateness of industrial regions. They have been alienated from their native place.<sup>16</sup>

We have lost our rootedness, says Heidegger, and thus we can no longer dwell the way earlier generations could. Heidegger's expressions have their own peculiar coloring, which could be debated one way or the other. Less debatable is the basic meaning he intends, his insight into the situation of modern man.

The notion of homeland, in this situation, at best becomes the object of a Romantic longing for a lost past, or an object of utopian hope. Well-known, and more or less paradigmatic for the twentieth century, is Ernst Bloch's vision of that "which everyone catches a glimpse of in childhood and yet is somewhere no one has ever been: the homeland."<sup>17</sup> At worst, however, we move back—perhaps—into animals' dens, without even feeling any longing for a home or homeland: "Modern man," in Adorno's estimation, "desires to sleep close to the ground like an animal. . . ."<sup>18</sup> Or—somewhere between the alternatives of the conservative-restorationist look backwards, the utopian progressivism, or the animalistic regressivism—we have the ordinariness of today's houses. In this case too, Adorno has it basically right, even if he betrays an educated bourgeois attitude that is never far from cynicism:

Whoever flees into genuine stylish homes in a collective subdivision embalms himself in a tomb with living corpses. If a person wishes to avoid the burden of responsibility for his home by moving into a hotel or apartment, he at once makes the imposed conditions of emigration the way to live for the smart set. Most distressingly, it happens almost everywhere to those who have no other choice. They live, if not in slums, then in bungalows, which already tomorrow could be thatched huts, trailers, cars, or camps, or sleeping under the open sky. The home no longer exists.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Martin Heidegger, "Gelassenheit," in Martin Heidegger, *Reden und andere Zeugnisse eines Lebensweges 1910-1976* (=Gesamtausgabe Band 16), ed. Hermann Heidegger (Frankfurt am Main, 2000), 517–529.

<sup>17</sup>Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung. In fünf Teilen*, chapters 38–55 (=Gesamtausgabe Band 5) (Frankfurt am Main, 1959), 1628.

<sup>18</sup>Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 42.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

In spite of all the problems that characterize Adorno's expressions here (and that betray more about the problematic aspects of Adorno's philosophy than he himself realized), Adorno—like Heidegger and Bloch—grasps something true: namely, that we live in a culture of loss and oblivion, and that we thus shirk the responsibility for our own life—"The home no longer exists." Here, we encounter above all the task of a hermeneutic of the forgotten, which, in contrast to utopian thinking, does not develop the vision of a homeland and its future realization in a counterfactual way, and in contrast to romantic-restorationist thinking does not simply want to bring back the world of the past, but instead recalls what always was and what we always already have known, and thus brings with it the possibility of a new understanding and a new appropriation of what has been forgotten. This is a more modest task, but one that is perhaps more proportionate to human possibilities.

But how would a hermeneutic of the forgotten proceed? One of the most important foundations of a hermeneutic of the forgotten is work in intellectual history and the history of ideas. The history of ideas shows not only what we once knew, but what has tended to be forgotten or suppressed, and also why and in connection with what historical process this knowledge has been lost. Only when we understand this, only when we thus understand this loss in its deepest roots, do we discover the possibilities of creatively living with this loss and, insofar as it concerns dwelling and the loss of the home, of learning once again how to dwell. It is at this moment, precisely when dwelling has become an object of philosophical reflection in twentieth-century philosophy and, simultaneously with this reflection, the sign of a crisis, that the question arises whether we ought not to view this crisis in connection with the paradigm shifts that characterize modernity. For it is above all in the philosophy of the twentieth century that many problematic aspects of modernity have entered into consciousness. Martin Heidegger has expressed an opinion that points in this direction: "The loss of grounded stability comes out of the spirit of the age, in which we are all rooted."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Heidegger, "Gelassenheit," 522. Otto Friedrich Bollnow (*Mensch und Raum*, 124f) has expressed a similar opinion: "For mythical man, the center of the world was objectively rooted in relation to the fixed center of space in general. For him, dwelling was therefore no problem. Since this objective center has been lost,

We discover a further clue for this connection when we ask why we are lacking this place set apart in which we are able to live, why the home has been lost and why dwelling has become so difficult for us. We could also at this point search in sociology, psychology, or the historical sciences for an answer to these questions. But we would then fail to hit upon the problem that lies behind all of the empirical data; that is, a deeper problem reveals itself in the inability to dwell and to be at home. What further connections does man's homelessness have in the history of ideas and of philosophy? And what does this deeper connection tell us about the situation of modern man?

### 3. *Time—Space—Boundary*

How man's homelessness fits more specifically into the history of ideas has up to now been studied less in relation to the transformation that occurs in the understanding of space than in relation to the understanding of time and history. In modernity, history was understood as a process, more specifically, as a process of progress—thus, Hegel defined world history, so to speak, as “progress in the consciousness of freedom”<sup>21</sup>—or also as a process of decline and degeneration from the origins.<sup>22</sup> This way of thinking, to which we could ascribe the discovery of historicity, effectively reduced the “now,” the present of our historical today, to a moment of the historical process, a moment that, moreover, can never be properly grasped. But this ultimately means that, insofar as it was referred in its roots to a future and past contained within the world's immanent horizons, the present was devalued and understood simply in terms of historical progress or decline.

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however, the anchoring in an objective system has also fallen away. Thus, the danger of uprootedness arises. Man becomes homeless on the earth, because he is no longer bound to any particular place. He has become a refugee in a world that presses threateningly upon him. This is, indeed, the danger of modern man.”

<sup>21</sup>G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Hermann Glockner, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1971), 46.

<sup>22</sup>For the understanding of history as process, see also George Grant, “History as Progress,” in George Grant, *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, ed. William Christian (Toronto, 1995), 38–48.

Closely connected with this devaluing of the present is the homogenization of time. This homogenization of time is to be understood in the context of what Robert Spaemann has called the “homogenization of experience.” In the will to homogenize experience, we discover a fundamental concern and a fundamental conviction of modern rationality:

at the basis of the demand for homogeneity lies a conviction that is at bottom metaphysical: the conviction that there is in principle no such thing as novelty. . . . For modern science, coming to be and passing away is simply a kind of change. There is no such thing as the introduction of something substantially new.<sup>23</sup>

In relation to time, this means that—up until the rediscovery of a different, more original notion of time, particularly in the philosophy of the twentieth century—the only kind of time is clock time, which ticks on forever and is in principle always measurably the same, but no radical *novum* in and with time—such as the time, so to speak, that man himself always *is*.

A similar process can be observed in relation to the understanding of space. In the early modern period, we could say that Newton developed the notion of absolute space, space that is constantly identical to itself. Space, just like time, thus became something understood in terms of a set of mathematical-physical coordinates. Quite concrete experiences in the modern age lent reality to these new developments in the understanding of space: namely, the discovery and conquest of new and previously unknown parts of the earth and the opening up of cosmic space. The concrete “here” thus became a moment within a trajectory in a spatial infinity that was boundless in principle; it became a step in a journey, in relation to which there is perhaps no longer, like for Odysseus, any return home. The fact that the concrete “here” becomes thus merely a partial moment, and no longer the distinctive place that is at every instant our own position within an order established by the boundaries of the horizon, comes clearly to view in the tendency to homogenize space. Everything has become the same, everything is comparable to and exchangeable for everything else, and can be in principle determined according to given coordinates. Or in Heidegger’s words: The modern reduction of space to

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<sup>23</sup>Robert Spaemann, “Ende der Modernität?” in *Philosophische Essays*, 241.

“mathematical-algebraic relations” gives rise to “the possibility of the purely mathematical construction of manifolds with an arbitrary number of dimensions. The space provided for in this mathematical manner may be called ‘space,’ the ‘one’ space as such. But in this sense ‘the’ space, ‘space,’ contains no spaces and no places.”<sup>24</sup> For in this homogenous space-time order, there is in the end no distinctiveness, nothing special, no novelties and no end—and therefore ultimately also no boundaries: there are no longer any spaces and times that are distinctive or holy, no longer any spaces and times of silence, of celebration or of feasts, no longer any parlors, any secret corners, or hiding-places, but also no longer any abysses and times and spaces of darkness and mystery. In the effort to make the world in principle intelligible and to reduce it to abstract, mathematically graspable quantities, the world has become diminished and disenchanting.

What is particular to the situation that is always our own, where and when we in fact dwell, when we have found a home and settled down, thus becomes not much more than a particular case of the general and universal—whether this generality is the historical process or the infinite breadth of the cosmos—and must justify itself and prove itself in relation to this generality. In the present, in spite of sometimes dramatic further developments with regard to the physicalistic understanding of time and space, this tendency, this project of the homogenization of time and space, has been even more deeply radicalized—ultimately, as one may guess, at the cost of making reality something “virtual.” And this means: at the cost of the increasing abrogation of reality. Reality then becomes a function of the virtual—an “attachment”—the function of a time-space order that feeds the illusion of boundlessness, since in a medium that plays with the possibility, in principle, of simultaneity and bilocation, spatial and temporal differences and the boundaries they imply no longer carry any weight. As Heidegger said, “All distances in time and space are shrinking, everything is being merged together in the homogenous lack of distance.”<sup>25</sup> This *seems* to be the case; however, it must also be said that reality ultimately does not allow itself to be suppressed or abrogated, but remains a thorn in the flesh of modern and postmodern reason: in the inexorable experience of finitude,

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<sup>24</sup>Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” 333.

<sup>25</sup>Heidegger, “Das Ding,” in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 157–175; here, 157.

suffering, and death, in the loving and responsible encounter with other human beings, in the astonishing experience of nature and of the wonder that something exists after all, and not simply nothing, and that it is nevertheless—against all obstacles—possible to be at home in this “something” and to find one’s very own place and one’s very own time—as the time and the place that we always already are.

In the here and now, beyond all the illusions that boldly negate our corporeality, however, there are boundaries that, as Hermann Schmitz has shown in a penetrating phenomenological analysis, perform a crucial function:

Man’s self-maintenance includes not only the interaction with nature and with the beings that are like him, but also the work of coming to terms with emotions and settling harmoniously into this environment that stirs him so deeply and mysteriously, so that he is not helplessly abandoned to it. Of the greatest significance for the success of this effort is the capacity to erect boundaries in space and thereby to create an enclosure in which to dwell. Dwelling is the cultivation of feelings in an enclosed space, that is, a way of interacting with these environments that overflow into physical space and affect us in a bodily way, in order to avoid being affected in a merely passive sense, by making these environments intimate, familiar, to a certain extent adaptable. The home is a protected space, in which man to an extent has the opportunity, thanks to the filtering enclosure, to come to terms with moods—even boredom, for example—and deep and mysterious stimulations, insofar as he cultivates them in one way and attenuates them in another, and thus seeks out energies for a protective, but also intense and nuance-rich climate of feeling.<sup>26</sup>

Boundaries mark out differences. Things look different on the other side of the boundary from the way they look on this side. Boundaries divide the world: into what is one’s own and what is foreign, into the familiar and the unknown, into the traditional and

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<sup>26</sup>Hermann Schmitz, “Der Mensch und die Grenze im Raum,” in *Höhlen-gänge. Über die gegenwärtige Aufgabe der Philosophie (=Lynkeus 7)* (Berlin, 1997), 131–141; here, 139f. On Schmitz’s understanding of dwelling as “culture of feelings in enclosed space,” see also Hermann Schmitz, *System der Philosophie*, vol. 3: *Der Raum*, part 4: *Das Göttliche und der Raum*, 258–308; Jens Soentgen, *Die verdeckte Wirklichkeit. Einführung in die Neue Phänomenologie von Hermann Schmitz* (Bonn, 1998), 77–84.



the new, the appropriate and the taboo, or the permitted and the forbidden. Boundaries are flexible and always have to be determined and established anew, even if there may also be a primacy of given boundaries that have to be preserved. Not every generation is able to call all boundaries into question, not every generation must deal with boundaries in a fundamentally new way. But as flexible as boundaries may be, it is not possible to renounce them altogether. This, too, is a trivial point, but it must be kept in mind. For, along with the home and its order, boundaries also seem to us to be receding from our memory—boundaries that we establish in the most fundamental way in dwelling. For in dwelling, when we settle into an apartment or build a house, we posit boundaries: between inside and outside, between the private and the public, between me or us—the inhabitants or residents—and you and them—the neighbor, stranger, or guest. Human life plays itself out above all here, in this region between one's own and the other, a region that possesses a value and inviolability; it plays itself out, moreover, in the shade of boundaries that are always being threatened and have to be erected again and again, boundaries that, no matter how widespread the fear of boundaries and limitations has become in our day, have not only negative implications, not only separate us from one another, but also present protective spaces and thus in the first place make comfort, security, and freedom possible. Just as we can be truly free only when we at the same time accept in freedom the boundaries of freedom, so too we can truly dwell only when we recognize and erect boundaries by dwelling in a particular place. We cannot be at home everywhere. And that also means: not everyone can be at home with us.

In dwelling, we set up boundaries on one of the most basic levels. We can receive guests, we can offer hospitality, only because we have disposal over a realm into which we do not allow just anyone, over which we, as ourselves, have disposal, and which is protected by an enclosure: for this reason, only a host can extend invitations; for this reason, we ring or we knock before we enter another person's home, even that of a close friend, even when the doors stand wide open and invite us to come in. We thus express modesty and respect for the other person and for the space that he has set up and in which he lives. Here we see one of the few taboos that have survived into our day and age, the recognition that space is not homogenous, but is internally structured in the most diverse ways, and that this, the basic structuring, is intended for our

relationship to one another. In a similar manner, the erection of boundaries in dwelling also shows the time and the temporal structuring of human interaction. For convention (and this means much more than mere consensus) regulates in a very precise way to whose home we are able to come and knock at the door, which is the appropriate time, what is the appropriate situation—and when we ought to leave. In this, we see a respect, a modesty, which expresses itself also in the ability to close a door again. According to Adorno, the fact that we are losing this modesty more and more today is due to technology:

*Not to knock.*—Technologization meanwhile makes the gesture, and thus the person, precise and crude. It expels all hesitation from the gesture, all deliberation, all sense of manners. It subordinates them to the merciless and simultaneously historyless demands of things. Thus one forgets how to close a door quietly, carefully, and at the same time securely.<sup>27</sup>

Wherein lies the reason for this taboo, which we still find today expressed in the legal directives that deal with the inviolability of the home? The reason lies not only in the fact that the home of another man is counted, with other things, among his own possessions—or in some circumstances is something rented, let, or leased. What then is the reason for this taboo? We approach the real issue with the notion of property, the issue being that there is a very close connection between what is proper to a person [*dem Eigenen*: what belongs to a person as his own, *eigen*—*Tr.*] and his home. How we live ultimately also determines who we are—and who we are determines how we live. Here we come upon an often neglected phenomenon, namely, that human identity is determined from the ground up not only by time but also by space. The question concerning man's identity with himself in the course of time plays a particular role precisely in the discussion about personal identity: Are we identical with ourselves in the passing of time? What we overlook in the one-sided focus on this question is the fact that man's identity also has an essentially spatial dimension.

Where we live, where we move to, and where we are from also determines who we are. Spaces, places, and paths determine our identity. We could say that we furnish a home [*eine Wohnung*

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<sup>27</sup>Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 44.

*einrichten*]. But to make it clear that we are doing this for ourselves, we say that we are installing *ourselves* in a house [*wir uns eine Wohnung einrichten*], and we even say we are settling down [*wir uns einrichten*]. Buying and setting up a house seems to have more to do with our identity than many other activities, in which the explicitly reflexive reference to ourselves is not necessary, and does not get expressed. The problem of modern homelessness thus consists perhaps precisely also in that we no longer in fact buy or set up a house *for ourselves*, we no longer settle down in a house. The house loses its relation to us and we thereby lose the relation to ourselves that is mediated by the home—an important aspect of our identity, of who we actually are. The semantic proximity between dwelling and living, which can be demonstrated in many languages, opens up in this regard: for dwelling concerns not only the fact that we are present somewhere or abide somewhere. It also concerns the fact that we live by dwelling—“living” here is intended in a more than merely biological sense—and we dwell by living in this manner. For the “way,” Heidegger says, “in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth, is *buan*, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell.”<sup>28</sup> Let us once again ask at this point, since the fundamental meaning of dwelling and its everydayness ought to have become clearer: Why have living and dwelling become so difficult for us? Why is it so difficult for us to settle down? Why has the home disappeared? Or are we dealing here simply with the prejudices of the critics of modernity, prejudices that can produce neither evidence nor reasons?

#### 4. Provisions—Language—Future

René Descartes, whom many consider the father of modern thought, points us towards an answer to this question. This much is certainly true: to whatever extent he may still have been rooted in the philosophy of the ancients and medievals, Descartes inaugurates something new. Descartes described the novelty he sought in a way that has great significance for our question concerning dwelling. In the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes writes:

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<sup>28</sup>Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” 325.

It is true that we never see anyone pulling down all the houses in a city for the sole purpose of rebuilding them in a different style and of making the streets more attractive; but one does see very well that many people tear down their own houses in order to rebuild them, and that in some cases they are even forced to do so when their houses are in danger of collapsing and when the foundations are not very secure.<sup>29</sup>

What Descartes is describing here is his own philosophical preference:

This example persuaded me that it would not really be at all reasonable for a single individual to plan to reform a state by changing everything in it from the foundations up and by toppling it in order to set it up again, nor even also to reform the body of the sciences or the order established in the schools for teaching them; but that, as regards all the opinions to which I had until now given credence, I could not do better than to try to get rid of them once and for all, in order to replace them later on, either with other ones that are better, or even with the same ones once I had reconciled them to the norms of reason.<sup>30</sup>

What initially seems to concern Descartes—at least according to the position he explicitly takes here—is the tearing down of his own house, the critical analysis and testing of the knowledge that had been handed down to him:

And I firmly believed that by this means I would succeed in conducting my life much better than if I were to build only upon old foundations and if I were to rely only on the principles of which I had allowed myself to be persuaded in my youth without ever having examined whether they were true.<sup>31</sup>

Descartes' demolition project, as we know today, did not limit itself merely to his own house, but was characteristic for modernity. Another thing characteristic for modernity was in a certain sense also Descartes' interim solution, namely, the erection of a provisional house—a provisional morality. As he puts it:

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<sup>29</sup>Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald Cress, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1998), 8.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

And finally, just as it is not enough, before beginning to rebuild the house where one is living, simply to pull it down, and to make provision for the materials and architects or to train oneself in architecture, and also to have carefully drawn up the building plans for it; but it is also necessary to be provided with someplace else where one can live comfortably while working on it.<sup>32</sup>

This throws a clear light on the situation of modernity, whatever position one wishes to take in relation to it: namely, that the houses that had been handed down were perceived—to some extent correctly—as dilapidated and were therefore demolished; and that we must be able to build a new house for ourselves as best we can manage—and with all the consequences of such a solution—in the provisional interim period. Against the background of this broader context, we ought to see that and why dwelling has turned into a problem: we live in modernity, however comfortably, in a certain sense in a house that will eventually be recalled; we live in a provisional building vis-à-vis the wreckage of our old houses. Herein lies the deeper reason for the homelessness that in a particular way characterizes modern man and his experiences.

Is this homelessness, however, connected solely with modernity? Or do we see here that dwelling, which is a fundamental problem for modern rationality, is a problem that has grown gradually through history? With Adorno, and also with Heidegger, we can entertain this hypothesis. For Adorno, *The Odyssey* is the “founding text of European civilization,”<sup>33</sup> insofar as it reflects at the very beginning of Western civilization the dialectic of the Enlightenment. This “founding text,” however, concerns precisely the loss of the homeland and the difficult and ambivalent efforts made to rediscover the lost homeland. The condition of being “in transit,” a new nomadic existence—which is conceivable only on the basis of sedentary existence—has taken the place of this homeland. The fact that this being in transit has so radically determined Western thinking might be due, among other reasons, to the fact that dwelling and finding one’s homeland have become so difficult. The abiding in the here and now, arriving and being at home, stand over against the pressure to break out of the old and discover something

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>33</sup>Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (= *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 3) (Darmstadt, 1998), 63.

new. Here arises Heidegger's question concerning the possibility of a new grounded stability [*Bodenständigkeit*]<sup>34</sup>—and initially not much more than just this question and his pointing to the fact that the “fundamental feature of dwelling” is a sparing [*ein Schonen*] and that “real sparing is something *positive* and takes place when we leave something beforehand in its own essence, when we return it specifically to its essential being”<sup>34</sup> and not try to have disposal over it and its essence.

The fear of settling down in a home, the danger of the demolition of the house in which we live, can also be seen in man's relationship to one of the fundamental human dwelling places: language, the boundaries of which, according to Wittgenstein, coincide with the boundaries of my world.<sup>35</sup> Here too we encounter once again an endangered home. In the closing lines of a brief address with the title, “We Worldliterateurs,” Harry Mulisch drew attention to the dangers that this home is exposed to:

That which we must however all gradually together become more attentive to is the home that belongs to all of us: the Dutch language. Alienation threatens. For a while now, sinister officers from the ministry of language have been standing over on the other side of the street and have kept watch over the building façades. That doesn't quite make me feel secure. Perhaps the day will come when we will have to occupy our own house.<sup>36</sup>

The loss of our home, as we have just seen, can have decisive consequences for who we are. It can be that we become something completely different, that we lose ourselves when we lose our home—just as we always lose ourselves in the loss of our homeland or in a journey lose and find ourselves once again, however changed. And this is true entirely independently of whether this home is in this case our language, our concrete home, the webs of our relationships and histories, or our homeland, whose way of life, whose light, whose air, and whose essence have become so familiar to us over the

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<sup>34</sup>Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” 327.

<sup>35</sup>Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), 5.6.

<sup>36</sup>Harry Mulisch, “Wir Weltliteraren,” in *Die Säulen des Herkules. Essays*, translated from Dutch by Gregor Seferens (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1999), 184–188; 188.

years. What becomes apparent here is the richness of our homes. We live in a complex texture of various realms and regions, in which we are always in a different way ourselves: from the basement to the roof, from the garden and terrace, through the kitchen, the living and dining rooms, the library, to the bed and bathrooms. And we dwell in even further realms: the realms of our streets and neighborhoods, of our villages and towns, of our countries and continents. We dwell in all of these realms—even when we do not have all of the realms in our houses or homes, even when we dwell only in a single realm, even when the broader realms seem to play hardly any role at all in our life and dwelling, or only a subordinate role. For in dwelling we realize the various possibilities and reference points of human existence, our dwelling gives expression to them, the multiplicity of these possibilities.

But because one of the fundamental human possibilities is death, and because, as Heidegger put it, to dwell means to be on the earth as mortals, we are able to dwell ultimately only in a conditional sense. As human beings we are “on the way” in a radical sense. We are in transit—however much we may determine the space and the destination of this being in transit. We live in time, which is limited. The same is true regarding space. We are in transit in space; we are constantly able to open up new spaces, to discover hidden and previously unknown parts of the earth, to conquer the expanse of space. But we always run up against boundaries and experience the notion of infinity as an abstraction or illusion cut off from life: for we are finite beings. We tend to think that time and space lie at our disposal. This is true only in a limited way, for with respect to the boundaries that we experience time and again, we see how limited are the space and time that lie at our disposal and how much their limitations make it impossible for us to settle down once and for all. The time and the space that we in every moment are, are finite. Therefore we are ultimately in a radical sense homeless, always merely visitors, never truly at home, and the decisive question that repeatedly confronts us is how we deal with this homelessness and this suffering, with the fact that our self-knowledge is always bound up with the insight into the loss of our homeland, the homeland we once glimpsed in our childhood.

But in order to remain human, we must also become domestic [*heimisch*]. We have to recognize that it is ultimately inhuman to make everything in our life ultimately provisional. To put everything under conditions is to make life ultimately impossi-

ble. We would no longer be able to make decisions anymore, and we would continually sit among packed up moving boxes, without knowing where we in fact are and where we after all want to or ought to go. But freedom is not realized in possibility, but in actuality, in not only being able to make a start but in fact actually making it. In a life that waits to be recalled, we are at best always on the point of making a start. We only unpack what we need at the moment, since we will in fact be moving again soon, or we reduce our possessions to the fewest absolutely essential items and our home to its basic functions—and build houses and apartments that can be understood and constructed henceforward only in relation to these functions, and no longer have any *excess* of irony and risk, of multiple meanings and ambivalence, of mysteriousness and hiddenness, or of beauty or sublimity. Stories are no longer told here, there is nothing more to discover, the cellars and attics are empty, and there are not even any hidden corners or trails anymore, which give our life support, and which indeed are our life. And there are therefore also no longer the other places and spaces in which man establishes himself and which determine his identity in a decisive way, because they receive their structure and order from who man actually and most profoundly is. Or they exist now only in a changed form: the garden, the park, the public squares, the coffee houses and salons, the marketplaces, chapels, churches, cathedrals, and graveyards, places and spaces in which children are raised, things are built, places of encounter, of recreation, of play or education, places and spaces that in their differentiation say a lot about who man properly is and where he has his place.<sup>37</sup> But here too we find the homogenization that characterizes modernity. No matter how differentiated they happen to appear at first glance, modern cities clearly show a tendency to reduce the multiplicity of spaces and places. It makes no essential difference, in this context, whether spaces and places are multifunctional, or whether they are increasingly understood only in relation to a few basic functions. For even in the multi-functionalization of spaces and places, there is often a hidden basic function at the core. The spaces—just like times—

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<sup>37</sup>Here we see an important task, not only for philosophy, but also for history and cultural anthropology and geography, namely, the task of exploring the question concerning the progressive differentiation of spaces and concerning the historical transformation of this progressive differentiation.



become interchangeable and come to obey the fundamental logic of universal (ex-)changeability.

Making nothing provisional makes life just as impossible. For in this case we think of ourselves as having always lived, and living on and on, and we thus entangle ourselves ever more deeply in the trap of a falsehood that will inevitably show itself to be such in the end. But how is it possible to live in the middle, in between provisionality and the complete lack of provisionality? Perhaps this is precisely where dwelling has its home, the unconditional life lived conditionally—in a present that is aware that the future will continually make decisions that concern it and that in relation to the future it can always become past again, but that it must nevertheless be present in order for there to be a future in the first place. A present that is also aware that this, unconditional conditionality, can exist because it comes from a past, which bears it and which it is able to recall. No one truly dwells who lives as if he could move again at any moment. But at the same time no one truly dwells who lives as if he were going to dwell forever and ever exactly where he is. The fact that we are truly able to dwell, the fact that we can settle down in the world without either radically fleeing from the world or becoming wholly caught up in it, presupposes a capacity that, beyond the romantic looking backwards or the utopian looking forwards, makes us first of all human, namely, the increasingly important human capacity of being able to find a home in spite of all ephemerality and dangers, the ability to reflect on reality in a questioning, abiding, and attentive way and thus protectively and peacefully setting up boundaries.—*Translated by D. C. Schindler.* □

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