

Towards a Phenomenology of Dwelling

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Abstract

This paper explores the connections between contemporary environmental ethics and the Greek notion of an ethos or “dwelling place” as articulated by Heraclitus’ fragment 119 (ethos anthropoi daimon, or “Man dwells, insofar as he is man, in nearness to a god”). Moving between textual analysis and phenomenological description, the author proposes that the ethos of dwelling is a space of hospitality and respect for the more-than-human world. This ethos is made possible by the tension between nearness and distance, or relation and difference, in the world we inhabit with others; it is collapsed by our fantasies of incorporating or fusing with the natural world. To dwell responsibly is thus to make room for others by dwelling within certain limits, recognizing that we become who we are as human beings only in response to a complex world which exceeds human existence and comprehension. An analysis of such writers as Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, and Ivan Illich brings this ethos into view.

Résumé

Cet article explore les rapports entre l'éthique environnementale contemporaine et la notion grecque ethos ou « mœurs », telle qu'énoncée dans le fragment 119 d'Héraclite : (ethos anthropoi daimon oi « L'homme en tant qu'homme demeure dans l'intimité d'un dieu. » Allant de l'analyse textuelle à la description phénoménologique, l'auteur propose que l'ethos de la demeure est un lieu d'hospitalité et de respect pour le monde suprahumain. Cet ethos est possible grâce à la tension qui existe entre l'intimité et la distance, ou la relation et la différence, dans le monde où nous vivons avec d'autres. En revanche, il s'effondre à cause de nos fantasmes d'intégration ou de fusion avec le monde naturel. Pour vivre d'une façon responsable, il faut faire de la place aux autres en vivant dans certaines limites, reconnaissant que nous devenons qui nous sommes en tant qu'êtres humains uniquement en réponse à un monde complexe qui dépasse l'existence et la compréhension des humains. Une analyse d'écrivains comme Heidegger, Hannah Arendt et Ivan Illich aide à mieux comprendre cet ethos.

What does it mean to dwell responsibly upon the earth? A philosophical reflection on dwelling requires us to think about the relation between one who dwells and the environment in which she dwells; but it also calls upon us to think more deeply about the history of this relation. For I dwell in space, but also in time and through history; thus the significance of dwelling shifts over time and between places. History is the collective remembrance of this shifting: a gaze cast back over the shoulders of the present moment. Often this gaze sees something in the past which could not have been visible except in retrospect. This is the case, I shall argue, with Heidegger's translation of fragment 119 from Heraclitus: *ethos anthropoi daimon*.¹ Often these words are translated, "Man's character is his daimon" (Kirk & Raven, 1963, p. 213). But more than two thousand years after the death of Heraclitus, Heidegger (1977) proposes this re-translation: "Man, insofar as he is man, dwells in the nearness of god" (p. 233).² In what follows, I wish to translate Heidegger's own re-translation into the language of environmental philosophy, learning from this exchange about what it means to dwell, not only with other people, but with other living and non-living beings. In the course of this translation, I shall begin to develop a phenomenology of dwelling which both looks back to the history of Western thought, and looks forward to a different and more hopeful future. To remember the past is not necessarily to repeat it; and so, by reading Heidegger and Heraclitus with our own retrospective gaze, we can learn from the past how to dwell more responsibly in the future.

Heraclitus says, *ethos anthropoi daimon*; and Heidegger responds by saying, "Man . . . dwells in nearness to a god." What could these words mean for environmental ethics? The word *ethos* gives us a first foothold; it signifies character, habit, custom, or dwelling-place. Our word *ethics* is rooted in this Greek sense of the customary or characteristic thing to do in this or that particular place. While morality may spell out a set of rules or values, ethics describes our everyday lives, our habits, the way we dwell in relation to other beings. Ethics, then, is better articulated by *gestures* than by rules or doctrines; it is reflected in the way we water the garden or share a meal with someone, rather than in a canon of universal truths. Our character—our response to the question, "Who are you?"—is a gathering of such gestures, a gathering which is singular and unique, but which defies every attempt at exact definition.

The second word in fragment 119, *anthropoi*, refers to both women and men; Heidegger translates it into the gender-inclusive German word, *Mensch*, which in English means "humanity" rather than "mankind." Thus the ethics, or dwelling, or character of humanity exists in the nearness of a god or *daimon*. This final word, *daimon*, carries a very nuanced meaning. It refers not to the Christian sense of god as creator or father, but rather to a sort of intermediate spirit, neither god nor human but something between the two.

Originally, the word *daimon* had no sense of malevolence or evil, as it does today in our word “demon;” rather, it approximated more closely our sense of a guardian spirit or “genius,” an image of our conscience (like Jiminy Cricket) existing somehow outside of us, but always referring to what we ought to be doing. Socrates occasionally refers to his *daimon* as a voice which does not speak except to say, *No!* It does not prescribe a specific course of action, but rather alerts him to the presence of a limit, warning against deeds which transgress the bounds of *ethos*.³

The word *daimon* leads back etymologically to the Greek verb *daiomai*, meaning “to lacerate” or “divide.”⁴ Thus the *daimon* is what splits me against myself, making me not quite coincide with myself; it both *is* me and *goes beyond* me, exceeding my grasp, resisting every attempt to comprehend it once and for all. The very character, or *ethos*, of human existence is to be split in this way: both knowing and not-quite-knowing who I am. Hannah Arendt (1958) briefly alludes to the Greek relation between self and *daimon* in her book, *The Human Condition*. She writes:

[I]t is more than likely that the “who” [the singular identity of a person], which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the *daimon* in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters. (p. 179-180)

Hence, what is closest to me, my character, my *ethos*, my “who”—is also the most distant, the most impossible to grasp or to master. I need other beings—and, as I shall argue, both human *and* more-than-human⁵ beings—to show me who I am. Not only am I essentially divided from myself (or daimonic), but the very disclosure of this dividedness comes from others who see more of myself at any given time than I do.

Indeed, my encounters with other beings not only *show* me who I am; in a fundamental sense, they *make* me who I am. My character “is” nothing other than this gathering-together of gestures made not by myself alone, but through my dwelling with others. Even that which is most my own is not mine to possess but rather a sharing with others, both a gift and a giving. Human existence does not simply forge ahead into its projects and enterprises; it also (and perhaps more essentially) looks backward and sidelong, like the *daimon* who sits on my shoulder. Every human enterprise depends implicitly on this other-than-myself who both discloses my character to the world and, at the same time, exceeds my grasp.

Ethos anthropoi daimon. In light of Heidegger’s translation, I propose that we interpret these words as follows: *The dwelling of human beings*—our essential character, our everyday habits, and the very root of our ethics—*exists not only in the nearness of, but at a distance from, an other that both surpasses me and makes me what I am*. We can think of this other as a spirit or intermediary, or as the human community; but we can also think of the other as

the entire human and more-than-human world: the plants, animals, elements, and people with whom we inhabit the earth. An ethics of dwelling emerges from the preservation of a tension between this nearness to others, and the distance which keeps us distinct from others. The gap between myself and the other is the space which makes ethical dwelling possible; in keeping us apart, it also preserves the difference which makes an ethical relation possible.

For this is the paradox articulated by fragment 119: that I am only myself in being divided, that I can only become myself by risking my identity in proximity to others. In effect, the boundary that separates me from a blade of grass, or from the moose across the river, is precisely that which grants me the possibility of approaching, addressing, and giving to these others. Often we are tempted by the romantic idea of “fusing consciousness” with the natural world, denying that there is a difference which keeps us apart from others and, precisely in keeping us apart, also directs us towards them. But the very possibility of an environmental ethics of dwelling rests upon the twofold nearness and distinction from others whom we need and for whom we are responsible. In the pages that follow, I will reflect more concretely on this relation between nearness and distance, or relation and otherness, which emerges from my re-translation of Heidegger’s translation of *ethos anthropoi daimon*. I shall argue that an ethical relation with the natural world is only possible given the gap of difference or otherness which is maintained by setting a *boundary* or *limit* to our dwelling-space. This boundary, far from alienating us from the natural environment, actually forms the basis for an environmental ethics of dwelling.

Consider a cabin in the woods. Cabins leak. They have doors hung with blankets and walls stuffed with moss. Mice crawl through cracks in the walls, and bats through cracks in the ceiling. In the winter, cabin windows stream with cold air, while the stovepipe sucks up hot air and spews it out into the cold. Wood chips and snow and mud from our boots make a track from woodpile, to door, to woodstove. Our cabin is encircled with pawprints and birdseeds and bootmarks: by traces of where we have been. In the summertime, cabin doors are flung open to welcome mosquitoes and blackflies, bees gone astray and the occasional panicky bird. The chairs in our cabin all face the windows; they look toward the outside. That is to say, our dwelling looks out toward the places where we *do not* dwell, but from which our dwelling-here could not possibly be separated: the land across the river, places inhabited by coyotes and ravens and mysterious moose, who often leave tracks but seldom appear. Daily, we look towards the other side of the river; and yet we know that we belong here, huddled up close to the fire in the winter, hauling up water for the garden in summer.

Consider also an apartment in the city. Cities are more like beehives. When I look out a city window (turning away from the television, opening the curtains and blinds, and peering out over the back of the couch), I see houses just like my own, arranged into rows like cells in a honeycomb. They

are inhabited by people more or less like me: people who work, come home, make spaghetti for dinner, fall asleep during the news. And yet I can walk through this city and see things that surprise me: a man with green hospital pants tied around his head, calmly walking his dog. A cat stalking a bird. Fireweed pushing through a crack in the sidewalk. For cities leak too, even in spite of themselves. The air conditioning may be on, the stereo may be blaring; but a storm outside can knock this out in less than a minute. Thus cities tend to show themselves most clearly just there, where they fail: a robin's nest in the mailbox; a leaking tap; the sound of an argument next door. In these moments of disruption we realize what the city tries most to conceal: that we dwell in relation to others, and that we can only be there if others are there, too.

While the cabin and the apartment are undoubtedly very different sorts of dwelling-space, both offer a glimpse into the ethical significance of dwelling. While there is much to say here, I want to focus on one aspect in particular: the relation between inside and outside in a home. The inside of a place can exist only thanks to the *boundary* (the walls, floor, and roof) which separates it from the outside. Without this sense of a place hollowed out from the world at large, there could be no dwelling, no intimacy, no home in which I welcome friends and strangers. The boundary that separates inside from outside need not be visible or material; for even among people who dwell under the open sky, there is the sense of a socially interior space, a space which is described more by trails and hunting grounds than by walls and floorboards.

Dwelling requires a sense of the inside: an intimate space where I belong with others who do not, properly speaking, belong to me. If the boundary which creates this interior space were absolute and impermeable, then life within its bounds would be impossible. We need windows and doors; we need wood for the stove and air to breathe. Thus dwelling occurs neither inside nor outside but in the tension between the two: in the interaction of spaces which have something to give one another precisely because they are not the same. The dwelling of human beings, the root of our ethics and the very character of our existence, occurs in the nearness of, but distinction from, an other, an outside, a complex of human and more-than-human beings who both transcend me, and let me become who I am.

Though our contemporary cities have largely neglected this tension between inside and outside, ancient Greek cities were founded upon the principle of a boundary or city wall, which both sets limits on the city's proper sphere, and establishes a connection between the human community and the cosmos in which it dwells. In his book, *H₂O and the Waters of Forgetfulness*, Ivan Illich (1985) describes the way Greek cities were ritually traced out upon the earth in relation to heavenly bodies, the flight of birds, or the movement of clouds. For the Greeks, a city could only be founded in relation to that which exceeds it, that which *is not* the city but nevertheless is the condition for its very existence. An *ethos* of ritual and custom inaugurated the city once a site

had been divined; a team of one female and one male ox pulled a plough around the cosmic shape of the city, the driver lifting the plough at intervals to make thresholds or city gates, places where the interior would meet and interact with the external world. Illich (1985) calls this ritual of inauguration “a sacred marriage of heaven and earth” (p. 15), an “opposition and wedding of right and left,” inside and outside, animal and human (p. 14). Without this collaboration of more-than-human others—the stars, the clouds, the oxen, the birds, and the ground into which the template is etched—the human city could not come into being. And yet this relation between the city and the more-than-city only comes into view when the city-space is marked off from that which exceeds it and from which it emerges.

The Greeks, we might say, had an *ethos* of city-dwelling: an understanding that human beings need to dwell with one another, but that we can only do so by dwelling within the limits of a boundary which both separates us from and aligns us with an exterior which is *other-than-human* and *more-than-human*. One could argue, of course, that the Greeks built walls around their cities not because of their deep sensitivity to the nature of ethical dwelling, but rather to protect themselves from armies and “barbarians” and beasts from the wild. For it is also true—and especially true in the history of the West—that boundaries have been erected in the spirit of exclusion and self-protection rather than in pursuit of harmonious dwelling. Thus we must turn to the past not in order to repeat its mistakes, but rather to learn how *not* to repeat them; we need the retrospective gaze of history not only to find inspiration for the future from the past, but also to mark the line which separates past from future, and opens a different horizon.

The Greeks may not have conceived the city wall as a boundary which separates and connects humanity with the more-than-human world; and Heraclitus may not have understood his words as the starting-point for environmental ethics. And yet, when we remember these ancient words and customs, we are given the responsibility to hear both what has been said in the past, and how this saying resonates for the future. For Heidegger, to remember is not to make the past “present” through re-presentation, but rather to preserve from the past a meaning which exists ecstatically in relation to the future. By letting an ethical sense of the boundary address the traditional history of the boundary as an instrument of exploitation and self-assertion, we open up the possibility of new meanings for old words. We need to remember the history of Western culture in this way in order to understand why our own cities are the way they are, and how they could be otherwise.

We cannot change the way we dwell simply by wiping the slate clean and starting over; any change in habits must arise first from an examination of our current habits and the conditions under which they were formed. For Ivan Illich (1985), “To dwell means to inhabit the traces left by one’s own living, by which one always retraces the lives of one’s ancestors” (p. 8). What does this sense of dwelling mean for the future of our cities? Drive into Vancouver or Toronto

—for one cannot help but *drive* there—and witness the hundreds of kilometres of occupied space sprawling out of our mega-cities. This is no longer dwelling-space, but rather what Illich calls “garages for living,” storage-space for human enterprise. Now, more than ever, we need to recuperate a sense of dwelling within limits: not in order to protect ourselves from the wilderness (as perhaps the ancient Greeks were concerned to do) but rather to protect the wilderness from ourselves. We must do this not only because our physical existence depends upon it, but also because without this relation to, and distinction from, others we cannot *become who we are*: namely, human beings whose character is our *ethos*. And yet we cannot stop here. For ultimately, and more essentially, we must set a limit to human dwelling not for our own sake, but for the sake of the other, making room for an other not out of enlightened self-interest, but out of *respect* and *hospitality*.

I propose, arising from this brief exploration of dwelling as thought and as experience, an environmental ethics grounded in these gestures of respect and hospitality. To respect someone is to hold her in regard while still letting her remain at a distance from me, giving her room to move. Respect thrives only where this distance and difference is maintained in the very midst of my regard and concern for the other. Likewise to offer hospitality—a notion which I have inherited from the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1969)—is to open one’s dwelling space to an other, a stranger whom I cannot grasp or comprehend but for whom I am nevertheless responsible. To be hospitable is, like the gift of respect, to take a step back so that the other can step forth; it is to set limits on my own dwelling so that the other has room to come and go. The genius of human being is not only that we can “be ourselves” only in relation to an other which both surpasses and constitutes us. Rather, the genius of the human character, and the root of our ethics, is in our propensity to give space, or make room for, an other who exceeds our grasp.

An ethics of respect and hospitality has political, social, and intellectual implications. In concrete terms, it means that we ought to set aside wilderness spaces that have no human function, not even the relatively benign function of providing recreation for people like you and me. It means that we ought to rethink our cities in terms of density rather than sprawl, and to preserve within them spaces of otherness and ecological diversity: parkland spaces without mowed lawns and barbecue pits. And it means that in our everyday lives, as well as in our municipal and territorial planning, we must cultivate habits of respect for those with whom we dwell, and without whom we could not exist.

An ethics of dwelling based on hospitality and respect demands that we resist the temptation to believe, even in a spirit of generosity, that we are the same as the other, that there is no difference between a person and a tree and a lynx across the river. For although we are by no means indifferent to these others, it is precisely our difference from them, our *not* knowing who they are

from the inside out, that lets us be ethical towards them. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1991) ends his book, *Language and Death*, with the following words, and this is where I, too, will conclude these reflections upon the *ethos* of dwelling:

We walk through the woods: suddenly we hear the flapping of wings or the wind in the grass. A pheasant lifts off and then disappears instantly among the trees, a porcupine buries in the thick underbrush, the dry leaves crackle as a snake slithers away. Not the encounter, but this flight of invisible animals is thought. No, it was not our voice. We came as close as possible to language, we almost brushed against it, held it in suspense: but we never reached our encounter and now we turn back, untroubled, toward home.

So, language is our voice, our language. As you now speak, that is ethics. (p. 108)

Notes

- ¹ Fragment 119 is cited in Kirk & Raven (1963, p. 213), both in the original Greek and in the common English translation.
- ² Heidegger (1977) retranslates the same fragment on the next page of his text as follows: “The (familiar) abode is for man the open region for the presencing of god (the unfamiliar one)” (p. 234). Given the brevity of my talk today, I have chosen to focus only on the first version of this translation.
- ³ See *Phaedrus* 242 b-c and *Apology* 31d, 40a-b for Socrates’ own description of his *daimon*. See Plato (1961).
- ⁴ See Agamben (1991), p. 93.
- ⁵ I thank David Abram (1996) for this phrase, “more-than-human,” which expresses more closely and carefully what I had formerly called the “non-human.”

Notes on Contributor

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