

LIVING ALONE, LIVING TOGETHER

Two Essays on the Use of
Housing

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Housing

BY

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This book, more than any other I have written, has depended on the kindness, steadfastness and love of other people. In revealing something of myself I have felt the need to seek the support of others for validation of this work. This book is about relationships and the (temporary) desire or need to withdraw from them. I therefore must acknowledge the massive debt I owe to my wife, B, and my two daughters, Helen and Rachel. They all feature in this work and have had the good grace to support me in writing it. B is a woman of tremendous strength and patience who deserves more than to live with a curmudgeon such as myself. My daughters have grown up surprising well despite their father. I thank them for continuing to endure, as well as to mock when they think I deserve it.

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INTRODUCTION

A dwelling is a tool,¹ and policy is merely the subsidiary process that helps provide those tools. Housing is something that we use. We can focus on policies and on quantities; we can argue over white papers, spending targets and population projections, but what matters is how housing is used by those currently occupying it.² It is perhaps only natural that the predominant focus is on the material aspects of policies, quantities and standards: these are easy to see and to measure. We can contain these and so readily explain them. Reducing housing to quantities allows us to compartmentalise problems and posit easy solutions.³ But, in doing so, we actually forget what housing is for. We can look at numbers built and their cost and feel that we have achieved something if there is some movement in these figures. Yet what matters just as much is how these dwellings are used. By this I don't mean that they are simply occupied — that square pegs are put into square holes — but in what ways do individual households take a dwelling and mould it to their purposes. In other words, how does a dwelling allow us to live? This, after all, is why we need a dwelling and why we attach any meaning to it.

As soon as we accept the importance of use, we also have to acknowledge that much of that use is both singular and

private. It is not open to public scrutiny and would become impossible were it so observed. It literally does go on behind closed doors. Accordingly, it cannot be readily measured and quantified, and so we find it hard to generalise. All we have to go on are our own experiences and what others tell us of theirs. Yet, just because something is hard to see and even harder to measure does not mean it has no significance. Indeed, the significance of our dwelling to us is precisely because our use of it cannot be seen. We have, then, to find ways of looking inside that is not obtrusive, but which can still help us to capture the meaningfulness of our use of dwelling. Much of my work has been an attempt to find such a means,⁴ and what I present here is my latest attempt.

This book consists primarily of two long chapters that present apparently contrasting views on the use of our dwelling. I say apparently because, while they appear to be opposites — on living alone and living together — they are actually complementary. To my mind they sit beside each other quite well. Like the poles of a magnet, which supposedly repel each other, they are actually connected and part of the same entity. Both chapters are concerned with how we are able to use private space. They are both based on a similar introspective method. Taken together they provide a more complete picture of how we can use our dwelling.

We live privately and have space that we say is ours. But much of this space is actually shared with a small number of others who we live with either through choice or accident of birth. We can relate to this space in an intensely subjective manner, and we know that others do too, and this is simply because we have direct corroboration — we can see how they behave. Much of the meaning that we derive from that space comes from who we share it with, but also because that sharing remains within private bounds.

But there is one place that we cannot share in any direct manner, namely the space inside our head. We can certainly describe our feelings to others and let them know what is going on in our headspace. Others may accept what we say as authentic and real. But ultimately that is because of what they know of us from the outside. They can have no knowledge of the actual inner space and instead have to rely on our facility with language and our ability to describe what we experience and feel. It is then incumbent on them to process what we say using their own headspace, allowing for how it is then sorted and filtered. We must accept the mediated nature of our description but we can seek to minimise it. We can try to reduce the level of mediation to the barest minimum and describe what is inside our own head and so leave the smallest amount for external interpretation. The listener or reader must still take much on trust, but they can test it against their own inner space with the minimum of iterations. This then is not a scientific approach and it has no pretensions to be so. All we can offer are a series of descriptions of particular head states.

The first of the major chapters in this book, 'On Living Alone', seeks to do this. It tries to describe what goes in in my head. There is certainly a cathartic element to this project, in that I have sought to understand my own head as a place that has often let me down. I have suffered from anxiety and depression for many years, and it has been a real problem for my wife and family as well as for myself. And this shows the connection right here: I cannot share my head with others, but I do share the place where I live. It is in this place that the contents of my head have much of their impact, and it is a shared place.

What I have found, however, when I talk to those closest to me about my depression (something incidentally I have been very loath to do until recently) is that I am perhaps the

least aware of how I am and what I do (and perhaps this is because of my reluctance to discuss it). As I explain in the piece, when I am depressed I cannot think, and when I can think — which is when I am not depressed — the last thing I want to do is dwell on the bad times. So this work is a conscious effort to think through what it means to have a head that is sometimes out of control. This has been a very hard piece to write. Some of the material is more than 12 years old and I have been reluctant to deal with it. Other things I have written down about my depression I have not included here, it being simply too painful and close to the bone. It would involve exposing too much and I am not yet ready to share it with anyone. There are some things that I am not even prepared to write down. So this remains a partial picture, with a deal of dissembling and hedging of the painful parts. I have tried to describe my depression as clearly and accurately as I can. But it remains partial, with some elements picked out and others remaining hidden. What is not described here is how my head feels most of the time, including the period when I was able to write this piece. These are the mentally calm and quiet times when I am relatively happy and productive.

Over the years I have read a reasonable amount of the literature on anxiety and depression, particularly in philosophy and social thought. Some of this reading will be evident here, but often only to be criticised. In general, I have not found this literature terribly useful. It has certainly been of little help in terms of my own mental health. It did not seem to be about me, and as I wasn't interested in this subject from a purely intellectual perspective, then it seemed inadequate. More recently I have found the works of Emanuel Swedenborg to be of a considerable comfort personally, as well as offering a model of our mental life that is more intellectually satisfying.⁵ His ideas are often implicit in what

follows but I do mention him where it becomes overt and necessary.

As a work of introspection my approach has been to dwell on the fragments that I have found within my head and to make some order from them. I have thought long and hard about how to structure this chapter, and much of my efforts have gone into reordering the material in a number of different ways. I am conscious that there are times where I appear to contradict myself and that I speak in different voices and with a distinctly different tone. In the end I thought that the best way of presenting this material was in a manner that actually emphasised these contradictions and differences, and I have done this precisely because this is how my mind works. The style of this piece is actually demonstrative of the very issues I want to discuss.

The same applies to the second chapter 'On Living Together', in that the style is as important as the content. A single chapter, broken up into numbered but unnamed sections, seemed to me to be the most natural approach when I first had the idea of writing this piece and began planning it out and making notes. I had always envisaged it as a single piece where all the key issues are taken together. I wanted to make it clear that the parts of the chapter were equal in terms of their content and their connection to each other. I wished to create an immediate impression of this connectedness and I wanted it to be read all of a piece and not something that one dipped into. So what matters here is the overall impression of the piece and how it creates what I hope is a reasonably coherent whole. Of course, more could be said and much of this could have been said differently. But this is what I have wished to say and I am grateful for the opportunity of being able to present it here in this manner.

In terms of its contents, as the title of the chapter suggests, it considers now we live together. Ostensibly, this might seem

to be the polar opposite of the first chapter, but as will become clear in reading the first chapter, the way I survive depression and anxiety is through living with others. This too adopts an introspective approach, but is also dependent on a number of my previous books, particularly *Private Dwelling*⁶ and *In Dwelling*,⁷ where I consider the issues of private dwelling and subjectivity in some detail. These books focus primarily on the issues of privacy and exclusion, laying a general groundwork, and so my aim in this chapter is to explore how these general facets of dwelling allow us to live with others. As in these earlier works, I have relied on my own experiences of living in private space. This is the only means I believe we can hope to understand what goes on, but, as I have stated already, I do appreciate that it does pose problems in terms of corroboration and generalisability. I have my own beliefs, attitudes and certainties. In terms of living together, my personal experience is largely reliant on what might be considered to be traditional heterosexual and monogamous family structures. I am well aware that my experiences are limited and that this might lead me into making certain conclusions that others might not share. But then, my experiences, and the conclusions I draw from them, could only be properly authentic if they were limited. This does not mean that I believe that any particular family type or sexual preference is superior to another. Rather, what I mean is that if my experiences are real and genuine they are necessarily limited to a certain range. My intention is not to state that there is only one form of relationship, but rather to suggest what it means to understand any relationship, in all its uniqueness and singularity, from the inside. It may be an approach with its limitations, and I may be accused of making generalisations that do not apply quite as readily as I believe they do, but as I hope will become clear in the reading of this chapter, there really is no alternative to this approach.

The final chapter, 'Alone and Together' is a brief yet, I hope, effective attempt at bringing these two sides of dwelling together, by showing that we can be alone precisely because we are with others, and that being together does not mean that we have to give up what it is that makes us what we are.

These chapters ask a lot of questions but provide rather fewer answers. This is because they are speculations, throwing out ideas and comments with the hope of eliciting some form of a response. Consistent with what I have written elsewhere,⁸ this is an attempt to think properly and deeply about housing and to do so from the inside of housing rather than to engage it with pre-existing tools that might not fit properly the concepts I wish to explore.

However, what I do not wish to do here is to rehearse again the arguments from my former books. I have spent a considerable amount of time — and printers' ink — on describing and justifying a subjective approach to housing, and I do not wish to go over this again. Likewise, I have developed a methodological approach to housing in my book *In Dwelling*,⁹ and instead of repeating this again here I want actually do the walking rather than the talking. An early reader of one of these chapters suggested that, while the subject matter was not out of line with much of housing discourse, I appeared to be completely rejecting the usual tools of analysis. In this way, the reader suggested, I was wiping the slate clean and starting again. Until I read this comment it had not occurred to me that my sources and approach were so unusual and that I was trying to do anything quite so fundamental. I saw the approach I have now taken as a natural development from my earlier work: I was actually doing what I said housing researchers ought to do in *In Dwelling*. This was precisely to create concepts from out of housing rather than relying on 'off the peg' theories and concepts from other disciplines and which were intended for other

purposes than analysing housing phenomena. But also these chapters have been inspired by my reading over the last few years, which in some ways could not be further from the mainstream housing studies literature. I suppose this does suggest an attempt to look at the issues in a distinctly new way, but this was for no other reason than this approach now seemed to be the most interesting and fruitful one for me to pursue. The results are doubtless unorthodox, but I hope that they will be read with an open mind and given the space that allows them to speak on their own terms.

NOTES

1. Heidegger (1962).
2. King (2017).
3. King (1996).
4. See in particular King (1996, 2004, 2008, 2017).
5. See Swedenborg (1987, 1996, 2010).
6. King (2004).
7. King (2008).
8. King (2017).
9. King (2008).