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A developed nature: a phenomenological account of the experience of home

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Abstract Though "dwelling" is more commonly associated with Heidegger's philosophy than with that of Merleau-Ponty, "being-at-home" is in fact integral to Merleau-Ponty's thinking. I consider the notion of home as it relates to Merleau-Ponty's more familiar notions of the "lived body" and the "level," and, in particular, I consider how the unique intertwining of activity and passivity that characterizes our being-at-home is essential to our nature as free beings. I argue that while being-at-home is essentially an experience of passivity—i.e., one that rests in the background of our experience and provides a support and structure for our life that goes largely unnoticed and that is significantly beyond our "conscious" control—being-at-home is also a way of being *to which we attain*. This analysis of home reveals important psychological insights into the nature of our freedom as well as into the nature of the development of our adult ways of coping and behaving.

Keywords Home · Being-at-home · Being-in-the-world · Maurice Merleau-Ponty · Phenomenology · Lived space · Dwelling · Spatial level · Embodiment · Passivity · Activity · Habit · Freedom · Human Development

Though the notion of "dwelling" is more commonly associated with Heidegger's philosophy than with that of Merleau-Ponty, the notion of "being-at-home" is in fact integral to Merleau-Ponty's thinking. I will here consider the notion of home as it relates to Merleau-Ponty's more familiar notions of the "lived body" and the "level," and, in particular, I will consider how the unique intertwining of activity and passivity that characterizes our being-at-home is essential to our nature as free

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beings. I will argue that while being-at-home is essentially an experience of passivity—i.e., one that rests in the background of our experience and provides a support and structure for our life that goes largely unnoticed and that is significantly beyond our "conscious" control—being-at-home is also a way of being *to which we attain*. In other words, we are active in our being passive: We are beings whose experience of home is that of an *essential* and *inherent* background and foundation, but this foundation has been *developed* through our very efforts of *learning* how to dwell. So, although "to dwell" is inherent to our nature, "how" to realize this nature is something learned.

In the first section of what follows, I will look at the character of our experience of being at home, which, I will maintain, is essential to our *nature* as being-in-the-world. Here we will see the essential continuity between the experience of home and the nature of the body as Merleau-Ponty understands it. In the second section, I will consider the way in which our experience of being at home is a *developed* condition, that is, it is an experience only accomplished through learning, a passivity brought about through our activity. In the third section, I will develop the argument, introduced in Sect. 2, that Merleau-Ponty's notion of "levels" offers us the appropriate conceptual tool for understanding our experience of home. Ultimately, this study of the fundamental intertwining of activity and passivity in our experience of home (and therefore in our experience as such) will allow us to recognize that the permanent character of our freedom is an ambivalent openness and closedness to what is outside, an ambivalence that requires vigilant self-criticism. In making these arguments, I will draw on the rich descriptive resources provided by artists, anthropologists, and psychologists in addition to the works of standard writers in phenomenological philosophy. Let us begin by looking at the character of our normal experience of being at home.

1 Home as second body

The nature of our particular ways of being-at-home may vary from the obvious Western instantiation of a privately owned house and its privately determined "household rules" to situations marked by a greater degree of flux and seeming indeterminacy such as those found in nomadic experience, those defined by a lack of a fixed abode (homelessness), communal habitation, abusive or otherwise problematic home lives, and so forth; but, among all of these examples, there remains, I argue, a shared core—namely, a developed *way* of being that is marked by a sense of "my own" or, more properly, "*our* own," an intersubjective *way* of being that is familiar and secure—even if this security is one of being comfortable in relationships and ways of behaving that are marked by great danger and instability for those involved.[1] While the following analysis will at points address particular styles of being-at-home—e.g., ones centered around a privately owned single-family house or ones marked by a certain tangible external structure—I

[1] The limit to this would occur in a person who never has the experience of feeling at home. Such a situation would amount to a complete lack of worldly "connection" and of worldly functionality, and would, one might argue, be the situation of persons who have been diagnosed as "insane."

attempt to locate a common and constitutive thread belonging to all human experience. I am arguing that home, as a place of and for the self, is a situation of refuge for us, a place or way of being in which "our own" is privileged and "the alien" is not manifestly present.[2] Let us consider experiences of home.

For many of us, it is a common experience that we close the door behind us when we enter our homes. For others who are not members of our home to come into the place we consider to be "home," we must invite them or at least open the door to them. With the exception of our organic bodies, there is virtually no other place in our experience that maintains this kind of inviolable self-enclosure.[3] Even in communal living situations in which many different families live together and do so in an area that may be comprised of open and even malleable spaces, this situation is one in which the very openness of the surroundings and the movement of persons through these surroundings count as the familiar for these dwellers, and thus, in spite of being full of movement and influx, is a self-enclosing situation—one providing for recollection of oneself, of what is one's own. Indeed, even when tangible doors are not present, people regularly set up markings of "their" space through explicit and implicit signs ranging from the placement of belongings to observable regular use of an area; though the boundaries that arise through these signs may be more easily violated than those of a secured building, they mark out a zone of familiarity for its inhabitants, an "inside" that opposes itself to the less known "outside" and its foreign character and demands. In *Getting Back Into Place*, Edward Casey describes how a setting that may seem to many people like the

[2] It is important to note here that what is "alien" for some is "our own" for another. For example, it is the case that for some people to be most "at home" involves interacting extensively with "unfamiliar" others—such is perhaps the case with a corner store owner, a traveling sales person, or those living on a kibbutzim. For an extensive literature review of conceptions of the home and related ideas, see the chapter "Home: A Landscape of the Heart" in Porteous and Smith's (2001) *Domicide*. In her article "Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature," Mallett also provides an interdisciplinary review of analyses and ideas about home. In my following discussion of home, I attempt to provide an analysis of the *human* experience of home. I acknowledge, however, that the shape of people's homes (both privately and culturally) have different forms—many of which pointedly lack the typical sense we may have of "comfort," "security," and "stability." For instance, many people are literally "homeless," and some are nomads; for some, the home is a place of abuse and rejection; in some cases, homes include multiple generations of a family or may be made up of many people unrelated by blood, but instead by occupation, while in other cases, a home may belong to just one person; the home in some cultures and families is a place with strictly defined roles (both customarily and legally based roles), and in others is a place of largely undefined or perhaps changing roles; and so forth. The wide range of these possible "expressions" of home may seem to imply that something constant or consistent cannot be said about the experience of home, but I wish to challenge this notion at some level. While I by no means wish to say that we all have or have had an unproblematic experience of being-at-home or that we would define the particular character of our homes in the same way, I do wish to maintain that there is a fundamental human experience of home that, although it may find different expressions, is a *human* experience. For support for this position, see Porteous and Smith's cross-cultural and situationally-diverse review of research into the experience of home, and especially their conclusion on pp. 61–63 of *Domicide*. Heidegger's analysis of Dasein as a dwelling being is, of course, making a related *philosophical* claim; see especially Heidegger's essay "Building Dwelling Thinking." See too Steinbock's *Home and Beyond* for a philosophical argument on this point, especially Chapter 13 (1995, pp. 220–235).

[3] In a place of work, we may have a private office, but it is typically a place for engagement with others, a place where we expect others to enter or at least to have the right to enter. The office is a place of exchange, a place where the outside world expects to find and deal with you.

ultimate outside—one with no bearings or security—can in fact be the familiar home for another:

> What would be a desolate wilderness for the city-dweller is welcome terrain for the nomad, who feels *oikoi*, at home, even in the most forbidding desert or steppe. Just such unlikely places as these provide dwelling for nomadic populations: that is, dwelling-as-wandering, within which the primary domicile is the tent.[4]

In this example, we see that what counts as "outside" or "inside" to a dweller is not something an observer external to that home situation can necessarily see. What counts *as* outside is what is *experienced* by a person as such; no wall or door is necessary for making the inside versus outside distinction, nor is it necessarily sufficient for securing such a distinction. To be at home is to have a sanctuary of sorts—one characterized by familiar and localizable ways of being—through which the outside world can be temporarily set aside. It is a place where one feels sheltered from outside intrusions and considerations, and given a place to recollect oneself in a space of familiarity.

At home, we can regularly let go of the demands made by others—at least by those beyond our household; and, we can typically leave behind the responsibilities of our profession, our civic commitments, and our larger social life, not to mention the vagaries and the contingencies of the "outside world." Even the "homeless" person, returning to her familiar daily resting points—a particular alleyway, park bench, and street corner—finds certain patterns of regularity here that, while literally exposed to the outside and often to great influxes of movement, are to her sites of familiarity. Rachel Whiteread's sculpture "House" can be seen as offering a commentary on this self-protecting character of our way of being-at-home. Her sculpture is a solid cast of the inside of a single-family row house, which has had all exterior walls, windows, etc. removed. By filling in this house with opaque and unyielding concrete, Whiteread displays the self-enclosed nature of the home experience—namely, that it is felt as a kind of world unto itself, a fortress impenetrable (or at least resistant) to the views of the outside world.[5]

[4] Casey (1993, p. 268).

[5] Though the house in this sculpture continues by means of its opacity to conceal its imagined dwellers from our view, the sculpture also suggests an experience of violation as well as of discomfort, as if the original walls of the house both served to deflect the attention of others that the sculpture pointedly invites, and also, in spite of their rigidity, offered a certain comfort and identification for the house's inhabitants that the uniform concrete of the sculpture defies. This feeling is magnified by the sculpture's physical location in an otherwise commonplace London neighborhood; the houses around the piece are suddenly brought to the viewer's attention and, thereby, lose some of their outward-deflecting character. The houses of the neighborhood take on a certain vulnerability in the face of this artwork. This sense is arguably further amplified by Whiteread's original (and fulfilled) plan to destroy the sculpture after a mere three months. This planned destruction reminds us that there is in fact a tenuous character—that is, a developed and, therefore, contingent character—to the privacy, security, and comfort that our home experience allows us to feel as so unshakeable. Whatever specific interpretation one makes of Whiteread's sculpture, there is no doubt that the sculpture forces one to question the nature of being-at-home, and does so by removing the "shell" of a house—that which many may most readily identify as securing our experience of home, but that, as Whiteread's sculpture and our present analysis suggest, is far from being the only constitutive element of home (2001).

This security and the self-reflection that arises through our experience of being-at-home are essential to our development as persons. At home, we can relax into our own ways of doing things, and do so without a plan, without determining in advance where we should be and for what purpose. It is when we rest securely at home that we can find room for daydreaming, for wandering in thought, deed, or imagination without worrying that some alien person or demand will interrupt us, and without concern about whether someone wants or needs our chair or whether the halls or yard in which we wander has closing hours or a curfew.[6] In his phenomenology of home, Bachelard lauds this aspect of home (and specifically in this case of the house) above all others; he writes "… if I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (*The Poetics of Space*, p. 6).[7] As this reflection on daydreaming underscores, our home answers to *our* demands or lack thereof. Though there may, of course, be rules that structure our homes—rules of cleanliness, rules of where things belong, rules of respecting other members of the home if they exist—these are rules in which we are precisely at home; they are not experienced as alien impositions but, like the specific parameters of limb and muscle that constitute the body's very capacity for action, they are the very terms within which we experience ourselves as having the capacity to live freely. Thus, within the bounds of our own projects, we can do as we wish, when we wish.[8] Home is filled with our interests and with our moments of drifting without any explicit interests, and it protects us temporarily from the interests and demands of others. In this way, home is a place of *self*-nourishment and *self*-development, and is also fundamental to our experience of our "own."

These descriptions of home as that which belongs to us and marks out a space for us, or, as Bachelard states so succinctly, as "… our corner of the world" (*The Poetics of Space*, p. 4), lay the grounds for a further recognition about home—namely, that home is phenomenologically akin to our body. In *The Phenomenology*

[6] This is one of the most important reasons why the impoverished dwelling spots of "homeless" people or those living in troubled domestic situations of some people are problems: Freedom from invasion cannot be wholly relied upon here.

[7] For Bachelard, this ability to daydream in the safe haven of the home is not simply a mark of the home's ultimate sheltering character. Daydreaming, he argues, is along with thought and experience one of the activities that "sanction human values" (1964, p. 6). He observes that daydreaming is an activity unique to the human being, and that in the daydream, we are able to feel what thought and analysis so often cover over. For Bachelard, then, daydreaming is an essential part to a phenomenological investigation (1964, pp. 3–8).

[8] This is not true of any of our engagements in public places. Even if there are places that we think of as "ours"—e.g., a favorite park bench, a chair in a music club, a vacation spot—these are places that we cannot reserve as our own, or expect to be our own. Someone else may be using the bench when we arrive at the park; a "full house" may mean that we have to stand for the night when we go to the club; we may have to make reservations far in advance even to gain access to "our" cherished vacation spot. Even if we can "secure" our place in these destinations, we are not free to do as we wish in them. We must abide by the customs and regulations that these environments give to us, and that we may even give to ourselves according to what we think is proper public behavior. In either case, we are regulated by our surroundings in these situations in a way that we need not be in the home. This is not principally true when we are in our public "homes"; here, the demands of others are upon us.

of Perception (PhP), Merleau-Ponty identifies the body as that which allows us to have a world in the first place[9]:

> … [I]t is one and the same thing for us to perceive our body and to perceive our situation in a certain physical and human setting, for our body is nothing but that very situation in so far as it is realized and actualized.[10]

The body allows us to extend into and throughout our surroundings and all our experiences of what is "there."[11] The body is equally what allows us to hold something before ourselves—that is, to have a "here" *with respect to which* a "there" can be experienced. Through the body and its gaze we can "pick a thing out" from an amorphous or, alternatively, a chaotic, overwrought background, and hold it before us as an object of our attention. The body and its *movable* gaze are also what allow that object to slip back into the background as we shift our attention elsewhere.[12] The body also gives us a sense of the relations among these objects of attention. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

> When I say that an object is *on* a table, I always mentally put myself either in the table or in the object, and I apply to them a category which theoretically fits the relationship of my body to external objects. Stripped of this anthropological association, the word *on* is indistinguishable from the word "under" or the word "beside".[13]

It is the body, then, that lets us be spread throughout our world, bring specific things forward from the background of this world, and experience these things as having particular places and positions in the world. Thus, "… far from my body's being for me no more than a fragment of space, there would be no space at all for me if I had no body" (Merleau-Ponty, PhP, p. 102). While we do not typically notice this constitutive role of the body, it pervasively shapes every possible activity in which we do take active notice. The body—and, more specifically, the body in its passivity, in its capacity as the receptive, given core in the background of all experience—is fundamentally the base of our action, and this is equally true of our home.

[9] Many concur with this point. Russon, for instance, writes in *Human Experience*: "We are embodied. It is our living body which is the dynamic process of our establishing contact with the world. It is *in* this process, *through* this process, and *as* this process that both what the world is and who we are come into being for us" (2003, p. 293). Barral agrees: "Man's body is precisely the condition for his relations to the world and to others, because, as an incarnate spirit, man reveals himself through his bodily being" (1969, p. 171); and regarding our ability to experience space, she writes: "Again, it is because of the body that man can speak of space at all. … It is always through the body that I make contacts, either with the world and things in the world or with other subjects in the world" (1969, p. 175). See also "Part II: The Body in Place" in Casey's *Getting Back Into Place* for an extended discussion of the body's "intimate interinvolvement" in direction and dimension.

[10] Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 340).

[11] See Merleau-Ponty's discussions of our body as allowing for a world in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 101, 146, and 320.

[12] See Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the body's relevance to the figure-background structure of perception in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 101, 102.

[13] Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 101).

Whether by serving as an outer skin of sorts, by being specifically responsive to the body and its needs, or by serving as a regular base by means of which we engage the world, our home is a second body for us. At the most basic level, home is like the body insofar as it is, as we have just been describing, a place of initial stability and a foundation for the self. The home grounds the "absolute here" of our body insofar as it allows the body a settled territory in which it finds itself—explicitly or implicitly—in its "here-ness." The experience of being-at-home and the bodily sense of self are thus inseparable; without home, there would be constant dispersion in the always retreating "there." As Bachelard writes: "Without [home], man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul" (*The Poetics of Space*, p. 7).[14] Gordon Matta-Clark's sculpture "Splitting" seems to push us to notice the importance of the stability of our home experience as well as of its enclosed nature, whether literal or experiential. The sculpture consists of a suburban house that has been split open by means of a V-shaped crack running from the roof of the house down to its foundation.[15] Given that those who would make a home in and through a suburban house would typically expect such a house to shield them from the intrusions of weather as well as of the look of others, the split strips the house of its special homesteading characters of soundness, protection, and the support of the dwellers' subjectivity—the latter insofar as the bare structure of the house rather than the persons who make it home determines the time and manner of major instances of coming and going. The sculpture underscores that our experience of home, like that of our body, is under normal circumstances not marked by unprompted changes or by surprises delivered from beyond; it is rather our foundation of regularity.

Beyond these crucial aspects of stability and "self-concentration," we can see the connections between our home and the body at the level of functionality: In modern Western culture, we typically make our home in a house that quite literally keeps our temperature regulated; our homes are often also structured so as to facilitate our needs and interests in ingestion, excretion, hygiene, sleep, sex, stimulation, and rest; our home is often constructed in such a way as to enhance and protect our senses by means of lighting, sound enhancers and buffers, air circulation, etc. In his phenomenological study of the human body, Leder argues that

> … the very house in which one dwells is both a reconstruction of the surrounding world to fit the body and an enlargement of our own physical structure. Its walls form a second protective skin, windows acting as artificial senses, entire rooms, like the bedroom or kitchen, devoted to a single bodily function.[16]

[14] Tuan makes a similar point by noting the trauma that would occur if a house were taken away from us: "To be forcibly evicted from one's home and neighborhood is to be stripped of a sheathing, which in its familiarity protects the human being from the bewilderments of the outside world" (1974, p. 99).

[15] The crack in Matta-Clark's sculpture not only makes a precarious gap in the floors of the house, it also admits the outside weather and views into the house. Moreover, unlike a door or a window, the crack cannot be closed or covered; it allows no say in what enters or, for that matter, what leaves the home (in a gust of wind or beam of light, for instance) (1974).

[16] Leder (1990, p. 34).

Also acknowledging the window as an outward projection of the home's dweller, the architect and artist Hundertwasser does not think that apartment dwellers should be forced to live with a "static" window frame, which he sees as a self-erasing, imprisoning boundary. Hundertwasser maintains that a window frame and its surrounding area should be made available to the tenant's self-expression, so that the tenant and outside observers can rightly recognize the space of inhabitation as an extension of one's self—as a "third skin" (*Hundertwasser Architecture*, p. 168).[17] Even if there is no explicit house that provides many of these features just described, home can be a situation of regular rhythms that match or respond to the demands of the body for sleep or rest, nourishment, and so forth. In these and related ways, our home acts as an extension of our body and its functional needs and interests.

While these descriptions of our regular daily experience of home present our home as something that is solidly and consistently "there for us," it is the case that just as we needed *to grow into* and *to figure out how to inhabit* our bodies, we also needed *to learn* how to dwell.[18] In his phenomenological study of home, Anthony Steinbock argues that "[m]aking ourselves at home as our world to which we belong entails more than a 'sub-liminal' belonging, but *an active responsibility for* setting limits, for repeating, for renewing the homeworld" (*Home and Beyond*, p. 227, my emphasis); and, more pointedly, that "home cannot be 'given' from any external perspective. Rather, it is *generated developmentally and intersubjectively*" (*Home and Beyond*, p. 233, my emphasis). In other words, we are not simply given a home and all that it entails. We are *responsible for* making our home, for making ourselves at home, and this is something we must learn how to do, and that we learn to do with and through other persons. We will turn now to see ways in which we begin this learning in our infancy and childhood—a time when, significantly, we are also learning how to recognize and inhabit our bodies and its powers. Though it is a passive dimension of our experience, home is an accomplishment—that is, it is dependent upon our action.

[17] To the end of stimulating this self-expression, Hundertwasser established window rights—i.e., "…the freedom for the resident to recreate the prefabricated space of the apartment he is to live in" (1997, p. 258). Hundertwasser stipulated in his building contracts that those occupying offices or apartments in his constructions must have the right to alter anything on the exterior of the building within arm's reach of the window casements. Hundertwasser's acknowledgment of the window and the outside of the house as a visible skin of the human skin—and one that we should attend to by means of personal "decoration"—makes yet another connection between the home and the body—namely, an aesthetic connection. Just as we spend time on (or sometimes neglect) the appearance of our bodies, so too do we do things to make our houses outwardly attractive to us and, we often hope, to others. One could also argue that our acts of cleaning mimic exercising, just as fixing a broken pipe is like mending a bone, throwing the trash out like excreting bodily wastes, rearranging or replacing the furniture like trying new clothes, and so forth.

[18] Heidegger supports this claim in "Building Dwelling Thinking": "The real plight of dwelling [far from being a shortage of houses] lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell*" (1971, p. 161). Heidegger examines the nature of this dwelling in this essay, and argues that there is no guarantee that we will come to know how to dwell.

2 Learning to dwell

Our education into our embodiment and into being at home and, ultimately, into our way of being in the world is inaugurated in the childhood home. Bachelard argues that home—especially our first childhood home—is that which allows us to form our first sense of and grip on the world: "It is the human being's first world" (*The Poetics of Space*, p. 7).[19] It is through our experiences of, in, and through this home that we begin to learn how to be ourselves, how to have a home.[20] It is in the context of our first experiences of having a home that we learn how to walk, how to move about our environment, how to sleep, how to deal with our needs for ingesting and excreting, and how to secure and manage countless other bodily powers. Simultaneously, our first home is also where we learn how to put things in their "proper" place, what it means to have belongings, how to care for and clean our surroundings, how to have a place, how to relax and play as well as to do work of various sorts, and so forth. Equally, this is also the place where we learn to speak, to communicate with others, to share (or conceal) joys and pains, to make plans with others, to simply be around people, and in doing so to be involved with them or to be involved in a "private" undertaking, and so forth.[21]

These multifaceted aspects of our personhood and their connection to our home are even acknowledged—albeit unconsciously—by children in their activities of "playing house"—"place-making" activities that Clare Cooper Marcus maintains are "… almost universal in childhood, regardless of culture, social context, or gender. They are part of the process of growing up" (*House as a Mirror of Self*, p. 23).[22] One way in which children "grow up" is to create their own homes-away-from-home, like homesteads on the frontier. In playing house, children seem implicitly to be recognizing that having a home is something that one must learn to do, that one can do in different styles, but that must include certain essential features, and that it is something by which one is shaped. We can see this in the way

[19] Again, while various descriptions will follow that most immediately relate to an explicit house-based experience of home, my argument should be read as including childhood experiences of home in which no fixed structure existed, in which change was more prevalent than any overt sense of stability, in which persons beyond immediate blood relatives were regular presences, and so forth. Though such homes may seem more irregular or even chaotic compared to a private household, they are nonetheless the ways of finding a place in the world that become familiar, become home, for these children.

[20] Marcus writes of this point: "If our dwellings in adulthood are those settings where we are most at liberty to be ourselves, where we don't have to put up any facades, then this process clearly begins in childhood" (1995, p. 26).

[21] Heidegger writes of the importance of a home that is built to reflect all of the stages of the human life—from birth to death—by including spaces both for the child's crib and the coffin as well as the areas for daily adult activity. Such a home teaches or reminds us explicitly or subconsciously of the expanse and breadth of the human life. See the closing passages of his essay "Building Dwelling Thinking" (1971, esp. p. 160).

[22] Rasmussen emphasizes that "places for children" are different than "children's places"—the former being places that adults have created and designated for children, while the latter are places that children themselves create and maintain, and that may or may not be recognizable to adults. "Children's places" are elemental in children's daily lives, according to Rasmussen; these places offer children a "break from" adult places, and are often the places in which children's most active and intense playing takes place (2004, pp. 161, 162, 166, 169, 170).

that, to play house, children take on different roles and personalities, set up different living areas or rooms, partake in various homemaking activities (including notably that of *leaving* home to go to work, to go shopping, etc.), invite others into their home, etc.[23] In doing so, children often mimic what they see in their own homes or perhaps at friends' homes.[24] Other times they surely improvise—perhaps acting in contrast to what they tend to see, or perhaps in longing after some "ideal" home about which they may dream; but, even if by way of contrast, the roles, the issues, the set-up of the play home are most likely influenced by their most familiar surroundings, their own homes. Marcus encapsulates these effects of our first home on shaping who we are when she asserts that "… the childhood dwelling and its environs is the place of first getting in touch with who we are as distinct personalities" (*House as a Mirror of Self*, p. 33). More importantly for our purposes, what these childhood practices of "playing" at being at home show is that our being-at-home is something that we as individuals must actively develop. It is our own space only if we make it our own.

Our personalities and our very ways of perceiving the world are built in and through our childhood homes.[25] This also means, then, that our home is not a separate part of our experience, but is rather a pervasive structure, providing the core to all our action. Whether we show signs of continuing the traditions of our childhood home or show signs of turning distinctly away from them, we are shaped by our first home in terms of *how* these self-developments will unfold. Our childhood home, in this way, makes its mark *on our future way of being in the world*.[26] If the den in our childhood home, for instance, was a place for quiet and private study, in our adult life, we may tuck away our own office space in an out of the way space, or perhaps we may never quite feel comfortable listening to music or sharing a table with another while working. Alternatively, we may find that the oppressiveness of that quiet den has made it undesirable for us ever to create a designated space for quiet study in our own adult home. If emotions of pain or conflict were hidden behind closed doors in our childhood home, we may continue to hide these away as adults, or, in rebellion against such secreting practices of our childhood experience, we may find ourselves displaying such emotions freely in the most public of places. If we grew up traveling to new home bases yearly, monthly,

[23] See Winnicott's chapter "Why Children Play" in his book *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World* for a general discussion of the role of play in childhood development. His chapter "First Experiments in Independence" in the same book also provides a helpful and related discussion of the character of the initial ventures of children acting and experiencing the world on their own (1992).

[24] In *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood*, Cobb (1977) confirms that the "*dramatis personae*" of the child's personal play are most immediately herself and her parents, and next in importance any siblings she may have, and so on (p. 30).

[25] Porteous and Smith quote an environmental psychologist who argues that our childhood homes "…put a permanent imprint on our neurological abilities: 'You think it only translates into preferences, but it actually affects our nerves'" (2001, p. 47).

[26] Marcus also supports this claim that our original home experience informs our future ways of living, writing: "Either we mirror what we saw and experienced in our childhood home, or we react strongly against it" (1995, p. 82). Her book *House as a Mirror of Self* presents numerous case studies of the relationship between persons' past and present homes. And, Bollas at least indirectly supports the point when he writes: "The body memory conveys memories of our earliest existence" (1987).

or even daily, as adults we may find ourselves at home only when we are "on the move." Though not speaking explicitly about the childhood home, Steinbock argues that even our perceptual powers are shaped by our home experience. He writes:

> A homeworld is privileged because it is that through which our experiences coalesce as our own and in such a way that our world structures our experience itself. This constitutional privilege of course is indifferent to whether we like it or not, or to whether it makes us happy or miserable. The point is that the norms that guide the homeworld are our norms, our way of life as that to which we have accrued. Even our bodies take on the styles and habitualities of comportment unique to our cultural values. Aesthetically (in the literal sense), it structures our way of seeing, the sounds and tonal ranges we hear, familiar smells and the odors of our bodies.[27]

This dovetails with the familiar recognition that we frequently find people growing up to like and dislike certain foods or tastes—and, in some cases, to be either notably capable or incapable of "stomaching" such foods; to be varyingly sensitive to certain types of music, different accents, and to entirely distinct forms of language; or, in more specific examples, to be capable of detecting that a person is entering insulin shock, of distinguishing dozens of different types of spices, snow, etc., of being almost immediately and continuously aware of where the entrances and exits of a building are, of seeing where lies the one tiny mistake in a sea of knitted stitches, and so forth.[28] As these examples illustrate, our childhood home has, in Bachelard's words, "… *engraved within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting*. We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house, and all the other houses are but variations on a fundamental theme" (*The Poetics of Space*, p. 15, my emphasis). Steinbock concurs, directly linking our lived experience of our bodies with that of our homes, such that it is not merely future homes that bear the shape of our first home, but as we have been arguing already, "[i]ndeed, this is so much the case that it might not be too strained to speak of the lived-body precisely as a 'home-body'" (*Home and Beyond*, pp. 232–233).[29]

[27] Steinbock (1995, pp. 232, 233).

[28] Tuan offers helpful examples of perceptual potentialities that we may or may not have depending on the culture and environment in which we live and were raised (1974, pp. 75–79).

[29] Blunt discusses research on traditional courtyard houses or "*haveli*" in Jaipur, India, which are created according to principles of "*Vastu Vidya*," which dictate the proper orientation of the architectural layout of a home and also the appropriate activities for each part of the home (2005, p. 208). According to one researcher, *Vastu Vidya* directly connects the home and the body: "Vastu symbolically and functionally connects the body of the individual with the spaces of the home and the cosmological context" (Blunt 2005, p. 208). *Feng shui* is another example of a practice of aligning the home according to principles that in some ways attend to the body. A possible criticism of these practices arises from their externally-given dictates as to what makes a successful home. As my argument already suggests, the home, while having certain "elemental features," is also importantly a developmental and personal construction—a construction that cannot be simply given to us or locked into place if it is to function fully as *our* home. While home-making principles or guidelines need not infringe upon our development of a home, they certainly can do so insofar as they can settle things in advance that may otherwise have been sites of an important development of the self, of one's relations to others within the home, of one's relations to the world beyond the home and others beyond the home, etc.

Both Bachelard and Steinbock are here describing what Merleau-Ponty identifies as an essential character of our way of being—namely, that we establish "levels" by means of which we are able to have and navigate a world.[30] A level is an attunement, so to speak, that we have with our surroundings when the objects and general axes of our situation are such that we are able to successfully move about in and accomplish projects in this situation. To elucidate the nature of the level, Merleau-Ponty describes an experiment in which a person experiences a shift in the way he is experiencing and involved in his surrounding situation. In this experiment, a man is asked to perform certain common tasks with various objects while looking at the objects he is to manipulate by means of a mirror that reflects these objects and his surroundings at a 45 degree angle with respect to his typical setting.[31] In this altered situation, the man is unable for a time to carry out tasks that are familiar to him or even to move about normally; in general, he is not able to make sense of this new scene. Yet, in spite of this initial disorientation,

> [a]fter a few minutes, … the reflected room miraculously calls up a subject capable of living in it. This virtual body ousts the real one to such an extent that the subject no longer has the feeling of being in the world where he actually is, and that instead of his real legs and arms, he feels that he has the legs and arms he would need to walk and act in the reflected room: he inhabits the spectacle.[32]

When the man is able to walk about and do things as if he were *in* the spectacle provided by the mirror, "[t]he spatial level tilts and takes up its new position" (Merleau-Ponty, PhP, p. 250). In this new spatial level, the man leaves behind the "up" and "down" and similar "anchor" points in which he regularly lives, and is wholly wrapped up in the directional demands of his new scene. His hand may appear to be reaching at an angle of 45 degrees to an outside observer, but he will report that he is reaching directly upwards. Even though this orientation is wholly different than that which he has in his typical daily life, the man nevertheless feels completely "at home" in this new level of embodiment. He does not notice or attend to a difference; he is *living in* this new level.

It is in this inauguration into a level or, to return to Bachelard and Steinbock, in our inauguration into a home-body, that we begin to see how a way of being that was initially *developed*, and thus in some significant way required *active* participation on our behalf, eventually and necessarily becomes a *passive* element of our existence. A level or home-body is, thus, both *called for* and *demanded by* our situation, and is also *brought about* in conjunction with our attempts to find a way of moving and acting successfully in the given situation. Similarly, our home—this essential dimension of passivity in our experience—is not separable from the actions by which we accomplish it. In other words, though our actions depend on

[30] For a focused discussion of spatial levels by Merleau-Ponty, see pp. 244–251 of *Phenomenology of Perception*.

[31] For Merleau-Ponty's discussion of this and related experiments, see PhP, pp. 244–251. David Morris offers a thorough and complementary analysis of a number of experiments on orientation in his chapter "Residing Up and Down On Earth" in *The Sense of Space* (2004).

[32] Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 250).

this passivity, this passivity, reciprocally, is fundamentally rooted in and defined by our actions. Let us look more at this notion of the level and the development of the level in relation to the experience of home.

3 Home as level

We know the position of our body and our limbs not as if they were various parts mapped out on a precise grid, but rather insofar as they—and, ultimately, we—are involved in action. We experience our body as a *given* power. A person's fingers move across the keyboard not as individual digits matching up with a pattern of keys that she has explicitly in her mind's eye, but as *reaching for the word* of which she is thinking. Similarly, the door handle to the bathroom, the number of steps from the first to the second floor, the turn at the end of the hallway, the height of the easy chair, the location of the salt shaker on the ledge above the stove, the proper ground on which to pitch the tent—these all *belong to* the body. The body knows the way to the bathroom in the dark, reaches for the sugar bowl without looking, sits down without checking the distance to the seat of the chair, stays away from the tent's edge in a rain storm though deep in the midst of sleep, and so forth. Our home's articulations are taken up by and housed in our bodies, and become as familiar to our bodies as our bodies are to themselves. Each of these articulations belongs to our bodies in a distinctly passive way: We do not thematically or explicitly think through or know these relationships; rather, our body possesses and lives out of these relationships. In his descriptions of his experience of home, John M. Hull, who went blind in adulthood, confirms that this sort of knowing is not merely based on our visual sighting of the home's walls, doorframes, furnishings, etc. The body *knows* these locations without having to make a case-by-case visual inventory. Hull writes of his own experience:

> I walked right through the house from the back door to the front door only touching the walls once or twice. I just seemed to know when to step sideways, when to move forward. The house is an extension of my body. It is like a skin, something within which I can move and which is appropriate for the proportions of my body.[33]

Yet, it is also the case that a certain activity was required in order to reach this position of passive possession; our bodies moved about and tried out varying ways to navigate the keyboard, the stairway, the chair, the tent, etc. In other words, it initially required an active effort on our behalf to develop the habits that now enable us to live, so to speak, *beyond* our bodies, and, by means of this, to settle ourselves into or to accommodate ourselves to our surrounding environment. In short, then, our bodies and our surroundings only became "ours" through a certain sort of work—the work of habituation and of inhabitation.

Using Merleau-Ponty's conception of levels, we can now make our point regarding the educational impact of the childhood home more explicitly with respect to our spatial experience. Tied up in our habits of dwelling, our body's first

[33] Hull (1997, p. 177).

spatial levels develop through the childhood home.[34] Our way of opening onto a world reflects the possibilities within our power for engaging that world, and these possibilities are shaped by our intersubjective relations, by our personal histories, as well as by the particular givens of our body and its capacities, and these insofar as they shape our grapplings with our surroundings. How these grapplings occurred in our childhood home *informs* us—that is, these grapplings habituate us to *certain* ways of doing things, to tending to open onto or to close ourselves off from *certain* possibilities. Describing the advent and the effect of this informed character of our existence, John Russon makes a similar argument in *Human Experience*—namely, that our "family narratives"—the ways of making sense of our relation to the world learned through our family experience—provide our initial means of "having a world," which includes our sense of what counts as important and as "ours" in the world as well as of locating ourselves and navigating within that world.[35] Though these narratives of home are originally largely *given* to us through other people and their shaping of our situation, we *incorporate* them into our own "personal" way of being. As a consequence, we carry the possibilities opened by (or restricted by) these "familial" spatial levels with us even when we have left behind the "objective" home in which they were formed. Reminding us of this *compelling* character of our past, Steinbock compares the lingering structuring effect of home—the very structuring that arises through the familial narratives Russon describes—to that of a thought one has been working on:

> Just because I stop actively thinking about a thought that I have been working on for days does not mean that "I" stop thinking about it; I continue to work on it even when I do not want to, even in my sleep. In the same way the generative momentum of a homeworld works through us even when we ostensibly leave it (*Home and Beyond*, p. 234).[36]

[34] Informed by a psychoanalytic perspective, Bollas argues for a similar point: "The way in which we position ourselves in space and in time may partly reflect how we were originally situated spatially and temporally in relation to our parents" (1987, p. 45).

[35] See especially pp. 61–74 of Russon's chapter "Others" in *Human Experience* for his discussion of familial narratives and their tension with "external" social narratives. Russon emphasizes that family narratives can be and often are produced in situations that do not resemble the stereotypical Western nuclear family; family narratives are equally present within situations of adoption, of shared parenting, of caretaking, and so forth (2003, see especially pp. 62, 63 on this point).

[36] Referring to the work of Ahmed on what it is like to be at home, Mallett writes: "Being at home involves the 'immersion of a self in a locality'. The locality 'intrudes' upon the self through the senses, defining 'what one smells, hears, touches, feels, remembers'. Equally the self penetrates the locality" (2004 p. 79). According to Mallett, Ahmed is particularly interested in ways in which this experience of being at home can occur in situations when a person is traveling or when the home is changing by means of ongoing new encounters with others—i.e., in situations when there is not a secure or stable "objective" home (2004, pp. 78, 79). Home can, in other words, encompass both movement and strangers, and still have a sense of familiarity (Mallett 2004, p. 78). We can say something similar about our bodies. Our bodies can experience new movements—e.g., "internal" changes and feelings that may come with illness or growth, or "external" activities or sensations that may come with trying out a new form of motion such as dancing or being exposed to something anew such as snow if one is coming from a tropical environment—and yet in the face of these new experiences, we can still feel a certain basic "at-homeness" in our bodies. Of course, sometimes these experiences—whether of the home or the body—can be so extreme that we can feel ejected from our homes, our bodies.

In and through our homes (especially those of our childhood), then, we develop certain ways of doing and perceiving things, and we carry these tendencies with us into our future homes as well as into the world, and these tendencies in effect open us onto a particular home, a particular word. Thus, using Merleau-Ponty's language of spatial levels, we can aptly describe our home and its accompanying customs as setting a particular spatial level for us, as establishing for us a stability and an orientation for our world. Learning to be at home is, in other words, learning a new level, and not simply *any* level, but rather the very level that allows us to belong *somewhere* such that we can establish a way of being-in-the-world.

This new level contributes to our ability to "make ourselves at home" or to "be at home" in places and situations far from our "objective" home. Far from being fixed in or limited to any specific location, our base level of being-at-home provides us with a portable personal pattern, so to speak, for navigating situations that are ostensibly quite foreign to us. By means of the navigation this level makes possible, we establish a new—even if temporary—place for ourselves, a home away from home. A person with a developed habit of reading, for instance, may carry a book with her if she anticipates needing to sit alone at a restaurant or fill time waiting for someone; a person from a very "chatty" household may in the same circumstances rely on his skills of "small talk" to engage people around him he does not know; other people may bite their nails, flip through a calendar, assess the design of the establishment's ventilation system, listen in on others' conversations, and so forth. In each case, the person draws on some familiar habit or interest *to find a way of settling herself into a surrounding* that does not belong to her. The person has carried her home, so to speak, with her. We see a particularly noticeable version of this "carrying forth of the home" in children, who arguably have not formed completely developed "home bodies," and who, I would argue, therefore, are often compelled to bring a *tangible* piece of the home with them to make themselves more comfortable—a stuffed animal, a favorite toy, a *security* blanket, etc. Like the adult's customary ways of being, this reminder of home offers the child something to which to anchor herself until she is settled into the new situation.[37]

Here, too, in the spatial levels that arise through our home, we can see further into the passive—and, yet significantly, *still developed*—character of our relationship with home. The habits of our lived bodies, our "home bodies" or "home level" are so deep that we typically find our home—our way of being in the world—anywhere we go, and often thickly or even overwhelmingly so. For example, we can travel to what is ostensibly a new place, but fail to experience it as new, because we have retained our habitual ways of living, our habitual ways of being at home.[38]

[37] See Marcus's discussion of adults' and children's reliance on objects in helping us feel at home (1995, pp. 72–76, 81–87).

[38] The ease of air travel and the proliferation of chain stores make this transference all the more easy. As a result, we can miss seeing and approaching the people, the sights, and other features that do not fit into our established interests. Traveling with other people or with guides may help to draw us into new ways of approaching a city or place; but it is possible that we will have chosen these companions for their similarity to us and for the comfort we find in the way that these like minded persons are able to offer us a shared way of seeing, moving about, and of creating a certain space. If this is so, these other viewpoints will only magnify the way we tend to see things.

This can happen even if we have sought out what we take to be a truly *foreign* place—one that we imagine to be far in distance and kind from our home. Indeed, since it is precisely the comfort provided by our way of being-at-home that *empowers us* to go *out* into a foreign world, we will commonly import our routine ways of looking and our habits of choice into our destination, and, as such, we remain rooted in our home. We do so by seeking out familiar types of areas or establishments, and engaging with them and the people there as if we had never left our point of departure: An American traveling in Asia may well seek out broadcasts of CNN, outlets for familiar Western commodities such as trademarked coffee drinks or sandwiches, and social gathering places populated principally by business people in ties. Even the traveler seeking an "authentic" experience of the foreignness of another culture is still seeking to expand *her* horizons, is still launching her engagement from the familiar parameters of her home platform. In such ways, a new place becomes laid over by the level we bring to it. Whether the habituation provided by our home is pervasive like this or is subtler in its orienting effect on our experiences, these examples serve to illustrate that we can and regularly do travel beyond the "objective" home (and sometimes by great distances and into greatly different circumstances) without ever leaving behind the shaping influence of our home.

Though this analysis emphasizes the pervasive way in which our home travels with us wherever we go, we do not typically notice or actively perform this "carrying." It is in fact essential to our normal daily experience of both the body and home that they are for the most part neither thematically noticeable to us nor are they for the most part *actively* manipulated or called upon by us. Instead, the body and home recede from our attention while we engage with our daily projects.[39] Merleau-Ponty describes the transition to this background character of our experience as one of "repression," as the

> transition from first person existence to a sort of abstraction of that existence, which lives on a former experience, or rather on the memory of having had the memory, and so on, until finally only the essential form remains. Now as an advent of the impersonal, repression is a universal phenomenon, revealing our condition as incarnate beings by relating it to the temporal structure of being in the world…. In so far as I inhabit a 'physical world', in which consistent 'stimuli' and typical situations recur… my life is made up of rhythms which

[39] Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the "habit body" makes a similar point; see esp. pp. 82–85, 144–147 in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Supporting Merleau-Ponty's conception of the passive or background character of the body and, by extension, of the home, both Gallagher ("*Lived body and Environment*", 1986) and Leder (*The Absent Body*) emphasize the importance of the *absence* of the body and the home in our daily activities. Gallagher writes:

> When the lived body is 'in tune' with the environment, when events are ordered smoothly, when the body is engaged in a task that holds the attention of consciousness, then the body remains in a mute and shadowy existence and is lived through in a non-conscious experience ("Lived Body and Environment," 1986, p. 152).

Leder extends this point to our home, observing that, as with the body, "… the experience of one's own home will be marked by corporeal effacement. As I gaze through the windows, they are in focal disappearance, the means from which I look upon the world" (1990, pp. 34, 35).

> have not their *reason* in what I have chosen to be, but their *condition* in the humdrum setting which is mine. Thus there appears round our personal existence a margin of *almost* impersonal existence, which can be practically taken for granted, and which I rely on to keep me alive.[40]

Our habit body and our habit home are, then, developed *passive* elements of our experience, and ones that slip into the background to become the stability on which we depend without need to pay heed to it.[41] This repression of their presence in our daily lives must be so insofar as without the "disappearance" of body and home, we could not be involved in or concentrate on the projects that extend beyond ourselves.[42] Making a similar point in "The Philosopher and His Shadow," Merleau-Ponty writes:

> … [M]y body must itself be *meshed into* the visible world; its power depends precisely on the fact that it has a place *from which* it sees. Thus it is a thing, but a thing I dwell in.… The relationship between my body and things is that of the absolute here to the there….[43]

We must and do let go of our awareness of home in order to venture into the world beyond our familiar territory, beyond what is self-same. In other words, our home disappears like the body *so that* we can experience and take up that which is beyond

[40] Merleau-Ponty (1962, pp. 83, 84).

[41] We see such a description of home in Merleau-Ponty's description of how we are fundamentally related to the location of our home:

> For primitive man, knowing the whereabouts of the tribal encampment does not consist in locating it in relation to some object serving as a landmark: for it is the landmark of all landmarks—it is to tend towards it as toward the natural abode of a certain peace or a certain joyfulness, just as, for me, to know where my hand is to link up with that agile power which for the moment is dormant, but which I can take up and rediscover as my own (*Phenomenology of Perception* (PhP), 1962, p. 285).

A further relevant example can be found in Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the changed life world or home of the phantom limb sufferer:

> It is precisely when my customary world arouses in me habitual intentions, that I can no longer, if I have lost a limb, be effectively drawn into it, and the utilizable objects, precisely in so far as they present themselves as utilizable, appeal to a hand I no longer have. Thus are delimited, in the totality of my body, *regions of silence* (PhP, p. 82, my emphasis).

[42] This alignment of the body and home can be disturbed in many ways, of course. Objects can be out of place or new objects can be introduced into the home; fatigue, illness, or intoxication can offset our perspective in otherwise familiar surroundings; new additions can take "getting used to," and so forth. Similarly, our bodies can become sore, injured, or "out of joint," making us experience our bodies as awkward or temporarily unmanageable. In these cases of temporary disjunction with our home or body, the possibilities for acting that are usually open to us through our body or home are somehow hindered, and attention is thereby drawn to our body or home. We must work on the body or our way of being-at-home to return them to their unnoticed state, to their state of being powers in which we are engaged rather than of being objects that we notice. Or, in some cases, we must simply let them return to this state—say, in the instance, of letting a stomach flu work its way out of our body, or letting the after effects of a broken water pipe evaporate from carpeting. Even in these cases, we can, of course, play a hand in aiding or hindering these returns to "normalcy."

[43] Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 166, first emphasis my own).

the body, beyond home. It is by becoming a level, then, that home becomes a fundamental structure of passivity in our experience.

4 Conclusion

What we have seen in this essay is that home establishes for us the level that allows us to have a coherent experience. Basically, it is our nature to need to be-at-home in the world. Our way of being-at-home, however, is not given, but is rather a perspective established historically and contingently. But, precisely because we come to be *at home* in this perspective—that is, because it is the level we live from—the contingent and perspectival character of this experience is repressed and experienced by us as if it were simply given. Our very ability to have an openness to what is outside us is, therefore, embodied in a prejudicial perspective, which is to say, a closedness to the outside. This duplicity of our freedom—its simultaneously being open and closed to what is foreign to it—is not a condition that can be overcome or "corrected." It is, rather, the permanent condition within which all our actions with the outside must be developed.

Home—our foundational level—can be a force of shutting down our freedom, of closing the doors to other possibilities for seeing, thinking, and acting. Yet, home is also the very situating foundation that allows us the power to strike out into the foreign and to be open to the world. Though the experience of home is thus inherently structured by an almost self-contradictory tension, the exercise of our freedom in fact requires this dual nature of our existence as open and closed, as vulnerable and secure. This tension points to the need for us to be both supportive and suspicious of our experiences of comfort.

Because our inauguration into the experience of home that allows this exercise of freedom is not a private or self-conscious activity on our parts, we assume our freedom by joining and inhabiting a social world structured by norms and presumptions that we take on as if they were simply facts. In personal life, this means that we will always be grappling with a character that may or may not fit well with the emerging demands of our lives. Politically, this means that ethnocentricity is a condition with which we must always contend and, indeed, it is thus incumbent upon us to be self-critical with respect to our ways of being-at-home.

What our analysis has shown is that the passivity of our being-at-home is not alien to our activity. This passivity is both made possible by activity and in turn makes possible further activity. This conclusion is important, both personally and politically, because it means that our sense of level, inasmuch as it is not naturally occurring but was shaped contingently by our actions is equally open to being reshaped by our actions. We had to make our homes, and in this sense our experience of being-at-home reflects the contingency and artificiality of our actions—the *developed* character of home. This very same activity is also our resource for revisiting and revising our way of being-at-home. Our activity, in other words, is both what is responsible for the limitations in our perspective and also our resource for moving beyond those limitations in response to experiences that challenge those limitations. Just as the body can be catapulted from an

experience of passive communion with the world to one that demands our active attention and intervention by way of injury or by the setting of new goals, so can our sense of home be unsettled and opened anew for us through disruption and challenge. In other words, the passivity of our experience of being-at-home is not an alien determinism, but a passivity that itself enables our freedom. It is our nature to be at home, but this is a developed nature, and thus a nature always open to be developed anew.

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