

CHAPTER 8

As Beings, Children Need to Be at Home

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Abstract: Building upon the philosophical insights of Martin Heidegger and Gaston Bachelard, this chapter delves into the essence of what it truly means for human beings to have a home and inhabit it. It explores how this understanding can shed light on the experiences of children who are removed from their homes and transferred between various child welfare institutions. In conclusion, the chapter advocates for a humanistic approach that recognises the existential meaning of having a home. By embracing this perspective, the author argues, we can develop a practice that is better suited to providing the necessary support for children who can no longer live in their childhood homes.

Keywords: home, existential meaning, child protection, poetry

Introduction

In June 2014, a fifteen-year-old girl named Ida intentionally set fire to the child welfare institution where she lived, resulting in its complete destruction. Three years later, in July 2017, another fifteen-year-old girl named Stine fatally stabbed a young woman at a shopping centre in southern Norway. Both girls were under the care of Norwegian child welfare services and both had experienced frequent transitions between various institutions before the tragic incidents. Ida had lived in six different institutions from January to June 2014, while Stine had been moved eleven times among different institutions from January to July 2017.

The aim of this chapter

The tragic incidents had a profound impact on both child welfare professionals and the wider public in Norway, raising questions about the operation of the child welfare system. In response to these concerns, official reports were commissioned to investigate underlying causes and extract lessons for child welfare services (County Governors in Hordaland, Rogaland and Troms, 2016; County Governor in Aust and Vest Agder, 2018). These reports, authored by the regional county governors responsible for the areas where the girls resided, provided a comprehensive examination of various aspects of the girls' care situations. They assessed factors such as the adequacy of care provided, the girls' opportunities for participation, the use of coercive measures, documentation procedures, governance structures and the effectiveness of leadership. The findings from these investigations ultimately revealed that Ida and Stine had not received proper care. Several contributing factors were identified. These factors included disregard for the girls' legal rights, the absence of well-established routines, incomplete diagnoses and deficiencies in the treatment approaches employed.

The aim of this chapter is to offer an alternative perspective on the underlying causes of the tragic incidents. Based on the girls' frequent transitions between various institutions, I will explore what it truly means for human beings to have a home and inhabit it. In this exploration I will turn to the phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions, with a particular emphasis on the inseparable relationship between individuals and the places they inhabit. This perspective challenges the idea of place as merely a physical location or a material backdrop for social interactions. Instead, it asserts that

places form the very foundation upon which human existence takes shape. Consequently, my focus lies in understanding the ontological significance of having a home, transcending mere empirical considerations.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section starts with a phenomenological exploration of the intricate relationship between humans and their environment, drawing on insights from the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger emphasises that the world is more than just a collection of objects at our disposal; instead, it is a complex network of relationships that imbue our existence with meaning.

The second part delves into how children relate to a particular place: their childhood home. Here, I draw upon the thoughts of the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, who argues that the essence of human existence lies in the feeling of being 'at home' and that children develop their self-understanding and perception of the world through their experiences, memories and use of physical spaces within the places they inhabit.

Both Heidegger and Bachelard have faced criticism for presenting an idealised and nostalgic view of home that might not fully capture the harsh realities faced by many individuals, including children like Ida and Stine. However, the focus of this chapter does not centre on that critique. Instead, my aim is to use Heidegger's and Bachelard's insights to gain a deeper understanding of the potential consequences of the many transitions the two girls experienced, shedding light on why their lives took such tragic turns.

In the third part of this chapter, my inquiry takes a further step by incorporating the concept of 'non-places' from the French anthropologist Marc Augé (1995) and the concept of 'unhomeliness' from Heidegger (2010). Augé's term 'non-places' refers to transitional spaces like shopping malls, supermarkets, petrol stations and airports. Heidegger's notion of 'unhomeliness' refers to the disorientation and anxiety that can arise from losing connection with a stable and familiar place. Together, these concepts help me to further examine the implications of Ida's and Stine's frequent transitions and to understand why setting one's residence on fire, and killing another person with a knife, might have been experienced as the only possible way to act.

Ida and Stine are not the only children in the Norwegian child welfare system who have gone through numerous transitions. According to a report by the Norwegian Ombudsperson for Children in 2020, many children and adolescents within the child welfare system experience this.

An investigation conducted by the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* revealed that from 2020 to 2021, a total of 261 children living in child welfare institutions were moved 2,000 times. On average, these children stayed at each location for only 60 days (Moland, 2022). In the final part of this chapter, I delve into the practical ramifications of my analysis and how it can impact the work of child welfare services towards *all* children who can no longer live in their homes. This discussion highlights the necessity for a shift towards a more humanistic approach in child welfare services, one that recognises the existential aspects of children's lives. In this way, the article contributes to a broader discussion that is taking place within Nordic welfare research, focusing on the imperative need to rehumanise health and social services (Hansen et al., 2023; Kroken, 2018).

Being always entails being somewhere

What, then, does 'place' mean on an existential level, and why do I claim that this concept holds such a fundamental significance in our understanding of what it means for human beings to have a home and inhabit it?

In Heidegger's philosophy, a central question is what it means for humans to exist and how the fact that we are 'here' matters to us. In one of his major works, *Sein und Zeit (Being and Time)*, first published in 1927, Heidegger (2010) argues that human beings are special kinds of beings in that they have a relation to their own existence. They are the only beings that ask the fundamental ontological question of what it means to be. He refers to this special mode of existence as 'Dasein', or 'being there'. In doing so, he indicates that there is a relationship between being and place.

For Heidegger (2010), the concept of being is always intertwined with our presence in a specific location. In our daily lives, we exist in an environment that includes not only ourselves but also other people and material objects. It is through an active engagement and involvement with these human and non-human elements that we interpret and understand ourselves. It is crucial to note that Heidegger's perspective goes beyond mere physical and mechanical interactions. It includes our ability to give meaning to the world around us. According to Heidegger, places do not exist independently; they gain significance through our interactions with them. This relationship is reciprocal. Our subjectivity is not formed before encountering a place; rather, it is shaped by the places we engage with (Malpas, 2018). This implies that humans and places are inseparable,

mutually defining each other. We do not first have a subject that perceives certain features of the world in terms of the idea of place; instead, the structure of our subjectivity is revealed through the structure of place.

Heidegger argues that a fundamental characteristic of human existence is our openness and willingness to be moulded by our surroundings. It is through this openness that we allow the world to have an impact on us. In his influential essay *Bauen Wohnen Denken (Building Dwelling Thinking)*, first published in 1951, he introduces the concept of 'dwelling' to shed light on the unique way humans exist in the world (1971). For Heidegger, dwelling is not just passive occupation of physical spaces. It represents a way of being characterised by a deep sense of rootedness and belonging, where individuals authentically feel 'at home' in their own existence (Heidegger, 1971). Dwelling entails a deep sensitivity to the distinctive characteristics of our environment. It involves an appreciation for the landscape, the materials used in construction and the cultural and historical contexts that shape our living spaces. It also allows us to connect the past with the present, carrying forward our experiences, traditions and personal histories into our contemporary lives.

According to Heidegger, we are used to think that building leads to dwelling; that we build a house or a shelter to have a place in which to dwell. According to this view, dwelling is the goal and building is the means to achieve it. Heidegger disagrees with this idea. As humans we *must* dwell because dwelling is inherent to our nature, and in order to dwell, we engage in the act of building. Therefore, building is not just a way to reach dwelling; building is dwelling itself. We do not dwell because we have built something; instead, we build because we already dwell (Heidegger, 1971, pp. 146–148). To build and to dwell are mutually contingent on each other. This can, for instance, be observed in children's intuitive engagement in building huts, crafting shelters or fashioning homes for their dolls or teddy bears. They instinctively understand how to establish secure and comfortable spaces, even though no one has explicitly told them what dwelling entails.

To be well is to be at home

Perhaps nowhere is the profound connection between human existence and place more vividly expressed than in Bachelard's work *La poétique de l'espace (The Poetics of Space)*, first published in 1958. In this book, Bachelard

(2014) explores the significance of our childhood home in shaping our self-awareness and how we perceive the world. Bachelard (2014) argues that the childhood home consistently represents something positive. To him, the feeling of being at home symbolises a state of existential well-being, something we continually seek. 'Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house.' (Bachelard, 2014, p. 29).

Bachelard's primary focus is on the existential significance of the tangible elements in our immediate surroundings — the things within a human being's direct environment. He delves into concrete elements within our homes, like the kitchen, bedroom, drawers and cupboards. He emphasises that our experiences in these spaces are deeply connected to our physical presence and introduces the concept of 'reverberation' to underline that there is a fluid movement between individuals and their homes. The spaces of the house are in us as much as we are in them.

At the heart of Bachelard's (2014) understanding of the existential significance of home is the human capacity to create poetic images of our personal and intimate spaces. He believes that humans possess a genuine gift for imagination, allowing us to envision things beyond what we immediately perceive. Bachelard suggests that daydreaming is our way of participating in this meaning-making process. He views daydreaming as an interpretive act that weaves together our past, present and future experiences. It is an imaginative process that operates at a level that precedes conscious thought, a state Bachelard calls 'naive consciousness'. Unlike simple sensory perception, daydreaming is a dynamic and creative act. It does not just replicate what our senses perceive; instead, it actively transforms our initial sensory images, allowing them to evolve and change. Daydreaming in this way provides a source of continuity that links us to the world. So instead of thinking of our understanding of ourselves and our personal history as a straightforward timeline, Bachelard encourages us to consider that our memories are deeply intertwined with the spaces we have inhabited, just as much as they are linked to the passage of time.

Bachelard (2014) assigns a specific significance to our first home. It is our initial connection to the world. It leaves profound emotional imprints on us, regardless of our future experiences. We continue to carry the memories of being the child who sought refuge in the attic or daydreamed in the quiet corners of this home. These memories offer a sense of continuity, grounding our sense of self in the concept of the 'absolute here'.

As beings, Ida and Stine need to be at home

So, according to Heidegger and Bachelard, having a home and inhabiting it is more than just having somewhere to reside. It involves a profound sense of belonging to a space wherein other people, the things in our immediate surroundings, and past and present experiences bring each other into being in creative and transformative processes which transcend time.

Drawing upon Bachelard, sociologist Ann Game (2001) characterises the feeling of being 'at home' as moments where one thinks, 'This is it', 'This is right', or 'This is what I have always known.' Game describes how she encounters such moments, among others, when she is running into the waves of the ocean, feeling the salty spray on her face and the sand between her toes. She describes a profound state of losing herself in these experiences, finding a sense of belonging and a feeling of 'coming home.' Game contends that this feeling extends beyond a mere repetition of past experiences with sea and sand; instead, it bears a deep connection to her childhood. It represents a profound merging of past and present, a harmonious blend of 'I know this already' and 'this feels new.' So these experiences evoke a dual sense of now and then, old and new, all at once. In feeling 'this is right', she experiences a sense of being in connection with the world. 'I belong, my body is comfortable here, it fits.'

What Game describes here is an experience she does not have a conscious or intellectual understanding of, but rather an experience on a deep, instinctive level. Something familiar unfolds for her, but not like a memory in the usual sense. It seems to be something more universally human. This raises the question: How can her vivid description help us to grasp the experiences of children who are uprooted from their homes — from the places that give them the feeling of 'this is right' — and moved between different institutions the way Ida and Stine were?

In his book *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* from 1995, Augé introduces the term 'non-places' to describe transient spaces we merely pass through while moving from one destination to another. These spaces include, for instance, airports, train stations and shopping malls. They are designed for specific functions such as transportation or commercial services and lack that sense of permanence and meaningful interaction Game describes. In these spaces, people are not seen as unique individual subjects but as representatives

of generic categories, like travellers or consumers. Thus, non-places typically do not leave any lasting impression on us, and we are not expected to leave an impact on them. According to Augé, this experience contributes to social and cultural alienation, disconnecting individuals from their environment and from each other, ultimately rendering these places uninhabitable.

A clear example of non-places can be found in multinational chain establishments like restaurants, supermarkets, offices and hotels. These locations are practically identical whether they are in the northern or southern hemisphere, or in the east or west. As a result, being in a shopping mall in Oslo can feel almost indistinguishable from being in one in London, Beijing or Dubai. We find the same stores, the same products and the same architecture. The experience of being there is almost like an experience of being nowhere.

For the majority of us, non-places are simply transient areas we pass through on our way from one meaningful place to another, such as the spaces between our workplaces and homes. However, for Ida and Stine the constant shifting between various institutions appears as an endless cycle of being moved from one non-place to another. They were denied the chance to forge meaningful bonds with their surroundings; to establish places conducive to daydreaming and dwelling. Consequently, this continuous displacement can be regarded not merely as a lack of proper care, as indicated in the reports by the county governors, but also as a violation of these girls' humanity.

Heidegger (2010) explains how attempting to dwell in uninhabitable spaces can lead to a state of existential disorientation, which manifests in a feeling of unhomeliness. It is a feeling that emerges when we lose the deep connection we once had with the world and become disconnected from our own existence within it. It results in a breakdown of meaning that gives us a fundamental sense that the world is an inhospitable place, leaving us with an existential emptiness — a feeling of not truly belonging (Svenaesus, 2005). Perhaps setting one's residence on fire and taking another person's life with a knife was the only possible way for Ida and Stine to express this feeling? Two months before Stine tragically stabbed the young woman, she expressed her struggle in a letter to the County Governor in Agder, stating, 'The Child Welfare Service allows me to live a life that I obviously cannot cope with' (County Governor in Aust and Vest Agder, 2018, p. 5).

After the incident, she wrote another letter to the County Governor, describing the past year as extremely exhausting (p. 6).

An ethical demand

In Heidegger's and Bachelard's understandings of what it truly means for us to have a home and inhabit it, an ethical demand emerges: Those responsible for the well-being of children and young people who cannot stay in their homes due to risks, neglect, abuse or exposure to parental mistreatment should strive to offer more than just a safe place. They should genuinely try to understand and acknowledge that moving these children from their homes entails more than disrupting the children's relations with their parents and friends; it also entails disrupting their connection to the places where they find their existential stability. The question that naturally arises is: How can child welfare professionals respond to this demand in a way that shields these children from encountering a feeling of not having a place in the world where they truly belong — similar to what Ida and Stine might have felt?

In *Being and Time* (2010), Heidegger describes three fundamentally distinct modes of being in the world. The first he terms 'readiness-to-hand'. This involves an objective and distant relationship with the world, observing and describing it from an external perspective, with everything appearing detached from its context. The second is labelled 'present-at-hand'. This relates to a pragmatic and engaged interaction with the world, where things and the world are observed from a concrete and practical standpoint. Both modes involve a connection to the environment where the world and its constituents are perceived as if they were mere objects.

The third mode is termed 'presence'. For Heidegger, this forms a foundation upon which all other thinking must begin. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Heidegger contends that life encompasses more than just objective facts, and it is only through 'presence' we can get access to this. Thus, it is only from this mode that it is possible for child welfare professionals to acknowledge and answer the ethical demand.

In the last section of this chapter, I will argue that the Norwegian child welfare system is underpinned by an epistemological framework that gives priority to the modes of being that Heidegger terms 'readiness-to-hand' and 'present-at-hand', not the mode of 'presence'. This makes it hard for child welfare professionals to perceive and respond to the ethical demand.

A need for an existential turn

In recent decades, the Norwegian welfare state has seen an organisational reform that has placed a greater emphasis on evidence-based methods and principles associated with New Public Management. This reform is part of a global trend aimed at improving the quality of interventions by applying scientific methods and standardised programmes (Almklov et al., 2017). A central objective of this reform is to encourage professionals to base their actions as closely as possible on objective and reliable knowledge (Ekeland, 2004). In the context of Norwegian child welfare services, these changes are often framed as part of a modernisation effort with the aim of establishing a knowledge-based child protection system (Lichtwarck & Clifford, 2010). Currently, there is a widespread belief that interventions should be firmly rooted in research-based knowledge which has been proven to have positive outcomes (Proposition to the Storting (bill) 106 L, 2012–2013; Christiansen, 2015). The Norwegian Government has taken several steps to enhance professional competence in this regard, emphasising the importance of more knowledge for better child protection through a competency strategy for municipal child welfare services spanning the period from 2018 to 2024 (The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs, 2018).

While evidence-based thinking offers a valuable approach for gaining insight into specific aspects of the lives of children in child welfare services—those that can be externally observed and described—it also embodies an epistemological perspective that tends to lead child welfare professionals to perceive the children and their environments as mere objects. In this way the perspective tends to obscure the genuine essence of the children's lives, those aspects that can only be accessed through the mode of 'presence'.

Some examples of this are the reports written by the county governors regarding the cases of Ida and Stine. As discussed earlier in this chapter, they primarily emphasise observable and describable aspects of the girls' care situations, such as the use of coercive measures, documentation procedures, governance structures and the effectiveness of leadership. Another example is the focus in the report authored by Barnevernsinstitusjonsutvalget [Norwegian Child Welfare Institution Committee], which was appointed by the Norwegian Government in June 2022 in response to various reports indicating unsatisfactory conditions for children and youth residing in

child welfare institutions. While the committee comprises members from diverse professions, including social work, medicine, sociology, law, economics, and psychology, it notably lacks representation from the humanities, such as theology or philosophy. The central focuses of the report are the needs for professional guidelines, individual plans, regular supervision, assessment, adequate staffing, increased expertise, management resources, and more healthcare assistance (NOU 2023:24).

In Heidegger's terms, both the reports from the county governors and the child welfare institution committee appear to be characterised by the modes of 'readiness-to-hand' and 'present-at-hand'. There seems to be a significant lack of consideration for the crucial issue of how the displacement of children from familiar places in their homes affects their existential well-being. This raises the question of how child welfare professionals, even while operating within the constraints of the modes of 'readiness-to-hand' and 'present-at-hand', can nurture the mode of 'presence' essential to comprehending and responding to the ethical demand. In my concluding discussion, I will suggest that it might be possible to do so by adding the language of poetry into the professional's work.

Poetry as a way to the mode of 'presence'

In the anthology *Omsorgsforståelser. Mellom poesi, profesjon og politikk* (Kroken, 2018), the authors argue that to truly understand the lives of people who are in vulnerable life situations, professionals need to look beyond what is usually considered relevant in their work. They also emphasise that such understanding requires professionals to personally engage with the people they are helping and that fictional literature and poetry can be powerful tools in this approach. To be able to do this, professionals must first seek to understand the fundamental existential aspects within their own lives. A poetic language carries within it the potential for a more direct connection to our experiences than scientific or specialised language can provide.

Bachelard (2014) also argues that poetry has the power to embody those aspects of people's lives which elude science. Poetry opens a realm of day-dreaming where we can get access to the deeper layers of our being. This enables us to transcend the limitations of rational language. Poetry has the power to awaken our imaginations, reconnect us with the profound meanings and experiences associated with our homes and provide a more

intimate relationship with our surroundings. According to Bachelard (2014, p. 28), it is only through poems that ‘the ultimate poetic depth of the space of the house’ is made available to us.

In Bachelard’s view (2014), authentic poetry never merely translates life: instead, it involves a process of creation, of bringing something new into existence. This understanding is connected to the ancient Greek understanding of poesy. Aristotle’s *Poetics* (1996) is an ancient text, over 2,000 years old, that delves into the nature and methods of poetry. While Bachelard discusses daydreaming and imagination, Aristotle, who lived from 384 to 322 BC, focuses on imitation. He begins *Poetics* by asserting that all forms of poetry fundamentally entail imitation. He believes that through the imitation of various aspects of life, both our own and others, we can gain a deeper insight into fundamental aspects of human life.

Aristotle’s primary focus is on tragedy as a form of poetry. Within his explanation of tragedy, four key concepts are essential. First, there is ‘mimesis’, which means imitation. Aristotle argues that tragedies imitate not people, but actions, life events, happiness and sadness. The second concept is ‘peripeteia’, meaning reversal. Tragedies are marked by a significant plot change, completely altering the situation. Those who watch, hear or read a tragedy see the world in a new way. Aristotle suggests that this change leads from ignorance to knowledge. The reason for this change is ‘anagnorisis’, which means recognition. In these imitations, we recognise universal human experiences that also relate to our lives. We identify the general within the specific, which stirs our emotions. Reversal and recognition are the core elements of tragedy’s structure and are its most impactful techniques. The last central idea is ‘catharsis’, meaning purification. Through the emotions triggered by tragedy, we learn something fundamental about what it means to be human.

Bachelard also employs poetic imagery in his own writing. In *The poetics of Space*, for instance, he draws comparisons between the house and ‘nests’ and ‘shells’ (2014). Game (2001, p. 232) describes how these images resonate in her. She expresses that Bachelard’s images evoke a childlike joy. Every time she reads him, she feels the urge to exclaim, ‘Yes, that is it! I had not seen that before, now I understand. Now I get it. Now I get what I have always known, reliving it in a manner that is new’. It is like reliving it in a fresh way. ‘His words take root in me, they grow, and they nurture my understanding.’

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to delve into the question of what it fundamentally means for human beings to have a home and inhabit it, and to examine how this can give a better understanding of the experiences of children who are displaced from their homes and transferred between various child welfare institutions.

In conclusion, addressing the existential dimensions of having a home and inhabiting it is essential for child welfare systems to provide children who are uprooted from their homes with the support they need to thrive. Uncovering and understanding these existential dimensions of home requires a paradigm shift in the language and approach used within the child welfare system. This does not diminish the importance of safeguarding children's rights, establishing routines and ensuring proper care and treatment, as highlighted in the reports from the county governors in Agder and Rogaland and the report from the child welfare institution committee. However, it underscores the existence of a deeper, existential dimension in children's lives that must be addressed first.

Author biography

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