

Unsettling Thought: An alternative to sedentary concepts and a defence of Frodo

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Abstract

In the last issue of *Existential Analysis*, Helen Hayes offers an interesting exploration of ‘migration, settlement and the meanings of home’ (2007: 2-16). Her paper provides a much-needed additional perspective to the ideas offered in my own article ‘Existential Migration’ (Madison, 2006). Hayes’ references to my paper demonstrate the need for further elaboration and clarification in my original article and I take the opportunity here to offer some of that. I also want to suggest that there is a conventional settled-centric bias inherent in our understanding of migration but more so, to suggest that our thinking in general is too ‘settled’. I propose that it might be valuable to develop thinking based upon an alternative *migratory* use of concepts: *unsettled thinking*.

Keywords: Home, Migration, Existential, Phenomenological, Cross-cultural, Heidegger, Conceptual Development, Alienation, Belonging, Unheimlich, Acculturation

Introduction

Extracting journal articles from large dissertation projects necessitates simplification. Such simplification can amount to a distortion of ideas that were more fully worked out in 40,000 words than in a massively abridged 5,000-word journal article. Hayes’ comments on my paper ‘Existential Migration’ re-awaken my frustration at not being able to simplify without distortion and misunderstanding. I will take this opportunity to clarify aspects of my previous article but would like to commence by pointing out that there is deep compatibility between the findings of our two research projects, although we go on to use these findings in quite different ways. There are various possible explanations for the different directions our projects take. It is possible that our co-researchers actually constitute distinct groups of people or that they are exhibiting distinct processes. It is likely that our pre-existing theoretical inclinations skew how we understand what we heard during our interviews. And, I suspect most likely, our forms of analysis reveal much about where the two of us stand personally in relation to these deep and vexing issues of home and homelessness. However, I need also to say that

Hayes gives me too much credit for having reached concrete conclusions when in fact I worked hard to remain uncertain and inconclusive regarding the various meanings of leaving one's home to become a foreigner. In the following paper I try to emphasise what I see as worthwhile in this uncertainty while illustrating what troubles me about theoretical stage models and the slightly oppressive move from description to value-laden 'knowledge'.

Existential Migration is a self-defined and incomplete process

Hayes says that I 'take the position' that emphasises the 'need to leave home in order to claim one's freedom' (Hayes, 2007:4). Although this is not a misunderstanding of my research findings, it allows me to reassert some of the complexity of the research. Firstly, to 'take a position' sounds arbitrary. The co-researchers I worked with were exploring their lived experience and as such were more '*discovering*' than '*positioning*' themselves. Likewise, I was not taking a position but rather trying to understand various experiences which I later grouped under the process label 'existential migration'. If it 'is' anything, *existential migration* is a process, one that can be *self-ascribed* by anyone at any time, a process that can arise unbidden and a process that can ebb away, replaced by other processes including the process that Hayes refers to as 'settling'. My best guess is that there are some people predisposed to this process and perhaps some for whom the process is an overriding way of being in the world. However, I would also guess that this process remains a potential for every human being, whether expressed or not, and there would be innumerable modes of expressing this process (even while 'settled').

In relation to leaving home, Hayes says '... this action itself permits the subsequent development of alternative meanings of home' (ibid:4). I would agree that this is inevitably the case; life choices always occur into myriad implicitly ongoing processes, therefore leaving home necessarily elaborates the meaning of home in innumerable idiosyncratic ways, not just one. Home can become associated with an experience of settlement, as is emphasised by Hayes. But it can also become intertwined with experiences of homelessness and perpetual migration. I suspect that some of these alternative meanings are liveable and others turn out to be quite problematic, depending upon the individual, but they are all still alternatives. The development of 'alternative meanings' cannot be assumed to be only towards 'settlement', an uncomplicated or

wholly positive development, and I can see no reason why any particular trajectory of development should be favoured over others.

The ‘Settling’ bias

Hayes and I both quote from Rapport and Dawson (1998), anthropologists who have uniquely interrogated the territory of migration and home. She also refers to Brah (1996), to whom she ascribes the point of view that ‘diaspora is as much about settlement as it is about dislocation’ and that ‘the task facing diasporic people is precisely the struggle to attain some sense of being at home amidst the uncertainties of displacement’ (c.f. Hayes, 2007:5). Rapport and Dawson on the one hand, and Brah on the other, illustrate the diametrically opposed responses to the question of ‘home’ after migration – Brah, and perhaps Hayes, reify home and settlement as the necessary ‘task’ for humans on the move, while Rapport and Dawson represent a view that emphasises the positive personal effects of migration. We must be cautious about deciding *for others* what their ‘task’ or ‘challenge’ *should be*. Why suggest that ‘development’ needs to be in the direction of ‘settlement’ (whatever that actually turns out to be) or ‘full awareness’ (whatever that actually turns out to be)? Some individuals may find it possible or preferable to develop in novel and intricate ways that we cannot predict and that do not fall neatly into our preconceptions.

Hayes emphasises important distinctions in this whole phenomenon by using the terms ‘home as bad faith’ and ‘home as paradox’ (Ibid:5). However, these terms imply inherent value judgements or at the very least incorporate an unacknowledged settled-centric bias. It was not clear how the co-researcher excerpts in Hayes’ paper support the hierarchical stage model she formulates, nor was there a rationale why the descriptions of each stage could not be reversed, with ‘perpetual migration and homelessness’ belonging to the Religious or Ethical Sphere and ‘settlement’ or ‘re-settlement’ ascribed to the ‘superficial’ Aesthetic Sphere. I suspect that we all struggle with implicit cultural biases in favour of settlement and end up importing this assumption into our theorising; the psychoanalytic writing on migration certainly exhibits this proclivity (see Grinberg and Grinberg, 1989). Phenomenological attention to these points may carry both Hayes and myself further along in our attempts to understand afresh the influence of migration on experiences of home.

Method determines what comes out

It is regrettable that Hayes was unable to detail her methodology as I suspect some of our different epistemological and ontological assumptions would be evident in our methodological choices. For example, I wanted my ‘method’ to be ‘a way of being’ that would encourage the interview dialogue to follow the implicit intricacy of experience as it unfolded into new understandings moment by moment. This emphasis is informed by the experiential philosophy of Eugene Gendlin (1973; 1977; 1981; 1995) and its application to phenomenological method (Todres, 2004; 2005). Rather than causal explanations or developmental patterns, I was seeking ‘process unconcealment’ - the uncovering of some inherent processes of existence that may have been eclipsed by conventional psychological assumptions and adopted theories of self and other.

My methodology was consistent with the Canadian phenomenologist Max van Manen, who writes in *Researching Lived Experience* (2001), ‘The things we are trying to describe or interpret are not really things at all – our actual experiences are literally “nothing”. And yet, we seem to create some-thing when we use language in human science inquiry’ (xviii). He suggests that one’s research method should be in harmony with one’s being; there is a personal ‘tonal context’ underlying one’s methodology that acts as a foundational felt sense; guiding decisions regarding the approach and the ways of understanding what arises from that approach.

Phenomenology, from my view, is like therapy. It is an expression both of humility and depth. Like therapy, phenomenology is also a transitory exploration of process, a series of migratory understandings rather than settled conclusions. Phenomenological ‘essences’ might be more like waves that arise on the ocean than boxes that we stumble upon in the dark. Language *points to* rather than fixes – there are many ways to ‘point’ at something that flows past, but the pointing itself must be accurate enough to contact what it refers to directly – not just any pointing (or saying) will be meaningful. An experiential shift tells us what makes contact and thus is meaningful and what is not, at any moment. This guided the interviews with my co-researchers in that we valued an experiential ‘carrying forward’, facilitating migratory understanding for the co-researchers and myself.

In my research themes are conceived as ‘somethings’ emerging intricately from ‘no-

thing', confirmed by a felt resonance for the people involved at the various stages (myself, the co-researchers, you as reader). These themes together signify one schema for mapping a moving landscape, a kind of loose and migratory schema revelatory of existence itself. Rather than designing an overarching structure of developmental stages, I presented the most common themes from my study as un-separated threads of an overall process labeled as 'existential migration'. I avoided further abstraction into ascribing stages to this process, directionality, or indications of developmental 'success' or 'failure'. The themes are general enough to hold diverse experiences, facilitating the attempt to nudge something whole and intricate into being, where at the most it is bodily felt and acknowledged, and possibly thereby carried further without being captured. The migratory and unsettled essence of this is apparent. Therefore, the fact that phenomenological insights are not complete, are later added to, contradicted or amended, is expected. Hayes' paper is an excellent example of a shift in emphasis that elaborates our overall understanding.

In my view, a phenomenological text is not meant to proffer conclusions or to abstract predictable developmental life stages, but to lure the reader into a version of the experience that is being explored. In van Manen's own words, '... the reader must become possessed by the allusive power of text – taken, touched, overcome by the addressive effect of its reflective engagement with lived experience' (2002: 238). In this way each reader is empowered to have, at the centre of their understanding, their own actual experience rather than only the author's concepts. This offers the reader a felt responsiveness by which to evaluate, elaborate, and contradict the researcher.

Stage Theories or Process?

We need to look more closely at this convention of setting out stages, phases, and spheres, as evident in Hayes' research. My own view is that each stage or sphere is present in every other; stages as such are illusory and my concern is that when a certain stage is associated with terms like 'ethical' or 'religious' while another stage is referred to as 'aesthetic' (and superficial), an unwelcome prescriptive evaluation enters into our explorations.

The vast majority of research studies on acculturation and psychological difficulties in cross-cultural adaptation (see Baker,1999; or Aronowitz,1984, for a review of studies)

remain couched within notions of generalised stage theories, presupposing a fixed identity colliding with solid environment. Most of these theories do not engage at any depth with notions of ‘self’, ‘identity’, or ‘environment’ but simply presume that coping with foreign cultures causes a seismic fracture in identity, subverting it with self-doubt and insecurity, both of which are seen as problems to be solved.

The Australian historian Peter Read (1996) recounts how sociologists originally developed various theoretical models for how immigrants ‘assimilate’. Such mechanistic models, which detected stages like ‘naturalisation’, ‘absorption’, ‘assimilation’, and ‘acculturation’ were eventually replaced by more sophisticated theories which allowed for individual difference and changing attitudes throughout the whole of life. Immigration theorists now allow that the process of belonging in a new land is much more complex than previously imagined.

Stage theories utilise a third-person ‘spectator’ view to claim generalisable validity for their findings. The felt and evocative first-person narratives of migration are almost entirely absent. The methodological approach I’ve taken seeks to avoid the prescriptive implications of stage theories, which epitomise a sequential order that each individual is expected to recapitulate. ‘Process’ acknowledges the lived intricacies, novelty, and vast diversity of human interaction and therefore offers no universal predictions (not-being-at-home can lapse into being-at-home but also vice versa), while implying that experience remains more than whatever is encapsulated by any theories. ‘Stages’, ‘phases’, and ‘spheres’, appear discrete and discernable within an individual subject, while ‘process’ points to implicit flux that is never comprehensively described, has a unpredictable directionality (not expected to smoothly follow a sequence), and is interactively elaborated by daily situational living. In ‘process’ there is no ‘self’ separate from environmental interaction. The disadvantages of the extensive universalisation of stage theories are apparent in the field of bereavement studies, where such theories of ‘adaptive’ grief stages have been imposed upon idiosyncratic experience, replacing individual meanings with diagnoses of ‘risk factors’, ‘pathological grief’, ‘complicated grief’, and ‘unresolved mourning’¹.

A process perspective does not presuppose which place is ‘home’. An individual may be in an interaction they would label as ‘feeling at home’ or ‘settlement’ for moments or

years, before returning to the homelessness and paradox of existential migration. There is no pre-set chronology, nothing on which to base judgments such as 'healthy' or 'pathological', (including no basis to advocate authenticity) except as experientially self-ascribed. The motivation for migration, including pre-existing values and sensitivities, remains suggestive of one's subsequent experience of 'adaptation' – a person desperately seeking difference likely implies different cross-cultural responses than a person relocating purely for career advancement. Potentially any of us could succumb to, or embark upon, a process of existential migration, either through choice or perhaps increasingly likely as a side effect of international relocation for career advancement. In the most abstract, a process of existential migration occurs when the interaction between person and place allows it, suggests it, demands it. Though even when 'demanded' or 'forced' as in exile, such a process can presumably be resisted by retreat into hominess (or also perhaps into various 'problems in living').

Authenticity

Authenticity is not an outcome; it is a process. What kind of process is being lived rather than what subsequent choice, settled or migratory, is made. Existential migration as I've outlined it in my previous article seems to sustain enhanced possibilities for self-awareness; authenticity arising from confrontation with the alien and the non-ordinary, though this possibility must be chosen. 'Authentic homelessness' may offer the potential for human dwelling in awareness of the unheimlich dimension of existence. In this way, the concept of existential migration clarifies the possibility that 'home' in its conventional sense constitutes true exile from values such as authenticity, awareness, pursuing self-potential, freedom, and valuing the ineffability of existence. One's orienting values determine which process is considered exile (exile from 'home' or exile from 'self') and which is considered 'home' (home as inclusive of 'awareness' or as retreat from 'awareness'). **In terms of existential migration, the suggestion is that we are not-at-home not because we have been exiled *from* home, but rather because we have been exiled *by* home from ourselves.** To be 'settled', likewise, may entail a return to an anaesthetized way of being or it may be an authentic version of settlement. It is unclear which is being revealed in Hayes' research, though the impression is that her co-researchers have experienced a transformation in their experience of home that is similar to the transformation my co-researchers have also experienced, i.e. in the direction of awareness.

Frodo's dilemma

The epilogue of JRR Tolkien's trilogy, *The Return of the King. The Lord of the Rings Part III*. (1967), illustrates a migratory adventure and hero's journey followed not by settlement, but by a subsequent exile from 'home'. The story ends with the return of the main characters to their homeland in the Shire but the primary hero of the story, Frodo, has suffered an injury in the course of his mission to save the world from darkness. Tolkien describes the return to the Shire in sentiments which at once take on a metaphoric tone, evoking comparison with the stories of existential migration. For example, Frodo, in conversation with the wise wizard Gandalf, complains of the wound in his shoulder as they ride towards home, in response Gandalf says,

'Alas! There are some wounds that cannot be wholly cured'.

'I fear it may be so with mine', said Frodo. 'There is no real going back. Though I may come to the Shire, it will not seem the same; for I shall not be the same. I am wounded with knife, sting, and tooth, and a long burden. Where shall I find rest?'

Gandalf did not answer (Ibid:323).

As they near the Shire, one of Frodo's companions remarks on their entry back into familiar lands and how their adventures and former comrades from other lands are already fading from memory as if it was all a dream, to which Frodo responds,

'Not to me', said Frodo. 'To me [returning home] feels more like falling asleep again' (Ibid:333).

There has always been something different about Frodo, for example his intense childhood interest in the worldly adventures recounted by his eccentric uncle. Now, having experienced other lands and his own loss of innocence, Frodo cannot adapt to the genteel life of the Shire. Not that Frodo had lost his love of the place, no, that was as intact for him as it was for his companions. But unlike his companions, Frodo could not stay. Sam, his closest friend settles down and marries. The Shire is the only place he really wants to be, though he still feels a loyalty to follow his 'master' Frodo, and thus feels 'torn in two'. Frodo acknowledges this,

'Poor Sam! It will feel like that, I am afraid', said Frodo. 'But you will be healed. You were meant to be solid and whole and you will be' (Ibid:372). Sam does not understand Frodo's need to leave, *'I thought that you were going to enjoy the Shire, too, for years and years, after all you have done' (Ibid: 375-6).* Frodo replies, *'I thought so too, once. But I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to*

give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them... (Ibid:376).

Frodo rides off with Gandalf and Sam returns to his wife, children, and home, where the fire is lit and the evening meal prepared. The combination of powerful themes in Tolkien's opus lends it to almost inexhaustible various readings. I offer only that this section can serve as an example of the ambivalent losses and desires of what I am calling existential migration, including the possible experiences of leaving, return, and leaving behind. Frodo is restless because his 'wound', a consequence of who he is, interacts with his world in such a way that he can no longer be at home 'at home'. There is no settlement for Frodo, *and this is how it should be*. Only by stating it this strongly can I unsettle the depth of our bias in favour of home.

In Summary

I present these clarifications and thoughts in order to raise awareness regarding the extent to which we prioritise the settled over the migratory. One version of what we call 'settlement' may indeed be no more than our incapacity to resist a homogenizing process. I want to challenge the stringing together of migration and settlement in a developmental sequence that implies settlement as the apex of human life. I want to suggest that both migration and settlement are not final accomplishments, but only processes that are constantly being elaborated in subtle ways, changing through the interaction of ongoing living, and always capable of collapsing back into previous processes - one process can give rise to the other process and in that sense these experiences are more intricate than we could ever capture in abstract phases, stages, or spheres. It may even make sense to consider that the two processes, as existential trajectories, co-exist in intricate ways in each of us, all the time, and are expressed in idiosyncratic ways. I think we may need to be mindful of trying to make a 'home' out of Heidegger's thought, or Kierkegaard's thought or any thought. Instead perhaps we can use these philosophers' ideas to keep us unsettled, to help us maintain a wandering restlessness, to call us into the open and away from what might try to 'house' us.

Since undertaking my original research I have embarked upon the 'becoming home' that Hayes refers to. I returned to my native Canada, which could be seen as a homecoming in the deeper Heideggerian sense. After eighteen months in my homeland I returned to the UK. I certainly feel deeply affected by this return in both directions. I

feel my understanding of home has shifted. But the shift is not towards settlement, though that may be a temporary side effect of my changed understanding. What I feel is that I am increasingly able to hold lightly the notion of 'home', I can feel more acceptance about feeling homeless. I have discarded the notion that being unsettled is a deficient mode of being. I fully expect that I may migrate again, or I might not. But the underlying sensitivities, as described in the themes from my co-researchers, remain very active in my experience of daily living and my understanding of therapy. My process of 'existential migration' feels inclusive of the notions of 'aesthetic', 'ethical', and 'religious' spheres while alternating between moments of authenticity and the 'homey homelessness' of 'the they'.

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ⁱ Recent developments in bereavement studies have supplanted this trend with 'postmodern' and existential approaches which avoid the thorny implications of 'normality/pathology' and the generalisation of individual experience into set 'types' (Madison, 2002; 2005; Klass et. al.,1996).