Identity, Self-Alienation, and the Problem of Homelessness

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All-Soul has the care of all things soul-less (*apsychou*). All across the heavens it wanders, coming to appear at one time in one form, at another time in another. Now when it is perfect and fully winged, it rises up and directs the whole cosmos. But the soul that is featherless is carried along until it takes hold of some solid thing, at which time it settles down, taking on an earthly body, which appears, through the power of the soul, to be self-moving. And the whole, soul and body fixed together, is called a living being and mortal (*Phaedrus* 246bc).

In this passage from Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Socrates recounts the ancient tale of the birth of living being through the fall of soul. The *Phaedrus* myth gives expression to the problem of mortal being, a difficulty inhabiting and troubling mortal existence itself. Featherless and fragile, wandering in an alien domain, a being’s very fact of being operates as a difference within itself, a difference from itself, a difference from a homeland, from a wholeness and from a natural directionality and bent. Mortal existence is a battle in an alien domain fought out upon the fragile site where fallen soul meets flesh. Living, mortal being is born in, and from out of, fundamental self-alienation.

Contradiction forms the core of all living being, claims Hans Jonas, Jewish student of Heidegger, lifelong friend of Hannah Arendt and her eminent colleague at The New School of Social Research. Jonas, his academic career interrupted for decades by exile and combat (Jonas fought on the front lines against the Nazis and later in the Israeli army in the War of Independence), manifested in his own life the contradictions of mortal existence. Jonas was both warrior and philosopher—the warrior who acts, with courage, to protect the persecuted peoples and the threatened homeland, and the philosopher who, with compassion, seeks to understand the ambiguities of deploying violence in the interest of justice. The soldier-philosopher seeks to understand the contradictions embodied in a species that could give rise both to his beloved old mother and to the soldiers at Auschwitz who murdered her.

Jonas sees living being as the event of the interplay of Being and Not-Being. Torn between the freedom that keeps each persisting in being and the necessity of the flesh and its vulnerabilities that ultimately and inevitably lose the battle for persistence, living being, explains Jonas, is a contradiction of autonomy and dependence, of freedom and necessity, of fragile flesh and divine immortal movement. In the struggle for persistence, the earliest awareness of this internal self-contradiction comes to visibility for the existent as the split between self and world. The self comes to an awareness of itself as a self in the realization of its vulnerability, as it recognizes its self-threatened with extinction. All organisms, claims Jonas, even the most primitive and simple, possess this relation to their own being that makes for the inwardness toward which Heidegger had pointed with the phrase “needful freedom.” In the perception of the world as the source of peril over against and threatening the self, the existent experiences...
of mortal existence, only human life is lived in the full awareness of its contradictory places along the great chain of being. However, for human beings, the contradiction of awareness of the contradictoriness of mortal life, we can say that contradiction is the very seat of human self-understanding. Identities are formed within, and from out of, that contradictoriness. Self-understanding, at its most fundamental level, comes to be an awareness of the isolation of a self that is threatened with extinction by the very forces that nourish it and give it continuance. Identity is rooted in, is circumscribed by, and flows forth from, contradiction.

Thus, for human being, earthly existence, as a being-in-the-world unto a death-never-to-be-clered, is a fundamental self-alienation, a species-alienation, an alienation from all other forms of life, at the same time as it is an utter and inevitable dependence upon the environing alien. Jonas, in a logic consistent with that of the Phaedrus myth, expresses the paradoxes of living being in dialectical terms: our being is riddled with not-being; our freedom is bound up in necessity; our isolated ego is at once inescapable being-in-the-world.

The never-at-home-ness of human being emerges into clear view when we consider phenomenologically the lived experience of “home.” Home, the primary site of a human’s be-ing, is ambiguous in its very essence. Beneath the simple exterior of stable identity, there reside layers of multivocal significances that defeat any unifying processes. “Home,” as centralizing site of human existence, masquerades as a unitary and univocal structure, yet beneath this facade are the shifting, dialectically entwined, polar aspects of its internal being. The home is, in its essence, a conflicted site that issues in a conflicted mission which dictates, in turn, a conflicted ethic, so that the home is logically obliged to place value in conflicted modes of comportment, and to venerate and practice conflicting virtues. Home is a paradox of freedom and repression, of gentility and tyranny, of divine liberality and demonic violence. Home’s contradictory aspects are captured in the figure of the ancient god that stands at its portal—Janus, the Roman god of the doorway. Janus has two faces, the welcoming face of the friendly god and the menacing face of the monster.

Janus was a solar deity whose two faces look east and west simultaneously, beholding the far ends of every day. Hence Janus was also the god of beginnings and endings, guardian of all openings and closings, all doorways and gates. Interestingly, the gates of Rome consigned to his protection paraded its aggressive strength in an audacious openness that expressed the fearlessness of the empire, its invulnerability to powers without. Thus, the portals were kept boldly open, even in times of war, taunting and provoking potential enemies. Janus’s doors were bolted shut only three times in the history of the empire. The conflicted countenances of the keeper of the portal, posed at the gates of Rome, as at the door of the humblest household dwelling, monstrous face and welcoming face counterpoised in careful attendance, looking hither and thither to locate and distinguish stranger and friend, signify the conflicted mission of the home: to welcome friends and frighten away enemies.

The lived experience of home is essentially one of refuge. A home is experienced as the place above all others that offers shelter from the elements, safety from the threatening, and security against the unknown beyond its doors. In a world experienced as alien “other” menacing the continuity of the separated self, home offers that space of “inwardness” where a “needful freedom” can be lived as a pure freedom, where death can be safely postponed, from which the alien can be effectively alienated. From the safety of the interior, the “homelessness” of human being can be temporarily forgotten. Home is a place of origin, a place of destination and, along the journey of life, it serves as the focal point that lends “definition” to who we are. Home offers a reference point of belonging, thus an opening for stable identity. However, its lived definition defies all logic of identity. The home violates the very laws of identity and non-contradiction by which we distinguish a thing as unique and self-same, this and not another, mine and not alien. The paradox of home, the equivocity of its essence, resides fundamentally in the ambiguities of refuge, captured by the equivocations of that mission.

Yes, home is essentially a refuge. To be a refuge to those within its walls, a home must shut fast its doors and windows, turn its monster face toward the threatening elements, close itself off from the alien and withdraw into a safe interiority. It must remain ever on guard, scouring the terrain outside its portals, wary when strangers come knocking, knowing that both gods and monsters show up unannounced at the door. The safe house must practice a fevered response-ability, always alert, never sleeping on its guard, if the inmates are to get their rest. The menace of the external must never be forgotten. Boundaries must be clearly marked so that encroachment upon the home territory can be recognized as such. The home must maintain itself in a high state of order, unified and solidified, mobilized for protective action, if it is to maintain self-identity in the midst of the chaos of otherness. Conflicting parts,
Therefore, must be resolved and the whole wisely organized and integrated into a well-"defined" space.

This self-definition can become an obsessive project, so that the home may begin to look less like a homely dwelling and more like a fortress-prison. The one in charge of the refuge, the one feeling most deeply the responsibility to protect one's fellow inmates, can transform, under the pressure of the task, into a monster with respect to passers-by, and a tyrant toward indwellers, ironically justified in these violations by the very mission of the home. Within the secured fortress-prison, inmates may, for their own good, need to be constrained to limit their individual freedoms, assume a uniformity and silence their singular consciences for the sake of presenting a united appearance to the world. They may need to be forced to share common ideals and goals and modes of conduct, the identifying markers of the home site. The externally-directed Janus-face that menaces the monster without can become internally directed and can be justified from within as a necessary violence for the sake of the security of the home.

A home, at its most responsible, then, will need to become organized as a fortress-prison. It will need to be ready for war. However, a fortress-prison is not experienced as a home. A home is not felt to be homely unless its doors and windows open onto the elements, unless its inmates can be nourished by the richness of their surroundings, unless they can savor and delight in their being-in-the-world. A home is experienced as that site which must look out over its neighborhood and immerse itself fully and sincerely in the voluptuous presence of the real. A home must have its neighbors. It must hail them in their proximity, salute them in respectful mutuality, and attend them in their need. Moreover, a home, if it is to be fully a refuge, must open its larders to the home-less, as the higher laws of the ancient gods demanded. This means that the home must put aside its war-mask and show its face of welcome to the world.

However, the more that the domicile’s doors and windows are thrown open to the unknown, the more its inmates are put at risk; and the more that the safety of the inmates is at issue, the more that the master must become obsessive about bolting the doors. It is the paradox of the home that its essence, its meaning in the world and its mission of refuge, is internally and irresolvably conflicted. It must constantly struggle within itself as this Janus-faced reality that both nurtures and oppresses its inmates, and which both welcomes and menaces its neighbors. The conflicted mission issues in a conflicted ethic, as value comes to be placed in opposing “virtues” that require conflicting modes of conduct to support the conflicted tasks. The virtue that is marshaled in the interest of the security of the refuge is courage. On the other hand, the home must practice compassion with regard to the needy passer-by and the neighbor. While both of these virtues imply a certain spiritedness, a passionate rather than an a-pathetic nature, they comprise dialectical opposites, as Socrates demonstrated in his account of the guardian watchdog in Plato’s Republic (375c-e).

The guardian watchdog of the city in logos, the city that purports to accomplish justice, is the very site of the purported simultaneous accomplishment of passionate caring and courage. Socrates points out (at 375c) that the guardian of the home territory must be at once gentle and high-spirited. However, this presents Socrates with a logical problem that parallels the problem discovered phenomenologically in the lived experience of the home. Gentility and the high-spiritedness of courage seem to constitute dialectical opposites. Socrates admits this problem when he states: “There seems to be an opposition between the spirited type and the gentle nature.” Yet Socrates insists that if either of these qualities is lacking, “a good guardian he can never be.” The simultaneous accomplishment of the diametrically opposed virtues required of the guardian nature presents more than a mere “logical” difficulty. If the good guardian turns out to be an impossible combination of natures, then the very possibility of creating a just home territory is dashed. If courage and welcome cannot be accomplished simultaneously, then either security will have to be sacrificed to the good of gentility or the gentility that welcomes the stranger and tends to the needs of the passer-by will need to be sacrificed for the sake of the secure freedom of the indwellers.

It may be objected that a resolution to the dilemma here resides in Socrates’s insistence that the guardian/philosopher is also the one with the ability to distinguish not merely between friend and foe, but between false friend and true, apparent enemy and real. With this wisdom in hand, the guardian, it may be objected, can welcome both friends and needy, harmless others into the secure home-space, while simultaneously excluding those who might jeopardize the safe continuance of the polis. However, it is crucial to recall that the well-bred hound, upon which the guardian is modeled, is an animal, not simply friendly to friends and unfriendly to enemies, but gentle to its familiar and lethal to the unfamiliar. Thus the guardian’s exemplar itself fails to accomplish the full Janus-faced mission of the home. The hound can protect the inmates and perhaps even welcome friendly neighbors, but it is duty-bound to menace and attack the needy passerby.

Even if we grant resolution to the problem of contradictory virtues in the figure of the guardian within the greater utopian model of the “just state,” it is essential to remember that Socrates admits at the close of the city’s construction (end of Book IX) that the entire model is just that—a utopian fantasy, never to be accomplished in the world of real, fleshy human beings with their conflicted allegiances and desires. This futility is evident in the fact that Socrates, the paradigmatic philosopher, could never himself make the cut to the guardian class. Socrates knows nothing. Socrates has no certain knowledge of anything, let alone the direct knowledge of the Forms that would render certain judgments of friend and foe. Ultimately, the model of the just city, Socrates admits, is only meant to serve as a “blueprint set up in the heavens” to guide the good person as he stumbles, ethically quasi-blind, through the treacherous streets of the cities of the earth.

Thus, internal ethical conflict remains an essential problem for the creation of the just home. Ironically, when we consider the testimony of psychologists who have studied the ethically conflicted, we discover that it is rather a blessing that the guardian watchdog proves to be an impossible accomplishment. Psychologists like Rollo May warn that conflicted ethical notions are a dominant cause of violent behavior in human beings. Since virtues are not trivial notions or preferences inconsequential to one’s mode of being-in-the-world, but compose the very manner of one’s dwelling, virtues constitute both a practical and a political accomplishment. Deep conflicts in the ethical orientation that informs the cognitive horizons of the lifeworld and underpins the
practical and the political, are fundamental problems for the home’s ideal of unity and for the realization of generous modes of dwelling within and between communities. It is no small matter that the home turns out, under the phenomenological gaze, to be essentially and ethically conflicted. Socrates underscores the dangers of the essentially and ethically conflicted when he concludes the analysis of the watchdog with the following stunning question, a question that haunts the architect of the just city no less than the author of the present inquiry. Socrates asks: “How then, Glaucon, will [the high-spirited] escape being savage to one another and to the other citizens if this is to be their nature?” (375b). One might respond to Socrates’s question by suggesting that the mere practice of com-passion (feeling-with, suffering-with) may be enough to soften the “savage” aspects of the high-spirited. However, criminologist/psychiatrist Bernard Diamond insists that compassion is, at base, nothing but self-interest. He states: “To identify with another is a powerful psychological force.... To have a sense of compassion and ethi­comoral feeling toward another, one must be able to identify with the other, to have a libidinal investment in the other person as a love object or at least as a narcissistic projection.” If Diamond is correct in this radical calculation of human egoism, then conflict of virtuosity is not the problem for the just city; consistency of nature is, because the consistency resides solely in the savagery of self-interest. If the virtue practiced by the welcoming aspect of the home turns out to be a tool in the service of the self, justice will not likely be found anywhere in the vicinity of the home space.

Even if we refuse to accept Diamond’s radically egoistic definition of compassion, there remains to be addressed the very disturbing social scientific claim that the compassionate one takes disturbing existential and ethical risks in approaching the suffering other. There is, the experts tell us, a desensitizing process commonly experienced by witnesses of radical suffering. This process kicks in to prepare the witness’s nervous system for emotional survival and effective participation in traumatic events. The shock of witnessing terrible suffering calls forth an exaggerated capacity for detachment that protects the witness from the full emotional responsiveness typical of everyday social encounters. Witnesses of terrible affliction have reported a sudden desensitization, not only a loss of empathy with the sufferer, but often a full emotional shut-down. Research psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton has written on the reactions of Hiroshima survivors to the mass deaths and devastation witnessed in the aftermath of the bombings. At first, explains Lifton, the witnesses were overcome by the utter horror of the carnage—the dreadful burns and disfigurements, the carcasses strewn about, torn in pieces, skin stripped from them. Witnesses could find no words to speak of their initial horror and revulsion. However, in a very short while a common and shocking reaction was reported: “each [witness] described how, before long, the horror would almost disappear. One would see terrible sights of human beings in extreme agony and yet feel nothing.” Granted, wholesale desensitization seems to arise largely in cases of radical suffering, and we might expect lesser suffering to evoke states of lesser desensitization in its witnesses. However, the fact that sensitivity to human suffering decreases with proximity and intensity of suffering suggests that spatial distance is crucial to the maintenance of emotional responsiveness to others.

The skeptic might argue that not all suffering is radical and that empirical experience demonstrates that many who witness suffering at close range remain emotionally responsive. Mother Teresa comes to mind as a fine exemplar here. However, the argument against compassion in proximity that is offered by Fyodor Dostoevsky in the objections to the law of love of neighbor voiced by Ivan Karamazov rings disturbingly true:

I have never been able to understand how it was possible to love one’s neighbors. And I mean precisely one’s neighbors, because I can conceive of the possibility of loving those who are far away. I read somewhere about a saint, John the Merciful, who, when a hungry frozen beggar came to him and asked him to warm him, lay down with him, put his arms around him, and breathed into the man’s reeking mouth that was festering with the sores of some horrible disease. I am convinced that he did so in a state of frenzy, that it was a false gesture, that this act of love was dictated by some self-imposed penance. If I must love my fellow man, he had better hide himself, for no sooner do I see his face than there’s an end to my love for him.

Conscien­ce and empathy, the emotional resources at the service of compassion, are active only in emotionally responsive human beings. So it seems that destructiveness, rather than warmth and liberality, is the practical result of naked confrontation with the suffering other. Our sympathies and actions can be set free from their conscience-linked restraints precisely by the moment of suffering-with described by the virtue of compassion. In sum, those who open their doors and hearts to the needy passers-by are, paradoxically, the first to gain an emotional distance from their afflicted fellows, which permits a diminished sense of personal responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Is it, in the face of such conflict and paradox, possible to think of living being, and especially of human being, as having a stable and secure identity? Can a “home,” given the impossibility of accomplishing its self-contradictory, yet definitively necessary, aspects, be successfully crafted in the midst of the environ­ning flux? Does fleshy existence turn out to be a “solid thing” where the soul, mere movement well-intended (when not entirely de-feathered), may settle and cling?

Jonas explains that human being, to forget his mortality, the fragility of the flesh, throws himself into the world as a “defiance.” Perhaps it is the sheer impossibility of the task that configures the mode in which living beings throw themselves into life, why there is such aggressive, often ugly and violent, “identity work” done in the name of individualism and of “homelands” in the world, by people often well-intended and serious about their responsibilities in the world. Everywhere human beings, as individuals, as communal groups, as nations and tribes and religious orders, are struggling to carve out stable, integrated, and unified identifying spaces—“homes” in the world—despite the absurdity of the task, desperate to forget that homelessness is the very way of being for living beings. As Jonas has so insightfully pointed out, spontaneous freedom can find its stable place in the world and forget its mortality only by carving out, through defiant actions, its own meanings of pretended eternal
and changeless validity. However, in action, the existent does not escape the contradictory
riness of the self. Rather, for human being, those spontaneous acts of freedom present
the greatest paradox of all.

A human being may come to terms with her mortality and make the most of her
limited days, but responsibility for her life, and for the lives and happiness of others
around her, dictates that she must live with the consequences of her actions. Her failures
and successes are eternal, irrevocable after the fact. The brute fact of memory, the
lived presence of the past through conscience, and the painful—or joyful—futurity
of memory's reach determine that, for every person, actions taken on an immortality
that the flesh will never share. Each single, spontaneous act of freedom—a kindness,
a gentle touch, a cruel joke, a murderous glance—as it enters the causal chain and
explodes into the world is felt throughout the universe now and for all time. Each
action must answer to an eternity of questionings and a lifetime of self-questionings.
Forgettings become more and more difficult as spontaneous living being becomes
responsible human being aware of the immortality of her effects in the world. Under
the gaze of the other, aggressive homecraft—being, having, accumulating, militating
against the flux—is called to answer for itself.

Nowhere is the human being called to answer for itself in such naked culpability
as under the gaze of the homeless other. Nowhere does the gaze of the other have
such reach into the soul as in the face to face between the well "homed" and the literally
and materially homeless, the one who lives the contradictions of mortal existence—the
desperate clinging of soul to fragile body—on the fleshy edge of its paradoxes. The
homeless one faces the "defiant" one with more than a mere dialectical difference.
This confrontation is a painful, disorienting, inescapable reminder of the one feature
that connects all human beings, a reminder of the truest, yet comfortably forgotten,
condition of all human beings. This confrontation reminds us that human being is
essentially a homeless way of being, struggling against an inescapable future by carving
in the midst of alienating otherness. He reminds
us that human existence is ever a mortgaged property awaiting repossession by
nothingness.

The Phaedrus myth is but one of a myriad tales that we tell ourselves to forget
our condition. Our stories, our myths, our laws and institutions compose the modes
in which we mortal beings respond to the question of our own conflicted existence.
But none of these "noble lies," meant to order and stabilize our earthly homes, has
any purchase against the gaze of the homeless other. His mere existence, his sudden,
silent eruption in the face of defiant freedom, raises once again the question of "who
belongs?" in a way that recalls the unbelongingness of all human lives.

Perhaps the greatest paradox raised by the confrontation with the homeless resides
in the brute fact that human identity as homelessness is a growing fact of the reality
of the modern world. Bureaucratization, technologization, industrialization, the advent
of "mass society" and global markets, world wars, national genocide projects as a
systematic policy for purifying the home space, and the global deployment of weapons
of mass destructive potential have created a situation where displacement, dislocation,
diaspora, violent expulsion, and mass political abstraction are fast becoming a "normal"
mode of dwelling for human being. Our names for the homeless may vary with local
circumstances—political refugees, asylum seekers, deportees, relocatees, resettled peoples, migrants—but the stunning reality that one in every one hundred
and fifteen people in the world is homeless raises the possibility of homelessness
as an emergent "human condition."

The homeless en masse, in the sheer fact of their numbers, in their "homeless
villages" constructed out of cardboard boxes and other waste erected in dump yards,
under bridges and in abandoned lots, map out for us the despair of those in the lower
regions of global capitalism, a domain relentlessly governed by self-interested
"defiance" and its partners in human crime: greed and competitiveness. The millions
who live on the streets, in doorways, and under the stars comprise an existential shock
to the comfortably forgetful ones. Those hungry eyes and tattered clothes, those weather-
beaten faces, comprise a defamation of our nations and our politics, exposing the
emptiness of our most revered ideals and the inadequacies of our systems and institutions
that promise a fair hearing and basic rights to all. The demos is integrally at risk
in facing the problem of homelessness because its identity articulates the belongingness
of all to which the homeless stand as visible disproof.

The homeless one is a scandal for the community, for the nation, and for the god
that, according to U.S. currency, can be "trusted" to watch over all. The ones who
tumble and slide outside the protective embrace of our systems reveal the
inadequacies of those structures, the false "securities" on which our wealth of
civilization is posited.

Ordered worlds are premised on the adequacy, stability, and constancy of their
self-definitions, on the claim of the realization of a unity of diverse beings. The homeless
masses expose the unraveling of the socio-political fabric and place in question the
quality, invulnerability, and eternity of our identity politics. The degradation of
the few proves the emptiness of the philosophical underpinnings of the unified many.
No matter how forgetfully secure the homespaces of the "defiant" freedoms, with
the event of the homeless, the ugly reality of the underside of the human world
continuously erupts in its audacious face, eroding the very parameters by which the
system seeks to be defined, revealing the impossibility of its imperative of unity and
exposing the deeper unity of the flesh that binds in trembling vulnerability all human
beings.

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Notes
1. Athena, patron goddess of Athens, was the goddess of both wisdom and war.
Lawrence Vogel (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 66–70.
3. Heidegger reserved the phrase for human beings alone, however Jonas attributes “needful freedom” to all living organisms.

4. The term compassion comes to English from the Latin *compassio*. It derives from the union of *com* (with) and *passus* (past participle of *pati*, to suffer). Hence compassion connotes a suffering-with that requires a connection on the basis of passions.


9. Robert J. Lifton, “Psychological Effects of the Atomic Bomb in Hiroshima: The Theme of Death,” in *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences*, 1963, 92. Lifton’s analysis demonstrates that compassionate responsiveness quickly hardens into what psychologists call “dehumanization.” This subjective phenomenon suggests that safeguards against compassionate response are inscribed into human beings as adaptive mechanisms. Dehumanization, the process whereby, in the interest of self-protection, we cease to see others who are different as fully “human,” actually hardens us against others and causes us to become less “human”—less emotionally connected and responsive to others. This constructive self-protection, say the experts, will inevitably “cross the ever-shifting boundaries of adaptiveness and become destructive, to others as well as the self” (Ibid., 107).

