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What is a home? An ontological inquiry

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1. Introduction

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the primary sense of "home" as: "The place where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family". Here various elements appear that can lead us to the nucleus of the concept of *home*, to its most fundamental ontology. The definition includes elements that are spatial (*place*) and temporal (*permanently*). Perhaps the requirement of permanence sounds a bit exaggerated. We needn't stay in a place permanently for it to be considered our home. It would be more correct to define "home" as the place where one lives habitually or frequently. Indeed, the spatial dimension—as *place*—and the temporal—as being frequented—are indispensable for something to be called "home". In addition, the definition includes a functional dimension: it speaks to us of living, not just being present or existing. The home is the place where one *lives*, not just where one happens to be. If there is nothing alive, no being that lives, there is no home. Stones have no home, nor do atoms or concepts. In a certain analogical, distant sense we can attribute a "home" to plants. Their home would then be their habitat (or the greenhouse we build for them when we take them out of that habitat). But the definition already specifies that *home* is the place where one lives "especially as a member of a family". And with plants the concept of family doesn't apply (except in a taxonomic sense that isn't important here). Animals also have their habitat. It is, in a very loose sense, a kind of home for them. But, in addition, some animals do live as members of a family in certain special places such as caves or nests. We can now say, with more accuracy, that these are homes. However, when the dictionary says "one" it is referring to a human being, to a person. In the most proper sense of the word, "home" applies to the place in which a human being habitually lives as a member of a family. As a result, on the basis of this more proper sense, and by analogy, we can speak of the homes of animals and plants, and in an even more metaphorical, forced and distant sense, of the "homes" of other non-living beings.

So if we want to know what "home" means, we will have to explore its most proper and basic sense, that which refers to human beings. We won't know anything about what a home is in general if we don't know what a human home is, and we won't know anything about that if we don't know what a human being is, a person. Our investigation must lead us to this point.

Furthermore, our investigation here is of a philosophical character. That means it must of necessity include a normative, evaluative or at least critical aspect. It is not merely a case of finding out what human homes are like with the tools of the natural, social and human sciences. It is also a question of evaluating, of looking for criteria to distinguish a home that

functions well from another that could do better. This axiological component is characteristic of the philosophical way of seeing the world, and emerges from an ontological investigation. This is the deepest meaning of Pindar's ancient maxim: "become what you are". As a paraphrase, we might say: a home *should be*, or should *become*, what it *really is*. When we find out, after an ontological investigation, what a home really is, we will also know how it should be, since only a good home is really a home.

This latter claim immediately raises a concern, for it looks like it would lead to abolishing all the rich empirical diversity of the actual homes that exist in the world. Furthermore, it looks as though it leads to forgetting the importance of hard homework, creativity and originality in the task of building a new home. This would be so if we were thinking in Platonic terms. A single *Idea* of home would give rise by imitation, always degenerate, to the actual homes that we know in the sensible world, which in turn would never be what they are in a full and proper sense. Far be it from me to adopt this Platonic perspective. On the contrary, I believe that good homes, those which can really be considered to be such, are very diverse among themselves, and they do not arise from mere imitation of a conventional stereotype or an ideal model. Rather, it is thanks to the creativity and hard work, sometimes even heroic, of the people involved in building it. But, at the same time, all of them are like each other in certain essential traits directly connected with human nature.

Along this line of thought, we can cite a recent resolution of the United Nations' Human Rights Council, which speaks of "the family", in singular, in recognition of the essential traits in which all human families are similar, and "reaffirms that the family is the natural and fundamental element of society". At the same time, it recognizes the diversity of circumstances and modalities in which these essential features can be made concrete.¹ It is precisely respect for these essential characteristics that permits and fosters diversity and creativity. Beyond these traits, there remains only the strictest monotony of the dysfunctional and the inauthentic, in the same way that different musics—even though they have much in common among themselves—are more diverse to our ear than mere noise.²

Once the general lines of the question have been set out, and the anxiety we had detected has been resolved, we can return to our initial question. What is a home? In order to attempt a response, I will begin by investigating the spatial and temporal dimensions that immediately appear in our intuitive idea of a home, as well as in any dictionary definition. In this section of

¹ "Protection of the family: the contribution of the family to the realization of the right to an adequate standard of living for its members, particularly through its role in poverty eradication and achieving sustainable development". UN resolution A/HRC/29/L.25, 01/07/2015, which is at: <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/LTD/G15/139/98/PDF/G1513998.pdf?OpenElement>.

² "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way". These are the familiar opening words of *Anna Karenina*. Was Tolstoy right? Yes and no. He is right to criticise social appearances and conventionalisms: there are societies, or segments of them, that have constructed an excessively narrow, detailed and conventional stereotype of a "good" family. In this type of social environment there is only one way to be (apparently) happy, but there are many ways to be (apparently) miserable. But Tolstoy would have been mistaken if he meant to give the phrase a deeper, ontological meaning. To begin with, this is because the relation of similarity ("likeness") already admits great diversity among its terms. Things which are similar can be like two musical pieces, alike but nevertheless so different! In the same way, happy homes can be alike and, at the same time, very different from each other. In an ontological sense, we should flip Tolstoy's saying over on its head: there may be a very diverse range of happy homes, and in addition one needs a lot of work, creativity and willpower to make one's home happy; nevertheless, in order that a home not be happy, one need do nothing more than allow entropy to erase the essential lines of human nature.

the journey, I will draw upon the reflection that Heidegger dedicates to building and dwelling, as well as the suggestions contributed by the Spanish philosopher Julián Marías (1914-2005) about the notion of “house” (section 2). We will see that the house is a space that is built and inhabited for the coming to be of a certain essence or nature, that which is proper to the human being. We will also see what the spatial and temporal structure is of this environment that we call “house”.

A house, however, isn't a home unless it is a lived-in house, at whose hospitable bosom a certain essence comes to be: that which is proper to the persons that dwell in it. A home must therefore be—expressing it in words I have borrowed from the poet Luis Rosales (1910-1992)—a *lighted house*. And a house is lit up, precisely, to the degree in which it actualizes the essence of the human in its womb. As a result, if we want to understand what a home is we'll have to pay attention to the idea of human nature and the idea of person that are employed. We will see (section 3) that the home is defined, functionally, precisely by its capacity to host and foster the development of persons so they can take on the direction of their own nature and personality.

If we characterize the basic ontology of the home as we do here, we will immediately realize that it can be fulfilled or concretized in very different realities (section 4). Stated in another way, when we think about a home, we typically imagine a building that a family lives in, but there are also other realities that we can call, in an ontologically correct way, house and home, such as a mother's womb, the Earth as a whole, perhaps also the Universe, and even what Christianity calls the *Father's House*. Ontological reflection on what a home is opens new dimensions—anthropological, ecological, cosmological and even theological—which can only be insinuated at here. I will try, finally, to bring what has been discovered together in a concluding summary (section 5).

2. The House. Space and Time

In the 1950s, due to the destruction of the war, Germany suffered a major shortage of housing. With this in mind, Heidegger wrote a text on building and dwelling.³ One can see that between building and dwelling there exists a simple relation of means to an end: that is, we build a house in order to inhabit it. “Thus dwelling”, writes Heidegger, “would be the end that is pursued in all building” (Heidegger: 348). So it is, but Heidegger takes another step and shows that building is already a mode of dwelling, in order to begin a human way of dwelling on the Earth, and every mode of dwelling generates a determined manner of building. “Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build” (Heidegger: 362), affirms Heidegger. Thus, for example, a house in the Black Forest is built according to how the populace dwells. We might say that it is a determined form of life that ends up producing a determined kind of building. A way of inhabiting that is still rural, as the German thinker indicates,

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 that, reaching deep down, shields the chambers against the storms of the long winter nights. It did not forget

³ M. Heidegger, “Building, dwelling, thinking”, in M. Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, Harper, New York, 1993, pp. 343-364; which is at: http://designtheory.fiu.edu/readings/heidegger_bdt.pdf.

the corner for Our Lord behind the community table; It made room in its chamber for the hallowed places of 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 that, itself sprung from dwelling, still uses its tools and its gear as things, built the farmhouse (Heidegger: 362).

The manner of dwelling generates a determined kind of building and "the essence of building is letting dwell [...] the building receives its essence from dwelling" (Heidegger: 361).

The entire paragraph that I have cited is thoroughly penetrated by the idea of *care* (*Sorge*, *Schonen*). In building a house what we achieve is the establishing of a place, opening a space in which dwelling is possible. The house, so to speak—and in reality the person who builds it or provides the means so it may be built—*cares* for our dwelling, it leaves it be, it leaves it in its essence. In building we open a space where the dweller is protected from the harsh side of *Nature*: snow, storms, the long winter nights; but we can also add the terrible sun, unendurable heat, drought, plagues, vermin and dangerous beasts... A space in which time passes differently, more constant, more stable, more welcoming, than it does outside. A *tempered* space protected from Nature's (*un*)temper, where the human being can dwell according to his or her essence.

The sparing [*Schonen*] itself—says Heidegger—consists not only in the fact that we do not harm the one whom we spare. Real sparing [*Schonen*] is something *positive*, and takes place when we leave something beforehand in its own essence [...] when we "free" it in the proper sense of the word into a preserve of peace. To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free [...] the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its essence. *The fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing*. It pervades dwelling in its whole range. That range reveals itself to us as soon as we recall that human being consists in dwelling (Heidegger: 351).

This is dwelling: being able to bring about one's proper essence freely and in peace, in the place appropriate for it. With the term *essence* here I refer to both that human nature that we all share, as well as to the personality of each person.⁴

In addition to the idea of care, Heidegger's entire text plays with the notions of place/space and time. I will try, in what follows, to explore what the spatial and temporal structure of the house is, from an ontological point of view. Heidegger's own text already gives us some clues. A human construction, a bridge or a house, opens a *space*. It can do so to the degree that it itself is a *place*. Or, stated in another way, with the construction of a bridge or of a house there arises a place to pass through or to reside in.

⁴ Perhaps one can find here the deep sense of the enigmatic verse written by Hölderlin: "Poetically man dwells". For this topic see M. Heidegger, "... Poetically Man Dwells...", in M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Harper, New York, 1971, pp. 213-229; which is at: <http://timothyquigley.net/cont/heidegger-pmd.pdf>. See also A. Marcos, "Ontología de la diferencia", invited paper contributed to the *III Simposio Internacional del Grupo de Investigación Filosófica USB-USAL: Concepciones de los Real*, University of Salamanca, Salamanca, 08/04/2014; available at: http://www.fyl.uva.es/~wfilosof/webMarcos/textos/textos2015/Ontologia_diferencia1_USAL.pdf.

The locale is not already there before the bridge is—Heidegger tells us—[...] thus the bridge does not first come to a locale to stand in it; rather, a locale comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge [...] Only things that are locales in this manner allow for spaces. What the word for space, *Raum* (space), designates is said by its ancient meaning. *Raum*, *rum*,⁵ means a place that is freed for settlement and lodging [...] A space is something that has been made room for, something that has been freed, namely, within a boundary [...] A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its essential unfolding. Space is in essence that for which room has been made, that which is let into its bounds [...] Accordingly, spaces receive their essential being from locales and not from “space.” (Heidegger: 355-6).

It is not that the house is in *the* space, but rather that the building of a house produces a place or locale, and thereby generates and structures spaces, an interior space and an exterior one, establishes distances and directions, in function of human action, that is, of our mode of dwelling. Some things are within an arm’s reach, others are close or next to the house, at a few paces, others are far from the house, many paces or even days of travel away. Distances are therefore measurable by human action and its reiteration: so many inches, cubits, feet or yards, so many days of travel... these measurements really measure an intermediate space (between walls or between houses), a *stadium*.

By a process of abstraction we can eliminate places and intermediate spaces in order to end up with pure dimensions reduced to analytical-algebraic relations. “What these relations make room for”, states Heidegger, “is 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” (Heidegger: 357-8). But *the* space, in this abstract sense, no longer contains intermediate spaces and concrete places.

As against that, however, in the spaces provided for by locales there is always space as interval, and in this interval in turn there is space as pure extension [...] But the fact that they are *universally* applicable to everything that has extension can in no case make numerical magnitudes the *ground* of the essence of spaces and locales that are measurable with the aid of mathematics [...] If we pay heed to these relations between locales and spaces, between spaces and space, we get a clue to help us in thinking of the relation of man and space [...] Spaces open up by the fact that they are let into the dwelling of man (Heidegger: 357-8).

Perhaps we could interpret Heidegger as saying that there exists a specific connection between life and space. That is, the very fact that a living being exists generates and structures spaces, and every living being does this in its own way. The human mode of life also generates and structures its own spaces. It does so largely through buildings, and especially through the type of building that we call a house. First let’s go a bit deeper into the idea that each living being generates a spatial structure, and later we’ll visit the special case of human life.

⁵ The word is clearly related to the English term “*room*”, which refers to a chamber as well as to space.

The existence of a living being makes an internal space appear, an interiority or intimacy that occurs in the most diverse senses and degrees. In the first place, I will speak of a physical space divided into inside and outside, or rather generated by this division, which in turn comes into view at the same time that the vital activity of the living being appears. The basic unit of life, according to the generally accepted cellular theory, is precisely the cell. And the same word “cell” has the sense of a small enclosure that permits and protects the life of a living being. Inevitably, with the appearance of an interior space there also appears an exterior space, an environment external to the living being. From here, the actions of the living being generate an environment, a domain or *Umwelt*—using the terminology of von Uexküll (1864-1944). The activity of a living being, its life, also generates spaces of intimacy that go beyond the purely physical: from the spatial enclosure surrounded by a membrane or skin, to the intimacy and immunological identity that closes off an it-self and separates it chemically from all other beings, from the most elemental perception of the surroundings to a mental activity that is developed and rich, and whose greatest exponent is the mental and self-conscious intimacy of the human being.

Thus, living beings have “walls” or borders, i.e. enclosing elements that delimit, distinguish and constitute them in their essence. But they also possess “windows” and “doors”. That is, the distance that the living being maintains from thermodynamic equilibrium, the challenge it poses for entropy, is sustained only thanks to a continuous exchange of matter, energy and information between the interior of the living being and its exterior. The necessary openness of the living being, the fact that its remaining alive depends on an exchange with the surrounding environment, makes the living being a vulnerable one, in need and always at the edge of death. The living being isn’t a monad; rather, it combines separation and communication in equal parts: without a membrane there is no cell, and not without pores either. Every living being generates an interior and an exterior space, and in addition places them in continuous communication.

The doors for interior-exterior communication must be thought of as *filters*. They are not mere holes. That is, they incorporate a certain intelligence, a certain criterion or capacity for discrimination: they let one thing past and block the passage of another. This idea reminds us, of course, of the famous mental experiment imagined by James Clerk Maxwell (1831-1879). In the door that permits communication between two compartments filled with gas, Maxwell stations a demon—a kind of Janus god—that allows the passage of faster particles in one direction and slower particles in another, generating thermodynamic order over time. The information that the door demon has allows the system to go against the general tendency of entropy.

Allow me to reproduce, as an illustration of what has been said, some verses by the Nobel Prize-winning Pole Wisława Szymborska, as elemental and beautiful in form as they are deep and impressive in their content:

Conversation with a Stone:

I knock at the stone’s front door.
It’s only me, let me come in.
I want to enter your insides,

[...]
 "Go away," says the stone.
 "I'm shut tight.
 Even if you break me to pieces,
 we'll all still be closed.
 You can grind us to sand,
 we still won't let you in."
 [...]
 "But there isn't any room."
 [...]
 "My whole surface is turned toward you,
 all my insides turned away."
 [...]
 "You shall not enter," says the stone.
 [...]
 "I don't have a door," says the stone.⁶

We now know why the stone doesn't let the poet in: one cannot enter a stone. As opposed to a living being, the rock has no interior, it is all surface. An interior is born when a living being is born. Someone could appeal here to a geometric concept of interiority, to the notion of concavity or to the space contained within a line, such as the circumference. But we have learned from Heidegger that this geometric space comes after living space, and always exists through abstraction. Thus, even for the arising of geometric space the existence of a living being is required. If houses generate an interior and an exterior, it is because they are the continuation of a living being and its prolongation, and because a living being dwells in them. An abandoned building ceases to have an internal and external face, and soon it becomes a twisted version of the harshness of Nature.

We can expect, then, that the space generated by a house will have the same structure as the space generated by a living being, with an interior, an exterior and certain channels of communication between the two. As in the case of living beings, these channels of communication, windows, doors, hot and cold running water, are, in reality, intelligent filters that allow things to pass, entering or leaving, the one but not the other, the light but not the cold, drinkable water but not rainwater, they allow the cat to pass but not the mouse, they let electrical power in but not the lightning, the friend but not the thief, it permits used water from the bathtub to pass, but not the baby that's in it... In this way, the selective work carried out by these channels end up generating an internal order protected from entropy and apt for the development of the human.

Perhaps one of the most simple and accurate descriptions of the space we call a house is that which we find in a text by the Spanish philosopher Julián Marías (the most prominent disciple of José Ortega y Gasset):

What is a house? What would its formula be, its living structure [...]?—asks Julián Marías—three words will be enough: *inside but open*. If there is no "inside", if there is no interiority, there is no house; if there is no opening, what there is is

⁶ W. Szyborska, "Conversation with a stone", in W. Szyborska, *View with a Grain of Sand*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995, pp. 30-33 (edition and translation by S. Barańczak and C. Cavanagh).

prison—at most a cloister—but not a house either way. In the house one can simply be—it is not a house unless it has been entered—but one can go out and even if one doesn't, there is the street, there is the world, and one can look out the windows and observe from balconies [...] and that world one looks at from within is 'practicable' [...] one can really go out to it; it has been offered and not prohibited or negated. That is what a house is⁷.

Marías also speaks of the temporal structure of dwelling at the home: "The house is 'where one resides', 'where one lives'. When? One must answer with a strange expression, which reveals the conflictive structure of daily life: *for now always*. Thus the time of the house is not linear; rather, is made of curious anticipations and flashbacks"⁸. The house is where one resides habitually, where one dwells, where one resides with the sensation of permanence, of what is *for ever*, where one customarily lives, even though it is only *for now*, even though one's staying in the house is interrupted over and over again, even if it ends up being a brief stay. And when one is not in the house, it is the place to which one returns or thinks one will return or wishes to return or is always returning. This strange temporal structure is what Marías attempts to gather together with the formula "*for now always*".

In a poetic mode we find it expressed in the verses of Luis Rosales, to which Marías's text serves as a prologue:

You have come to your house,
and, upon entering,
you have felt the strangeness of your steps
which were already resounding in the hallway before you arrived,
and you turned on the light, in order to verify again
that everything is placed exactly how it will be within a year.⁹

"The guiding thread of the poem", writes Marías, "is a happening that strictly speaking does not 'pass by'; rather 'it abides' "¹⁰. This "it abides" refers to residing, to dwelling. The house generates a time of stability, of constancy and trustworthy continuity, a kind of present moment ("for now") that is said to be nearly eternal ("always"), and within which one can grow freely and in peace, developing oneself, updating the human.

But, "what is the topic of *The Lighted House*?" continues Marías, "One need not look too far, because it is a book with a good title: its topic is *the house* [...] the lighting of the house is its culmination, its 'outcome', precisely in the subtle sense that this word took on when it was a case of a non-narrative plot"¹¹.

⁷ J. Marías, "Al margen de la casa encendida", in L. Rosales, *Rimas y La Casa Encendida*, Espasa-Calpe, Madrid, 1979, p. 130-131; available at <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/al-margen-de-la-casa-encendida/>. My translation.

⁸ J. Marías, "Al margen de la casa encendida", in L. Rosales, *Rimas y La Casa Encendida*, Espasa-Calpe, Madrid, 1979, p. 129; available at <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/al-margen-de-la-casa-encendida/>. My translation.

⁹ L. Rosales, *Rimas y La Casa Encendida*, Espasa-Calpe, Madrid, 1979, p. 144; available at <http://barricadaletrahispanic.blogspot.com.es/2011/08/la-casa-encendida-luis-rosales.html/>. My translation.

¹⁰ J. Marías, "Al margen de la casa encendida", in L. Rosales, *Rimas y La Casa Encendida*, Espasa-Calpe, Madrid, 1979, p. 128; available at <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/al-margen-de-la-casa-encendida/>. My translation.

¹¹ J. Marías, "Al margen de la casa encendida", in L. Rosales, *Rimas y La Casa Encendida*, Espasa-Calpe, Madrid, 1979, p. 128; available at <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/al-margen-de-la-casa-encendida/>. My translation.

Up to now, with the aid of philosophical and poetic texts, we have explored the basic ontology of what we call a *house*. Now we can take another step towards the idea of home, an idea suggested by the expression *lighted house*. In many languages the word for home also refers, at the same time, to the fire that warms the home, whose light fills the interior spaces and appears at the windows, that brings the family together around it... Thus, we can justly adopt the poetic formula here: a home is a lighted house.

3. The lighted house. Human nature and the person

The house is a space-time that is open for the care of an essence, for freely and peacefully bringing the human into being. That essence is *human nature*, and to the degree that it is actualized in the unrepeatable form of each concrete person, in each dweller in the house, the house starts to come alight, the house is beginning to be a home.

Let us now ask what human nature consists in, because from the answer to that question we will obtain many indications about what a home really is, about what every home should be.

There are those who deny that the human being has any nature at all. In addition, there are those who claim that humans do have one, and that it is purely natural; that is, that we humans do not differ from other natural beings in anything essential. Paradoxically, both theories, opposed, have practical implications that in large part coincide: both recommend, or at least admit, a deep artificialization of the human being. If we do not have a nature, we must build ourselves an artificial one, either from pure indetermination or from the will to power. If the nature or essence of the human being is purely natural, then the human being is also—technically—available, at least as much as other natural beings. Neither of these two theories of human nature seem correct to me. Nor do I think that their practical implications are desirable.¹²

Regarding theories of human nature, I find the one we can attribute to common sense and daily experience to be more useful and closer to truth. This theory has been philosophically developed, argued and refined by Aristotle and by the Aristotelian tradition up to our own times. According to this theory, every human being is a unique person, but by abstraction we can distinguish various aspects in that person. In the first place we have the physico-biological aspect, in second place the social aspect and in third place the spiritual. In Aristotelian terminology we would speak of the human being as an animal (*zoon*) that is social (*politikon*) and rational (*logon*). We must insist, in order to avoid any mistakes, on the unicity of the human person. We can only distinguish these aspects by abstraction, since they are not truly found separate in the concrete person; rather, they are interwoven in a state of mutual differentiation.¹³ So, an analysis of human nature centred on these three aspects will be

¹² I cannot go into this issue in depth here. In other texts I have criticized in detail both the negation as well as the radical naturalization and unrestricted artificialization of human nature. I refer the interested reader to A. Marcos, "Filosofía de la naturaleza humana", *Eikasia. Revista de Filosofía*, año VI, 35 (noviembre 2010) pp. 181-208; A. Marcos, "Nuevas perspectivas en el debate sobre la naturaleza humana", *Pensamiento. Revista de investigación e Información filosófica*, in press.

¹³ For an ontological exploration of the concept of difference and its importance for human life, see A. Marcos, "Ontología de la diferencia", invited paper contributed to the *III Simposio Internacional del Grupo de Investigación Filosófica USB-USAL: Concepciones de los Real*, University of Salamanca, Salamanca, 08/04/2014; available at: http://www.fyl.uva.es/~wfilosof/webMarcos/textos/textos2015/Ontologia_diferencia1_USAL.pdf.

greatly useful for our present purposes: it will help us to explore more deeply the ontology of the *home*.

The fact that we are physico-biological beings, and especially animals, has deep implications. It demands that we think of ourselves as bodies, from the experience of the animal we are. The old fleshless rationalism tended to identify human beings only with their rational component. Today we know that was an error. If, by nature, we are animals, that means that we are *vulnerable*, susceptible to being harmed. The vulnerable is that which can be injured or pierced. In more basic terms, it is a matter of an entity into which another can be inserted, which in turn logically demands the distinction between interior and exterior. The insertion of something external into a living entity is considered to be a wound to the degree that it causes functional damage. Living beings generate an interior and an exterior, as we have seen; they possess semi-permeable barriers that identify them, separate them from their environment and permit them to communicate with it, making living beings functional, but also, at the same time, vulnerable. This is our condition as living beings, and more specifically as animals, which makes us vulnerable; in many aspects and ages of our life we are even more vulnerable than other animals. Rocks and concepts are not vulnerable. Therefore, they have no need of a home.

We humans must *recognize* our extreme vulnerability and, at the same time, we must attempt to *mitigate* it to the degree possible and protect ourselves from harm.¹⁴ To a large degree we do this through the protection that a house offers us. This protection is so important for us that there is no just political power that does not recognize the inviolability of the house and protect it by law. Now, for the human being the desire to attain absolute invulnerability is somewhat contradictory. We can only aspire to perfect invulnerability at the price of ceasing to be human. Even the house that protects us is vulnerable: the walls and roof can give in, the windows and doors can fail in their function of filtration. Even so, it is clear that the house reduces or mitigates our natural vulnerability—and indeed *must* do so. In a house there is an evident increase in the person's probabilities of healthy growth and development, insofar as he or she is a physico-biological being; in turn, the house begins to be a home, it begins to come alight.

Let's now consider our social nature. In general, the first house that a person knows is that of his or her parents. "In one sense, all houses are 'mom and dad's place'", writes Julián Marías, "and human beings spend their lives seeking it, trying to re-establish it and restore it, even when they never had it".¹⁵ When we come into life, and later, when our consciousness awakens, our parents' house was already there, it expected us. Somebody built it and prepared it for us, someone kept laboriously maintaining it. And the first thing that parents awaiting a child do is prepare a place, a space, a *room* or cradle, at least, for the little one who is going to come. The house must be seen, therefore, as an intergenerational nexus, as a place of living together for human beings of distinct generations. At the outset we depend completely on family members of prior generations, who may with time end up depending on

¹⁴ Cf. A. Marcos, "Vulnerability as a Part of Human Nature", in A. Masferrer and E. García (eds.), *Human Dignity of the Vulnerable in the Age of Rights. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Springer, Dordrecht, in press.

¹⁵ J. Marías, "Al margen de la casa encendida", in L. Rosales, *Rimas y La Casa Encendida*, Espasa-Calpe, Madrid, 1979, p. 130; available at <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/al-margen-de-la-casa-encendida/>. My translation.

us. These are care relations which are usually lived in the heart of a family. The parents look out for their children, the siblings watch out for one another, and the children end up caring for aged parents.

We could use the expression “keep vigil for someone” as a synonym for “care”. Let’s think about this for a moment. “Keeping vigil” means to stay awake, stay on watch. But everyone needs to sleep. Hence, some of us have to keep vigil for others. That is, some stay awake while others sleep, and later others will come to relieve them. In our days it is frequent that all members of a home sleep at more or less the same times, but that was assuredly not the case in the past, nor is it so today in situations of illness or extreme risk. In those conditions, some have to keep vigil for others. And I believe that we all sleep better if we know that someone is staying awake and alert. This is crucial at least for little children and the sick. Care understood as “keeping vigil for” demands mutuality, someone to relieve us. Sometimes being relieved comes about after minutes or hours, at other times we speak of processes that last years or decades. The older brother cares for the youngest, but with the passage of years it is the little brother who helps the older out. The parents keep vigil for their children, but after the passage of decades it is the children who will end up caring for their parents, keeping vigil for them. These relationships of mutual care permit the essence of the human to develop freely, so that it develops in peace in each person. One knows that one has a secure space-time, stable, constant, where someone keeps vigil while others sleep, or play or study or think or eat or rest, while others grow and develop their nature and personality in peace. The house has been lit up, there is now a family home in existence.

One doesn’t need to be especially keen in order to realize the immense damage that is done to people, and especially to those most dependent on others (children, the sick, the disabled and the aged), when they are subjected to unstable family environments, where little can be taken for granted. What is striking is that contemporary western societies seem to have become blind to this kind of damage. Few people are aware of the total amount of suffering that family instability causes, for example to small children. In the economy of suffering—so beloved of utilitarian and hedonist thinkers—this ocean of suffering seems not to compute. Of course, the stability of families cannot be formally demanded by the law. But it *is* the task of each person, as well as of the public administration, to *foster it*. We are perhaps facing a condition that—as Hans Jonas tell us—is necessary but cannot be formally required. In the case of family stability, it is a necessary condition for the full self-realization of people, as required by their human nature. Without touching on legal demands, much can and should be done in their favour, much more, without a doubt, than what is actually done.

In sum, just as our physico-biological nature makes us vulnerable, our social nature makes us mutually *dependent* and places us, from birth, in a determined community: the family. The same thing that occurred with vulnerability also occurs with dependence: it does not make us less human; rather, it is in fact a part of what being human consists in. From the standpoint of philosophy, in recent decades it has been Alasdair MacIntyre who has best understood and explained this aspect of the human. He has developed a more contemporary formulation of the ancient Aristotelian idea of the human being as a political animal, as a dependent animal:

we depend on others even in order to become autonomous ourselves, and we have to place our autonomy at the service of those who are most dependent.¹⁶

With this last observation we are already penetrating into the third of the aspects of human nature, that which we call spirituality or rationality.¹⁷ We are rational, yes. That includes our intentionality, our capacity to think and to think about ourselves, to use language, to reflect, to contemplate and to weigh the reasons for doing and believing. Because we are rational we ask for and give reasons, we seek explanations and causes, including those that are deepest and most final, we deliberate, we decide voluntarily to go in one direction or another, we consciously value the good, the true and the beautiful. I understand rationality here in a broad and contemporary sense, which includes and integrates emotional intelligence, the contributions of intuition and in general of the “common sense”. Thanks to this spiritual aspect of the human condition we are *autonomous* subjects, we can determine for ourselves the norms and criteria we will follow, and are able in a lucid and free manner to accept (or not) the guidance we receive from others. Our capacity for autonomy, just as Kant saw it, is rooted precisely in this zone of the human.

However, as I indicated above, even the building of a person as an autonomous being requires a place where this can be carried out in peace. The place where the spiritual aspects of the person can be brought into being is the home. In it we learn our mother tongue, through which we awaken to language, and which becomes a crucial tool for the construction of our thought, of our identity and autonomy. It is in the home that we are first recognized as persons; and on the basis of that recognition we construct our self-understanding, self esteem and identity. In the home we receive our first moral instructions, indispensable for developing as autonomous moral reasoners. The home is the domain, the space-time, in which we enter into contact with the culture and traditions that will give rise to our personal development. Many houses, furthermore, in all times and cultures, have opened windows to transcendence. The pagan Romans placed in them their *lares*¹⁸ and *penates*; the Christian dwellers of that house in the Black Forest “have not forgotten the corner”, says Heidegger, “where we place the image of Our Lord”. It is at home that all of this forms, around each person, a kind of permeable cupola from whence each person can grow towards the good, truth and beauty. Now the house is fully lighted up, it is fully a home.

What is interesting is that these three dimensions of the human that light up the house, dimensions which we have approached hurriedly, are not reducible to one another nor are they merely juxtaposed. Their relationship is better described by the idea of mutual differentiation: each one of them completely impregnates the other two and *differentiates* them. We can illustrate this latter idea with an exploration of the act of eating. The more biological aspects of this act, which are also present in the rest of living beings, are

¹⁶ A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, Carus Publishing Company, 1999; A. Marcos, “Antropología de la dependencia”, in Alberto Muñoz (ed.), *El cuidado de las personas dependientes ante la crisis del estado de bienestar*, Tirant Lo Blanch, Valencia, 2013, pp. 21-34; A. Marcos, “Dependientes y racionales: la familia humana”, *Cuadernos de Bioética*, XXIII, 2012 / 1º, pp. 83-95.

¹⁷ Here the term “rationality” translates the Greek term “*logos*”. I understand both in a broad sense, not in the narrow sense inherited from the Rationalists, so that they can be taken also as synonyms of “spirituality”.

¹⁸ This word evidently shares a Latin parent with other terms present in Romance languages, such as “lugar” (place in Spanish), “lar” (home in Portuguese), “lareira” (hearth again in Portuguese), “focolare” (fireplace, hearth in Italian)...

differentiated in the human case by its social aspects. Eating is often a social act carried out in common. In fact, it is one of the acts that most contributes to forming a home and to taking part in social relations. Here the interweaving between the biological and the social is so tight that, it appears, the habit of eating unaccompanied can end up being unhealthy, even promoting the appearance of eating disorders. In addition, everything that surrounds food, its preparation and consumption, is elevated to the plane of culture thanks to culinary, gastronomic and dietetic wisdom, as well as to multiple traditions and ceremonies that in each epoch and country surround the simple act of eating. Here the spiritual facet of the human appears clearly. And in many homes, equally, this act is preceded by the blessing of the table, i.e. of the food that occupies the centre and of the persons that are sitting around it, looking at each other and speaking to one another. The blessing brings the spiritual dimension into the same biological and social act through the recognition of both the food and the company of others as grace or gift. Therefore the lighted house is and should be at the same time—and inseparably—a space-time for our biological, social and spiritual development.

Allow me to conclude this section with the same verses that close—and open!—*The Lighted House*:

The next day,
—today—
arriving at my house—#34 Altamirano—it was night,
who cares for you? tell me; it wasn't raining;
the sky was clear;
[...]
and on looking upwards,
I saw illuminated, working, radiant, stellar,
the windows,
—yes, all the windows—;
Thank you, Lord, the house is lighted.

4. The Lighted Houses

The characteristics that I have attributed to the house and to the home can be found in various entities, which, in justice, could receive the same denomination. I refer here to three of them: the Universe, the Earth and the person. The Universe as a whole, if we pay attention to the so-called anthropic principle, would be the first house for the human home. It can't be said that it is exactly a warm place to stay, but at least it offers us a background temperature of around three degrees Kelvin. In addition, it maintains certain universal constants that appear to be welcoming of life. If the Cosmos saves us from some harmful environment, it might possibly be from pure chaos, as the ancient cosmogonies suggest, from Hesiod to the Pythagoreans.

The Earth is also a house for humanity. The term from classic Greek for house was *oikos*. That word is very present today in our vocabulary, through the word *ecology*. On that basis, the idea of the Earth as house and home to the great human family is today almost a truism. The mass of the Earth keeps us in the habitable zone of the solar system. The Earth's atmosphere protects us from the outer space, providing us with a liveable median temperature, acting as a

shield against impacts of undesirable matter and radiation. It functions as a filter, in the same way that windows do. It allows light and heat to pass in appropriate amounts and allows just the right dose of radiation to escape back to space.

I describe the characteristics of the Universe and of the Earth as a fact, a fact that suggests an orientation or direction. But it's not necessary to discuss the question of teleology here. It might be that the Universe and the Earth have been made for human life, or perhaps not. In any case, it is a fact that they are habitable and that we can make them into our home. Humans can do little about the constants of the Universe. Nevertheless, we can act—and we do so constantly—on Earth's conditions of habitability. At least since the Neolithic, human beings have transformed their terrestrial environment. Today, our capacity of acting on it is quite considerable. With this power our responsibility has also grown, as Hans Jonas has taught.¹⁹ One might say that we are now the caretakers, at least in certain aspects, of the house that has been granted to all members of the human family, which was waiting for us even before our arrival. We, the human family, are responsible for this house continuing to be a true intergenerational home, for its being a more *lighted house* every day, or, on the contrary, for extinguishing its light.

Now we come, finally, to the person him or herself: can a person be a house for another? This idea was suggested in a poetic key in the following verses of Rosales:

“Perhaps we are still within one another”,
and it might be that we dwell in that house of our infancy
[...]
and that house was always alive
[...]
with that mother's joy with windows
[...]
that her hands have been the walls of the first house we had”²⁰.

We could leave this here, as a poetic image. But I would also like to work on this idea from the philosophical point of view. In fact, the first space we live in, within which each of us came into the world, is another person: our mother. The mother's womb is the clearest illustration of an opening space so that in it a human being can grow freely and in peace according to his or her own nature. It is a space that cares for an essence, that leaves a being in its own essence, or at least that's how it should be. The mother's womb forms a protective enclosure and at the same time opens paths of communication between what it bears in its interior and the external world. Whoever speaks of the mother's womb, speaks of the entire body of the mother, which completely reconfigures itself in order to take care of a new life. And whoever speaks of the body, speaks of—while avoiding all dualism—the person. In addition, beyond the event of birth, parents—fathers and mothers—protect their newborn children with their hands, they give them warmth with their bodies, they separate them from exposure to Nature's hostile side, filtering everything that might possibly touch them, giving them—in a

¹⁹ H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984.

²⁰ L. Rosales, *Rimas y La Casa Encendida*, Espasa-Calpe, Madrid, 1979, p. 185-188. My translation.

physico-biological, social and spiritual sense—the stability, constancy and security that they need. Their parents are their homes.

We can now revisit the idea that the first and only house that we dwell in is the house of one's infancy. This is true in a certain sense: it is the only place we dwell without being dwelled in. One is born and lives in a house, in the best of cases in a home, and that is the home of one's infancy, the house of one's parents, a house that to a large degree *is* one's parents. When people gain more autonomy they abandon that house in order to become houses themselves. We pass, therefore, from *dwelling* in a house to *being* a house in which others can dwell. Perhaps we only attain to dwelling, in its full and original sense, in the house of our infancy, since in it the harshness of the world is unable to reach us, no serious problems worry us, in it we are able to sleep, play and grow in peace and freedom. Afterwards we, now autonomous, lose that position. We are no longer care-free. We will have to expose ourselves to word's harshness in order to give protection and warmth to others. Even though we reside in an edifice, we will have to build the roof with our hands, or else pay for it with our work time. We can thus understand the nostalgia for our parents' home that sometimes causes us to shudder. But that change, from dwelling to being dwelled in, is in reality something positive; it is what the process of maturation, the development of a human being, consists in. In more abstract and philosophical terms, we say that we depend on others—especially on our family—in order to become autonomous persons, and that our autonomy begins to make sense when it is placed at the service and care of those who depend on us. In more poetic terms we would say that each person must not just be a house for those that depend on him or her, but also a home, a lighted house.

The idea that a person can be a house for others immediately reveals its theological dimension, since in the tradition of Christian thought God has having personal nature. The paternal house here refers not just to the house of one's human parents, but also, and perhaps originally, to the *house of the Father*.²¹ If the house of our infancy awakens a certain *nostalgia* for the past, the house of the Father instead produces a *longing* that looks to the future and to a definitive home. The poetic version of this notion can be found in some verses of the Spanish intellectual Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), verses that serve as an epitaph upon the tomb of the former Rector of the University of Salamanca:

Wrap me, eternal Father, in your breast,
mysterious home.²²

Here the suggestion of an interior appears—"wrap me"—perhaps without any exterior, without any possible harshness outside, since it encompasses within itself the entirety of what exists. Let us recall, further, the temporal structure that Julián Marías attributes to the house: "for now always". Thus, in the house of the "eternal Father" that *always* ceases to be *for now*. The first verse evokes, then, a place for dwelling forever in peace and freedom. The house of the Father is a home, yes, it is, however, a "mysterious home" indeed.

²¹ "In my Father's house are many rooms"—we read in *John* 14:2 [RSV]— "if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?". See also M. O'Rourke Boyle, *Divine Domesticity*, Brill, Leiden, 1997.

²² My translation.

5. Conclusions

We have been asking about the ontology of the home. In order to attempt a response I have sought help—on the shoulders of giants!—in the philosophical ideas of Heidegger and Julián Marías, as well as in the literary images of Pindar, Tolstoy, Hölderlin, Szymborska, Rosales and Unamuno. We have discovered that a home is a *lighted house*, i.e. a place, a space for caring for the human. The home has a particular structure in the dimensions of the spatial, temporal and functional. It is *within but open*, it is *always for now* and is *care for the human*. It is the place for the free and peaceful actualization of the human. The human refers here to *human nature* in general and to the individual form of each *person*.²³ When we deepen our inquiry into these two ideas—human nature and person—we obtain clearer and more precise indications about what a home is and should be. Human nature includes at least three aspects, which we can know by abstraction, but which are interwoven, in a state of mutual differentiation, in each concrete person. These three aspects are the physico-biological, which implies vulnerability, the social, which implies mutual dependency, and the spiritual, which implies personal autonomy. A home should be a space-time of care, in which each person can develop these three aspects in peace: with health, surrounded by love and familial stability, and with a spiritual openness toward the good, the true and the beautiful.

This ontological inquiry, finally, has suggested other possible avenues of philosophical research that I will merely mention here: the home can be thought of also in connection with cosmology, with ecological wisdom, with the anthropology of the person and with theology.

²³ The Aristotelian tradition admits the existence of the individual form. I have discussed this issue extensively in A. Marcos, "Towards a Science of the Individual: the Aristotelian search for scientific knowledge of individual entities", *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 35: 73-89, Cambridge 2004; A. Marcos, *Postmodern Aristotle*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, UK, 2012.