

THEORETICAL PAPER

“Dwelling-mobility”: An existential theory of well-being

LES TODRES, PhD & KATHLEEN GALVIN, PhD

Centre for Qualitative Research, Bournemouth University, Royal London House, Bournemouth, UK

Abstract

In this article we offer an existential theory of well-being that is guided by Heidegger’s later writings on “homecoming”. We approach the question of what it is about the essence of well-being that makes all kinds of well-being possible. Consistent with a phenomenological approach, well-being is both a way of being-in-the-world, as well as a felt sense of what this is like as an experience. Drawing on Heidegger’s notion of *Gegnet* (abiding expanse), we characterise the deepest possibility of existential well-being as “dwelling-mobility”. This term indicates both the “adventure” of being called into expansive existential possibilities, as well as “being-at-home-with” what has been given. This deepest possibility of well-being carries with it a feeling of rootedness and flow, peace and possibility. However, we also consider how the separate notions of existential mobility and existential dwelling as discrete emphases can be developed to describe multiple variations of well-being possibilities.

Key words: *Phenomenology, Heidegger, well-being, home, homecoming, homelessness, existential theory, dwelling, mobility*

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The proper dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the essence of dwelling, that they *ever learn to dwell*. (Heidegger, 1993a, p. 363)

In this article we offer a theory of well-being that has been centrally informed by Heidegger’s notion of “homecoming”. We do not systematically present Heidegger’s scholarly exposition and refer readers to other relevant texts (Heidegger, 1962, 1966, 1971, 1973, 1993a, 1993b). Rather, we will draw on a particular aspect of Heidegger’s later works in relation to homecoming and a particular development of this that he calls “*Gegnet*”. We pursue the implications that these aspects of his work provide for an existential theory of well-being. This theory includes the notion of “dwelling”, the notion of “mobility” and the unity of these two dimensions (*Gegnet* as “abiding expanse”). More than providing a philosophical description of “abiding expanse”, we are particularly interested in how this possibility can be experienced by human beings as a great resource and possible direction.

Heidegger’s task is philosophical and ontological. In relation to issues relevant to everyday human experience, he provides an ontological context; that is, he concerns himself with what it is about being-as-such that makes various kinds of human experiences possible. In other words, with reference to the phenomenon of human well-being, he provides a framework to approach the question: what is it about Being that gives to human beings the possibility of well-being? In drawing on Heidegger’s later works, we want to note the difference between his task as a philosopher and our task of trying to understand the implications of this ontological concern for well-being as a possibility in human life.

The specific trajectory of Heidegger’s ontological writings that we wish to draw on concerns how his notion of homecoming can be usefully extended towards a more ontic understanding of the nature of well-being in our daily lives. We do this by building on a previous paper (Dahlberg, Todres, & Galvin, 2009) in which we articulated well-being as the intertwining of “peace” and “movement”, at metaphorical, existential and literal levels. In articulating

the essence of well-being, we also expressed these notions of peace and movement more metaphorically as “home” and “adventure”. In this current article we wish to expand our earlier notion of peace towards the more encompassing term “dwelling” and expand our earlier notion of movement towards the more encompassing term “mobility”. More than this, we will consider how Heidegger’s notion of “Gegnet” can open up an understanding of how “dwelling” and “mobility” are both implicit in the deepest experience of well-being. We are substantially guided in this trajectory by Mugerauer’s (2008) book “*Heidegger and Homecoming*”, but wish to use his analysis in a way that can throw some light on the phenomenon of human well-being. Mugerauer helped us to see how a rather obscure idea in Heidegger’s work, namely “Gegnet”, could be highly productive when trying to integrate the experiences of movement and stillness.

The discourse that is especially relevant to well-being occurs in a number of Heidegger’s later works (1966, 1971, 1973, 1993a, 1993b). In some of these texts, he describes the “togetherness” of things in an interrelated horizon that gives space for things and their movement (“the four-fold” of sky, earth, mortals and divinities). This “together” four-fold is the source for the possibility of dwelling with things as they are, and moving with things as they become what they can. It is this ontological “togetherness”, with its “horizon” of room-making (einraumen), that provides the template within which human beings’ experience of “dwelling with”, and “moving with”, can be credibly understood.

The ontological possibility of well-being: the harmony of dwelling and mobility

Heidegger’s (1993a, 1993b) introduction of the four-fold, sky, earth, mortals and divinities is his way of indicating an alternative ontological context for the relationship between Being and beings, an alternative to the technological perspective of the western metaphysical tradition. The western metaphysical tradition posits neutral space within which one can “put” beings and things, and time is the neutral context in which all things happen sequentially. But Heidegger was concerned that this metaphysical framework missed a “cosmos” in which Being was not just space and time (merely a neutral context), but a wholeness that was more intimately implicated in the way beings are related to one another and Being-as-a-whole. This relatedness is both a relatedness of movement and a relatedness of kinship, and is indicated in Heidegger’s (1966) notion of Gegnet.

Gegnet gives both a continuity between Being and beings, as well as a rupture, so that beings can become figural and stand out of their ground. Gegnet means open expanse or abiding expanse, but it is at the same time also a gathering. ‘The gathering is a multidimensional letting’ (Mugerauer, 2008, p. 467).

Human beings are intimately implicated in Gegnet by being the “there” of being, the “place” where there is a clearing for the gatherings of beings and things; in this way being-as-such does not happen without human being.

Heidegger then also offers a consideration of how this ontological context above can be relevant for the ontic everyday lives of human beings. Can a human being remember his or her own dwelling in Being while also sojourning in the “mobility-current” of being, thus called into a novel future? We would like to leave this ontological analysis for now, and consider how this framework may play out in relation to the human experience of well-being.

Delineating the phenomenon of human well-being

In his book “*The Hermeneutics of Medicine and the Phenomenology of Health*”, Svenaeus (2000) draws on Heidegger’s (1962) *Being and Time* and the “Zollikon Seminars” (Heidegger, 2001) to progress a view of health as “homelike being-in-the-world”: “Health is to be understood as a being-at-home that keeps the not-being-at-home in the world from becoming apparent” (Svenaeus, 2000, p. 93). In this current article we cannot do justice to all the ways that Svenaeus insightfully elaborates this theme. However, building on some of these insights we would like to concentrate more on how the phenomenon of “homelessness”, although never fully eradicated, can become reframed within a more encompassing possibility of homecoming: the possibility of finding home within the homeless.

The journey through homelessness before authentic homecoming

In *Being and Time* Heidegger refers to a form of being-at-home (zuhause) that is inauthentic in that human beings can take excessive refuge in “das man” or “the man-in-general”. Such taken for granted familiarity constitutes a kind of “at-homeness”, but at great cost to what he sees as the possibility of taking on a life of one’s own. The numbing comfort of this taken for granted familiarity is in Heidegger’s view not sustainable as human finitude and vulnerability inevitably announce themselves in many ways. In his analysis

of the journey towards authenticity, he emphasises the importance of anxiety as a form of attunement that opens up a certain aloneness in facing the uncertain cares of one's personal life that is always in the shadow of its potential falling away. Heidegger uses the term "uncanniness" (*unheimlich*) to indicate this kind of existential homelessness that is faced when one is able to embrace the "resolute" responsibility of moving away from the "taken for granted" securities of the familiar "at-homeness". Within this perspective, ill health can be one of the ways in which human vulnerability reminds us of an existential homelessness that cannot be denied. Illness then can be "a wake up call" to face existential tasks that may have been avoided. If Heidegger just left us here he would leave us in quite a nihilistic position in which we have to stoically come to terms with our homelessness. But later, in what Mugerauer (2008) calls "the homey papers", Heidegger articulates another kind of homecoming which is authentically possible for human beings: a movement from the inauthenticity of a familiar being-at-home (*zuhause*) through a more authentic embrace of existential homelessness to the possibility of an authentic homecoming. Facing this "not being at home", although an anxiety-provoking experience, can also open up a path of movement; and this can provide an energising potential that can itself be felt as well-being. Homelessness paradoxically provides an important motivation for the quest to seek the experience of homecoming. Our theory of well-being thus wishes to incorporate the value of experiences of homelessness as well as experiences of homecoming. As will be shown, homelessness gives mobility to life as a positive potential, while homecoming gives peace to life as a positive potential.

An existential theory of well-being as "dwelling-mobility"

The following exposition of our existential theory of well-being first articulates existential mobility and existential dwelling as distinct dimensions before considering them together, and dialectically, as the unity of dwelling-mobility.

Existential mobility

In many different ways Heidegger conveyed how homelessness does not just bring insecurity, but also provides the ontological possibilities of authentic movement or what we call "existential mobility". Homelessness carries with it a sense of unfinishedness that seeks future possibilities, people and projects. It is a creative restlessness in which we are

called into our future possibilities. We could say that it is a kind of "eros" or energy which can give a feeling of flow, aliveness and vibrant movement. When called in this way we may feel connected to our life's desires. We can also metaphorise this movement as a "sense of adventure". Therefore, such existential mobility forms one of the dimensions of our theory of well-being.

Although they do not use this term, it could be said that the writings of Boss (1979), Gadamer (1996) and Toombs (1993) emphasise this notion of existential mobility in their considerations of well-being. In this view, well-being is about the access to one's existential possibilities in time and space, with one's body and with others. In emphasising the notion of possibilities, we are also emphasising the "forward moving" quality of living towards the future and finding meaningful projects there. For Boss (1979), well-being is understood as all the ways in which we are able to have access to, and actualise a full range of experiential and behavioural possibilities as articulated by Heidegger in *Being and Time*. These possibilities, which Heidegger called "existential", include spatiality, temporality, intersubjectivity, embodiment and mood. For Boss, to restore well-being is to restore one's potential to be connected in all of these ways. Thus, for example, to help restore a depressed person's temporal range, the psychotherapist becomes interested in the ways in which the future has become uninviting to the person; to help restore well-being for a person whose physical movement is very limited, a helper may focus on the well-being possibilities of facilitating contact with greater spatial horizons through accessing beautiful and expansive sights, smells and sounds; to help restore well-being in an ill person isolated in intensive care, a mere human touch or voice may be the intersubjective welcome that is needed to invite the person out of their sense of isolation. In his writings on health and well-being, Gadamer (1996) indicated how healthy people are embodied in such a way that they are unpreoccupied with their physical condition, thus free to participate in all the powers that their bodies afford. Also, Toombs (1993) provides a number of descriptions of ill health as the truncation of, or deficit in, healthy existential possibilities of spatiality, temporality, intersubjectivity, embodiment and mood. Both Heidegger and Boss have emphasised how these different existential possibilities are equi-primordial, that is, that they are all implicated in one another without privileging any one of them in a way that sets up any particular existential dimension as primary. Our theory of well-being, in its emphasis on "existential mobility", is thus interested in all of the ways one can experience existential mobility with

different emphases. However, this dimension of “existential mobility” alone is at risk of obscuring another equally important but distinctive dimension of well-being: the dimension that we call “existential dwelling”.

Existential dwelling

In his later work, Heidegger became more focused on a kind of existential homecoming that authentically grounds the human potentiality for a peaceful attunement to existence. In his writings on “letting-be-ness” (*Gelassenheit*), and “making a space for”, Heidegger articulated the possibility of a human relationship to being that was characterised by acceptance and the possibility of peace. Already in *Being and Time* there was a concern to face and come to terms with finitude and the existential vulnerabilities of existence. There is some question here about the extent to which such “coming to terms” was a true acceptance rather than a resolute form of courage to bear ones aloneness and responsibility. After what has been called the “turning” (*Kehre*), Heidegger concerns himself much more directly with the kind of comportment required that allows Being and beings “to be”. He believed that this had great import for a philosophical project that tries to think Being in a fresh way that is more original than traditional Western Metaphysical frameworks. However, implicit in this we also find some important clues for a more peaceful attunement to life’s everyday vicissitudes. In the comportment of “*Gelassenheit*” or “letting-be-ness” there is an openness to allow whatever is there to simply be present in the manner that it is present, before one rushes in to try to change it. We would like to express the essence of this quality in the term “existential dwelling”. To dwell is to come home to one’s situation, to hear what is there, to abide, to linger and to be gathered there with what belongs there. When such dwelling is able to be fully supported, there may be a mood of peacefulness. But peacefulness is only one possible attunement within dwelling. The essence of dwelling is simply the willingness to be there, whatever this “being there” is like. One can come to dwelling in many ways such as sadness, suffering, concern, attentiveness, acceptance, relaxation or patience. Dwelling is intentional in its attunement in that it allows the world, the body, things, others and the flow of time to be what it is. It is a form of being grounded in the present moment, supported by a past that is arriving and the openness of a future that is calling. Dwelling makes room for all this. Although peacefulness and “being at one” with “what is there” is its deepest calling and possibility, such homecoming is invariably through

homelessness if it is to be authentic. To dwell is to “come home” to what is there with oneself and the world, whatever the qualities of that may be.

There is a paradox to existential dwelling. In coming home to what “is there”, there is not necessarily an eradication of suffering, pain and the existential vicissitudes of life. So how can such dwelling constitute a core dimension of well-being? What is it about this dwelling that can be called well-being? Just this: that there is a felt quality to “making room for” and “letting-be-ness” that constitutes a kind of peace, in spite of everything, that is different from the kind of peace that depends on the eradication of limiting conditions. If we were to follow Heidegger’s project to speak the possibility of possibilities, we would say that, in existential dwelling, human being is inhering in Being; that is, that such dwelling is not just a psychological state but a description of a relationship of belonging between human being and her/his ground.

Conceptually, it is possible to distinguish the two dimensions of mobility and dwelling: mobility emphasises the call of the future and the energetic feeling of possibility; dwelling emphasises a settling into the present moment with its acceptance of things as they are. In his later work, however, Heidegger opened up the term “*Gegnet*” and offers a way to speak of how dwelling and mobility can come together as an integrated unified experience that forms the deepest possibility of well-being. We thus now turn to *Gegnet* and what we have called “dwelling-mobility”.

Dwelling-mobility: *Gegnet*

In this section we wish to consider how Heidegger’s notion of *Gegnet* may help us to think about the ultimate essential unity of mobility and dwelling in the context of well-being.

Heidegger never eradicates the givenness of homelessness, but what he does open up at various levels and stages is a space in which homelessness does not exclude the possibility of well-being. This kind of well-being has to be inclusive enough in order to hold open the possibility of homecoming within homelessness. He thus had to find a language and a way of thinking that could express this paradox. Because the words “dwelling” and “mobility”, “home” and “homelessness” divert attention from each other, it is difficult to imagine how both these dimensions can live together as a source of well-being. But we can do this by unfolding some of the implications of Heidegger’s use of the term “*Gegnet*” in an ontological context. Mugerauer (2008) provides a useful summary of what is meant by the term:

Gegnet is the opening that lets the horizon come forth as horizon, permits all to shelter, and lets everything come back home to its ownness, which is, at one and the same time, in/as their belonging together. “To the already potent figure of homecoming in ‘return to itself’, Heidegger adds the long-anticipated, long held off final possibility of completion: opening gathers and returns everything ‘to rest in its own abiding’ to rest, to stay at home in itself and to that to which it belongs.” (Mugerauer, 2008, p. 467)

Implicit in this idea of Gegnet as “gathering in the abiding expanse” is a sense in which there is both the freedom and openness of mobility (being called into the novelty of open horizons) as well as the “coming back home to itself” of dwelling (resting in the peacefulness of its own abiding). This togetherness of mobility and dwelling provides the possibility of well-being with both a “rootedness” as well as a “flow”. This rooted flow, this “dwelling-mobility”, is a space in which “homecoming” can be found by embracing “homelessness”. So, in Gegnet, there is always already the togetherness of dwelling and mobility. To sojourn in “dwelling-mobility” is to . . . “endure in the abiding expanse” (Mugerauer, 2008, p. 469).

Summary of existential theory of well-being: dwelling-mobility

In this theory we approached the question of what it is about well-being that makes all kinds of well-being possible. Thus, our phenomenon is about the structure of well-being before any particular categorisation of well-being, such as, for example, physical well-being, social well-being, emotional well-being and economic well-being. Our structure of well-being thus makes these categorical forms of well-being possible and provides the essence of well-being that coheres through all its variations.

Consistent with a phenomenological approach, well-being is both a way of being-in-the-world, as well as how this way of being-in-the-world is felt as an experience.

The deepest possibility of existential well-being lies in the unity of dwelling-mobility. Guided by Heidegger’s notion of Gegnet, dwelling-mobility describes both the “adventure” of being called into existential possibilities as well as the “being at home with” what has been given. This deepest possibility carries with it a feeling of rootedness and flow, peace and possibility.

However, the variations of well-being lie in the dialectic of mobility and dwelling, as well as the

relative emphasis that each dimension offers as a possible variation of well-being.

The essence of mobility lies in all the ways in which we are called into the existential possibilities of moving forward with time, space, others, mood and our bodies. The feeling of this “moving forward” is one of energised flow.

The essence of dwelling lies in all the ways that we existentially “come home” to what we have been given in time, space, others, mood and our bodies. The feeling of this “coming home” is one of acceptance, “rootedness” and peace.

Well-being, as we have articulated it, is a positive possibility that is independent of health and illness, but is a resource for both. In other words, well-being can be found within illness and well-being is more than health. However, we wish to acknowledge that well-being, as an ontic everyday experience, is never complete, but something of the essence of well-being provides a possibility that always calls and can shine through. As such, our theory of well-being as “dwelling-mobility” describes a capacity for movement and a capacity for settling.

Well-being possibilities: kinds and levels of well-being

Gegnet as an experiential possibility is inclusive of all the kinds and levels of well-being. It would appear to be an existential possibility that calls to us from deep within embodied being. In a sense, the body knows this unity of dwelling-mobility, even though one’s life circumstances and conscious experience may not often present this deepest possibility of well-being. However the emphases that we have articulated as mobility and dwelling can also provide a conceptual foundation for considering various levels and kinds of well-being that stop short of the unity of dwelling-mobility. We would like to offer several kinds of well-being experiences in which dwelling and mobility occur with a number of different emphases. These emphases are informed by the following lifeworld constituents as articulated by Husserl and elaborated by Heidegger: spatiality, temporality, intersubjectivity, mood and embodiment. When dwelling is experienced in a spatial way, one has a sense of being at home; when mobility is experienced in a spatial way, one has a sense of adventure. When dwelling is experienced in a temporal way, there is a sense of being grounded in the present moment; when mobility is experienced in a temporal way, there is a sense of temporal “flow” and forward movement. When dwelling is experienced in an intersubjective way, there is a sense of kinship and belonging; when mobility is experienced in an intersubjective way, there is a sense of mysterious interpersonal

attraction. When dwelling is experienced as mood, there is a sense of peace; when mobility is experienced as mood, there is a sense of excitement or desire. When dwelling is experienced as a form of personal identity, there is a sense of “being at one with” the world; when mobility is experienced as a form of personal identity, there is sense of “I can”. When dwelling is experienced in an embodied way, there is a sense of comfort; when mobility is experienced in an embodied way, there is a sense of vitality.

All these experiential qualities, although overlapping, provide distinctive nuances or emphases. As such they can provide a conceptual framework for the range of distinctive resources that can be drawn upon or developed on in peoples’ well-being journeys.

If one was trying to take this framework into a more applied direction, one would be concerned with facilitating possibilities for “movement”, as well as possibilities for “letting-be-ness” at both existential and literal levels.

We cannot in this article pursue these applications in detail. This is the subject of a future article. The practical applications, however, proceed from a thoughtfulness about different kinds of mobility and dwelling at literal, metaphorical and existential levels, and how these different possible variations may be experienced within the context of fundamental lifeworld structures (existentials) such as temporality, intersubjectivity, embodiment, spatiality and mood. This sensitising (rather than prescriptive) way to consider the kind and level of well-being that may be possible in a concrete circumstance may offer some practical directions. So, for example, informed by the theory, one may think of one kind of possible well-being variation as “spatial mobility”, another as “temporal mobility”, and another as “mooded dwelling”, etc. In thinking about the question of what spatial mobility is possible for a person, one could, together with a person who has complex disabilities, and can’t go outside, consider what expansive spatial horizons may be possible within that context. An example of “temporal mobility” may refer to the challenge of how to help a person access past memories (move into the past) when their short-term memory is failing. An example of “mooded dwelling” may refer to the challenge of how to help a person feel more peaceful and “at home” in a busy clinical care environment.

So, the theory itself may begin to provide a way of thinking about what the ontic possibilities and variations of well-being could be within the ontology of well-being as a human possibility.

Within this perspective of well-being, people find their own unique way towards well-being, and there is a play between all these nuances, one’s personal history, and the limitations that life presents. But in all these variations, the body knows something about well-being as “dwelling-mobility”, and such tacit-knowing forms the experiential touchstone for guiding our quest towards homecoming within the homeless.

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