

## The Home of All Other Homes: A Phenomenological Inquiry<sup>4</sup>

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**Abstract:** This essay focuses on a phenomenon that warranted the attention of Ronald C. Arnett (2017) in his book *Levinas's Rhetorical Demand: The Unending Obligation of Communication Ethics* and is essential to the wellbeing of human beings: the home. My discussion emphasizes a phenomenological understanding of this dwelling place. Insights are drawn primarily from the philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas. I turn to these two phenomenologists after offering some general comments about the home that are intended to complicate the all too easy and idealistic way of conceiving this habitat. The essay concludes with a case that allows me to relate in a positive way the thinking of Heidegger, Levinas, and Arnett: G-d's announcing its name to Moses on Mount Sinai. With this case, we learn, among other things, that communication ethics is grounded in what I term the "home of all other homes." Without this home, communication ethics would not exist—nor would we.

**Keywords:** home; phenomenology; Heidegger, Martin; Levinas, Emmanuel; communication ethics

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In this essay, I focus on a phenomenon that has received little consideration in the literature of communication studies, though warranting the attention of Ronald C. Arnett in his award-winning book *Levinas's Rhetorical Demand: The Unending Obligation of Communication Ethics* and most importantly being essential to the well-being of human beings: the home. Gaston Bachelard (1969) affirms the status of this dwelling place when he notes that home "is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life" (6–7). Interpreting home with such glorious terms is a perfect way to describe what is commonly considered the perfect way of being, what this habitat is supposed to be as a source for living the good life in one's

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<sup>4</sup> I am honored to be a contributor to the present celebration of the work of Dr. Ron Arnett: a trusted friend, inspiring teacher, researcher, and interlocutor who is always willing to share the life-giving gift of acknowledgment. Where art thou? Here I am!

everyday existence: a place that is well situated and decorated, a place of security, convenience, cordiality, relaxation, happiness, and love; a place that encourages the development of personal relationships and strong family ties; a place where one need not worry about “being oneself”; in short, a place of genuine care and comfort.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the well-known sayings “Home sweet home,” “Home is where the heart is,” and “There is no place like home”: home is a place where you can feel at home with yourself, others, and the immediate surroundings. Not feeling at home when one is at home is, for most people, an unhealthy way of being in the world. Indeed, it is depressing.

My discussion of home emphasizes a phenomenological understanding of this dwelling place. Insights are drawn primarily from the philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas. I turn to these two phenomenologists after offering some general comments about the home that are intended to complicate the all-too-easy and idealistic way of conceiving this habitat, as noted above. The home does not have to be perfect to be a home. The following claim by Heidegger (1977) is key for my purposes:

Language is the house of being. In its home human beings dwell. Those who think and those who create words are the guardians of this home. Their guardianship [ethical responsibility] accomplishes the manifestation [truth] of being insofar as they bring this manifestation to language and preserve it in language through their saying [communication]. (193)<sup>6</sup>

The act of manifesting the truth requires rhetorical competence so as to increase the effectiveness of the language being employed. Levinas advances what this claim entails by emphasizing how the Otherness (alterity) of other people plays a fundamental role in establishing the ethical nature of the home environment. Here I also draw insights from Arnett’s book on Levinas, which includes significant insights that clarify Levinas’s conception of the relationship between home, ethics, and rhetoric. I conclude my discussion with a case that allows me to relate in a positive way the thinking of Heidegger, Levinas, and Arnett on the phenomenon of the home. Up until that point, controversy characterizes the relationship between the three thinkers. The case I offer cites one of the most important moments in Jewish history: G–d announcing his name to Moses on Mount Sinai. This case belongs in the literature of communication ethics.<sup>7</sup> With this case we learn, among other things, that communication ethics is grounded in what I term the “home of all other homes.” Without this home communication ethics would not exist. Nor would we.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, scan the pictures and articles in such popular magazines as *House Beautiful*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and *Good Housekeeping*.

<sup>6</sup> The bracketed terms—ethical responsibility, truth, communication—receive further clarification as the essay progresses.

<sup>7</sup> For a noteworthy introduction to this literature, see Ronald C. Arnett, Janie M. Harden Fritz, and Leeanne M. Bell’s (2009) *Communication Ethics Literacy: Dialogue and Difference*.

## Being and Feeling at Home

According to Agnes Heller (1984), “integral to the average everyday life is awareness of a fixed point in space, a firm position from which we ‘proceed’ (whether every day or over larger periods of time) and to which we return in due. This firm position is what we call ‘home’” (239). Indeed, one’s home is both a place of origin and a destination that is longed for after a busy day, a weary journey, or even an enjoyable vacation. It is satisfying to be able to say and really mean that “it’s good to be back home,” even if the home needs repair. A nomad would object to Heller’s way of thinking because for this lived body the simultaneous nature of the home as a “place of origin” and “destination” does not fit into the nomad’s way of being in the world; a nomad’s home is mobile, forever changing with every move.

The conception of a home as “origin and destination” is confirmed by religion. As part of a related research project, I am permitted to join a devout Christian family of three sisters and a brother when they visit their dying mother in a hospice facility. The children are singing hymns. The mother opens her eyes and assures her children, “Don’t worry my loves. I am going home to my Maker.” I wanted to ask what this home looked like and how it functioned. Given the situation, the question would have been quite inappropriate: the wrong words spoken in the wrong way and wrong time, thus risking the chance of having the whole family not feel at home with my interruption. I imagined later what the family could have said in response with sharp-witted rhetoric. First, their annoyance: “Please sir, have a heart.” Then, the biting humor: “For remember, home is where the heart is.” And if the American clergyman and social reformer Charles Henry Parkhurst was in the room, then he could have added a bit of rhetoric of his own: “Home interprets heaven. Home is heaven for beginners” (Quarantine Memories NOTES 2020, 1).

Parkhurst also brings to mind the importance of the educational environment of home. The home promotes our well-being by providing a refuge wherein one can feel more confident when learning how to cope with the difficulties of everyday life. The home is a place where youth learn to crawl, walk, talk, eat, play, converse, be good and bad, and to care for others who are busy caring for them as they teach their loved ones all kinds of things. As one inhabits a home, it in turn begins and continues to inhabit oneself. Hence, for example, the possibility of becoming upset with a guest’s table manners and wondering if he “was raised in a pig sty.” Our bodies are home to our home’s ways of being a social, political, moral, and, like it or not, unforgettable environment. Do you know people who were raised in a “loving” home only to become disgusting creatures that do not “give a damn”? I was raised to appreciate rhetorical questions.

This is not to say, however, that a dwelling place no longer qualifies as being a home if it lacks any of the qualities of perfection mentioned earlier. The perfect home will be different for each person, depending on his or her needs and personality. Liz Arnold (2012) makes the point this way when commenting on the values of a “perfectly imperfect” home: Some people

dislike homes that look too perfect and un-lived-in. But embracing imperfection does not mean anything goes—it means realizing that a house needs signs of life. When I was growing up, my home was neat and attractive, but it had no soul: no memento was ever brought back from holiday, no flowers ever stuck in a vase. (10)

Despite its loss of soul, the house still displayed signs of life with loving parents. Or consider this: A student of mine, an anorexic, once told me that she did not feel at home when she went home because her parents were always giving her grief about her weight and physical appearance. She remedied the problem when she retreated to her bedroom, where she could feel at home as she spent hours late into the night on her computer, hooking up with other anorexics who reinforced her lifestyle while remaining silent about how this lifestyle eventually leads to death. Homes can make people not feel at home with themselves and others. A home within a home can solve the problem, even if it fosters unhealthy behavior.

However, sometimes the discovery of a home proves impossible and the consequences are horrendous—hence, the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the home confinement of families and their members suffering emotional disorders such as anxiety and depression (Rodríguez-Fernández 2021). The pandemic taught us a lesson: a home loses something of its character, its ethos, when its comfort becomes confinement. As was the case with my anorexic student, home computers and social media did allow for an outlet, but confinement still held its ground and proved deadly.

We need homes, a dwelling place, where at the very least some degree of comfort can be found and one can thereby feel at home in the environment at hand. Walking in a forest, attending a concert, hanging out in a neighborhood with your “homies.” The examples are many. One that typically is not referenced in discussions of the scope and function of the home is how a home can form in the hearts and minds of people at a funeral as they listen to a eulogy of epideictic grandeur that remains memorable in the lives of the attendees, is always there on the right occasion to stir others to speech or to action. By way of our minds and hearts we provide accommodations that enable the dearly departed to come back to life, to be there with us, and to guide us as we carry on their teachings. Here on earth, our lived bodies offer a home for the dead. As the speaker offers unqualified praise to family members and friends, she constructs a home where personal relationships and strong family ties can flourish and where people can know together the truth of whatever calls for concerned thought and thoughtful behavior. Feeling at home with the truth and others is an honorable way to live.

In his recent book *On Truth*, Harry G. Frankfurt (2017) emphasizes the relationship between truth and home:

To the extent that we grasp the truths that we need to know, we can develop sensible judgments concerning what we would like to happen, and concerning the outcomes to which various possible courses of action will probably lead. This is because we are then more or less fully aware of what we are dealing with, and because we know how the objects and events that would be implicated in our following one course of action or another will respond to

what we do. In a certain part of the world, we are therefore able to move about feeling somewhat more relaxed and secure. We know what the important constituents of our environment are, we know where to find them, and we can maneuver freely without bumping into things. In that region of the world, we can begin—so to speak—to feel ourselves at home. (56–57)

Frankfurt notes, however, that the home in which we find ourselves may not be a very attractive or inviting locale. Rather, “it may be riddled with terrifying pitfalls and traps. . . . Far from our being *fully confident* in facing what awaits us, we may have no confidence whatever that we will succeed in negotiating it effectively, or even that we will be able to get through it alive” (56–57). Still, Frankfurt maintains that

it is nearly always more advantageous to *face* the facts with which we must deal than to remain ignorant of them. After all, hiding our eyes from reality will not cause any reduction of its dangers and threats; plus, our chances of dealing successfully with the hazards that it presents will surely be greater if we can bring ourselves to see things straight. (56–57, italics in the original)

In short, for Frankfurt, knowing the truth is more important than feeling at home with it, though it is nice to have both the truth and the feeling of being at home. And sometimes we will tell lies designed to have others believe we are telling the truth so that they can feel at home with us and themselves, no matter the disgusting consequences.

We need homes. This need is rooted in how we exist as metaphysical creatures, who, in having to deal with the uncertainty of our temporal existence and the anxiety that such uncertainty inspires, have developed a passionate longing for some degree of meaning, order, and completeness or perfection in our lives. This metaphysical urge is at work, for example, as religious souls pray to God, scientists formulate mathematical equations in an attempt to identify the ultimate laws of the universe, and philosophers try to determine the meaning of being. Such endeavors display what William Earle (1976) describes as “a nostalgia for something final and absolute” (157). This description is especially appropriate in that the feeling identified here—“nostalgia,” from the Greek *nostos*, meaning “to return home”—speaks of that state of being wherein one is “homesick.” Such sickness threatens the health of human beings. Concerned with the seriousness of this threat, Akiko Busch (1999) writes, “There are times when the very idea of home seems an impossible proposition. There are other times when our homes express infinite possibilities, when they reflect exactly who we are and what we might be” (11). Busch elaborates on this expressive function when she notes that a home has

a language of its own, one that includes not only the slight sounds, hums, and vibrations of all the electrical appliances that keep it going, but a host of other interior systems, a network of social and cultural currents, those habits, beliefs, and values that also make it function. (14)

Busch contends “that by being attuned to all these systems . . . we might arrive at some genuine understanding of what it is that gives power to the places we live” (161).

The existential philosopher William Barrett argues that what gives power to all the homes referred to so far is another home, one that makes possible the existence of our everyday homes, be they perfect or hellish or anywhere in between. Barrett (1990) writes:

We may chatter about alienation as a cultural or social phenomenon, but all such talk falls short of the deepest dimension in which man is a stranger in his universe. And yet this dimension of strangeness is the peculiar home where he is drawn closest to all that is. (154)

This home is not a human creation but comes to us as the spatial and temporal function of our existence—that function that we measure with our clocks, calendars, maps, and computers but is always other than what these measures report. Besides what astrophysicists can tell us about what happened 13.7 billion years ago when the big bang occurred, the origins of the dimension remain a mystery. Nevertheless, the presence of the dimension, its otherness, is an empirical phenomenon that we are fated to face on a daily basis and, as Barrett puts it, deal with the “burden” posed by its constant presence. Barrett continues:

Is it too great, amid our other anxieties, for us to carry? It makes us feel more homeless within the world than any animal can be. Yet is it altogether a burden? Is it not rather a gift too? It is given to us and to no other animal to stand with the mystery. It claims us as its own and we are at home there where no other animal can be. Tonight the stars shine overhead like old and reliable friends. This cosmos is ours to the degree that we are still able to be enthralled by its stupendous presence. (154)

To be enthralled is to be called by and emotionally attuned to the showing (the call for attention) and saying (how the showing speaks to who, how, and why we are) of the presence of some object of consciousness, the way it is disclosing its being, its truth. I now turn to Heidegger, Levinas, and Arnett to clarify and elaborate on this point and its significance.

## Heidegger, Levinas, and Arnett

The home heralded by Barrett is what Heidegger, in his ontological analysis of the meaning and truth of Being, describes as the fundamental dwelling place (*ethos*) of human being, which as briefly noted above is fundamentally a process of becoming, grounded in the otherness of our spatial and temporal existence, and whose trajectory opens us to the objective uncertainty of the future. We are this openness, which is forever presenting us with the possibility of change, of things being otherwise than usual, of how what is yet to come in our lives may require us, for *truth*'s sake, to rethink and revise what we currently hold to be correct about our ongoing commitments, involvements, and interpretive practices. Owing to the

objective uncertainty of the future, our self-assured beliefs regarding what we claim to know about ourselves, others, and the world in general are always being called into question, whereby the security, stability, and comfort of our feeling at home with ourselves and others is disrupted. What can happen tomorrow? Who can say for sure?

The call of the spatial and temporal fabric of human being discloses itself “in silence” to the self living it. This nonverbal act of communication and revelation is what is “talked about” with the happening of the call: “the givenness” (Hyde 2001, 41), the “bare ‘that-it-is’” of the self’s existence (Heidegger 1962, 321). This primal happening marks the original instance of language. And so, Heidegger (1977) will say, as noted earlier, “Language is the house of being. In its home human beings dwell.” We dwell in the spatial and temporal fabric of a primal state of otherness.

The presence of any object of existence also sounds a call for attention, for this presence, like the call of the spatial and temporal fabric of human being, is a *showing*, a disclosing and revealing of the givenness of the object’s actually being present here and now. The Pulitzer prize-winning author Annie Dillard (1988) emphasizes the importance of our being ready and willing to witness this disclosure in the search for truth:

If we were not here, material events like the passage of seasons would lack even the meager meanings we are able to muster for them. The show would play [not to a home but] to an empty house, as do all those falling stars which fall in the daytime. (90–91)

Hearing the happening here enhances one’s ability to be attuned to the truth disclosed in the silent showing and nonverbal saying of objects of consciousness. This showing and saying is the primal being of language at work in the spatial and temporal fabric of human being, the home of all other homes.

At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, to the world, “Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive.” You empty yourself and wait, listening. After a time, you hear it: there is nothing there. There is nothing but those things only, those created objects, discrete, growing or holding, or swaying, being rained on or raining, held, flooding, or ebbing, standing, or spreading. You feel the world’s word as a tension, a hum, a single chorused note everywhere the same. This is it: this hum is silence. Nature does utter a peep, just this one. (Dillard 1988, 90–91)

The philosopher Jean-Louis Chretien’s (2004) way of making this point is captivating: “Our eyes are able to watch over the call that rises from things and truly see things only because they have heard it” (83). Whatever we see and hear takes place in the openness of existence and the question it raises: Are you sure?

A question is an interruption. It follows, then, that along with its call for perfectibility, openness, and acknowledging the truth of otherness, the home of human being is fundamentally an interruption; it never stops putting us and our beliefs to the test; it never ceases bringing to mind the issue of contingency. The interruption that we are speaks to us of how existence is always completely incomplete, perfectly imperfect. The interruption that we are is a question always

being asked. And so again and again: Are you sure? The questioning function of our existence is a reality check: it calls us to perfect our capacity to be as receptive and open-minded as possible to the ways the world speaks and shows its truths and to think and act in accordance with these truths, at least for the time being. The call thus speaks to us of an ethical responsibility that becomes all the more apparent as we attempt to be true to our openness. Hence, in so doing, the call shows itself to be a perfective impulse at work in the presence of human existence. We are called to improve, better, and perfect ourselves (from the Latin *perficere*: *per*, “thoroughly,” and *facere*, “to make”). Endowed with this passion, we are fated to struggle with the ever-present challenge of being as “complete” as we can be as we grow, mature, and become wise with experience. Responding to this call is the original calling (vocation) of human being. Before we take on any other vocation, we are homemakers. The home of human being can be a brutal place to be, but its instructional directives warrant praise for their ethical and democratic function. Hence, we can agree with Barrett’s earlier noted claim that the home of all other homes is a “gift.”

The effort needed to deal with this ever-present state of being called involves people in the construction of dwelling places or worlds of meaning where a more stable and comfortable way of existence is created and maintained, at least for the time being, and where they can feel at home in their environmental surroundings and engagements. Heidegger, for example, looks to van Gogh’s painting of shoes to illustrate the function of the call. The painting provides a dwelling place where witnesses can be touched and moved by the showing of its presence and with this showing what it has to say to us. Heidegger sounds a call to others about the painting’s significance and thereby assists in maintaining the value of van Gogh’s own awe-inspiring response to a call that is now announced by the presence of shoes. All serious writers struggle with their involvement in the showing, saying, and recalling activity of communicating to others the truth of their concerns. The home of human being calls for development of rhetorical skills: discovering and using the right words, in the right way, and at the right time in order to be persuasive about whatever truth concerns you.

All that I am saying here is accounted for by Heidegger throughout his works as he develops an appreciation of the relationship between home and language. An earlier noted quotation deserves repeating: “Language is the house of being. In its home human beings dwell. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home. Their guardianship accomplishes the manifestation of being insofar as they bring this manifestation to language and preserve it in language through their saying.” Heidegger wants us to hear the call and speak the truth (as he struggles to do with his philosophy). He is answering a call that lies at the heart of human being, which shows and says of itself to be a dwelling place, a primal home that we cannot live without.

Communication is called for by the educational directives of this home, a call that is associated with what Heidegger (1962) describes as a “call of conscience” (see Hyde 2001): a knowing (Latin, *scientia*) together with others (*con*). Heidegger gave a seminar on Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* in 1924 where he examined everyday communication behavior in private and public life and the practice of rhetoric that



enhances its effectiveness. The rhetorically informed activity of knowing together is not optional for a species that must engage in the activity in order to maintain and promote the well-being of its members. As I have noted elsewhere, this

rhetorical act defines its “architectural” function: how, for example, its practice grants such living room to our lives that we might feel more at home with others and our surroundings. The practice of rhetoric would have one appreciate how the premises and other materials of arguments are not only tools of logic but also mark out the boundaries and domains of thought that, depending on how their specific discourses are designed and arranged, may be particularly inviting and moving for some audience. (Hyde 2011, 37)

The practice of rhetoric makes use of our inventive and symbolic capacity to construct dwelling places that are stimulating and aesthetically, socially, and perhaps theologically instructive. We are creatures who are destined to be caught up in the process of providing the openings of these places where good (and bad) things can happen. These venues serve the purposes of those who would perfect the world, heal the nation, or care for others. The call that lies at the heart of human existence demands as much. We are homemakers, beings who, as noted above, need to develop the skill of discovering and using the right words, in the right way, and at the write time in order to be persuasive about whatever truth concerns us.

As homemakers instructed by the call of the primal home of our being, we are challenged to be true to our openness, to acknowledge the showing and saying of the truth, to be competent in our rhetorical and architectural use of discourse, to value our interruptive nature, to engage in the democratic struggle for perfection, and to be ethically responsible toward others. The call of the primal home of human being challenges us with instructional directives that serve our homemaking ability and that grant moral integrity to the practice of communication ethics. Heidegger uses the term “resoluteness” to characterize the self’s decision to respond to the call (Heidegger 1962, 344). Resoluteness does not isolate the self from others; rather it “pushes [the self] into solicitous Being-with Others” (344). Elaborating on this point, Heidegger offers the following important observation: A human being’s

resoluteness towards itself is what first makes it possible to let Others who are with it “be” in their own potentiality-for-Being, and to co-disclose this potentiality in the solicitude which leaps forth and liberates. When [a human being] is resolute, it can become the “conscience” of Others. Only by authentically Being-their-selves in resoluteness can people authentically be with one another—not by ambiguous and jealous stipulations and talkative fraternizing in the “they” and in what “they” want to undertake. (344–45)

Heidegger uses the term “the ‘they’” to describe the others that are involved in this way of being. The term is typically employed in a demeaning way, associated with the world of “publicness” and its “mass”-like (Plato), “crowd”-like (Kierkegaard), and “herd”-like (Nietzsche) propensity to bring about a mindless

conformism amongst its adherents. For example, Heidegger notes that in our publicness

the real dictatorship of the “they” is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* . . . take pleasure; we read, see and judge about literature and are as *they* see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the “great mass” as *they* shrink back; we find “shocking” what *they* find shocking. . . . In this averageness with which [the “they”] prescribes what can and may be ventured, it keeps watch over everything exceptional that thrusts itself to the fore. Every kind of priority gets noiselessly suppressed. Overnight, everything that is primordial gets glossed over as something that has long been well known. Everything gained by a struggle becomes just something to be manipulated. (Heidegger 1962, 164–65)

For the most part, Heidegger displays much phenomenological talent when disclosing the ontological workings of the primordial home of Being. Where he falls short in this task is developing an in-depth analysis of how resoluteness promotes the self’s interpersonal and ethical relationship with others. What would be especially helpful is a case-based assessment of how the practice of rhetoric called for by the primal home of human being as described above can be an antidote for the disease of mindless conformism.

This lack of attention of the interpersonal, an ethical relationship between the self and the Other, serves as a major impetus for the philosophy of Levinas, who would have us understand that it is the otherness of the Other, not the otherness of the spatial and temporal fabric of human being, that defines the dwelling place of our primal home in existence and where the original showing and saying of truth occurs. The presence of the Other, or what Levinas terms the “face of the Other,” is for him the origin of the earlier noted instructional directives informing our homemaking ability. Levinas interprets the otherness of the Other as an existential phenomenon of transcendence that he maintains is an indication of G-d’s presence in our lives. Responding (“Here I am!”) to the call (“Where art thou?”) of the Other, we dwell in a relationship that defines the original ethically informed home. As Arnett (2017) puts it, “The face of the Other functions as an original dwelling, a primal home for the possibility of transcendence” (73). Moreover, the ethics that is central to Levinas’s philosophy “dwells in a home composed of unending responsibility for the Other” (Arnett 2017, 173).

In his reading of Levinas, Arnett grants home a status that is true to the philosopher’s words, although Levinas’s analysis of the matter is more comprehensive. For example, in his most celebrated book *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas (1969) tells us that “The home . . . serve[s] for habitation as the hammer for the driving in a nail or the pen for writing. For it does belong to the gear consisting of things necessary for the life of man. It serves to shelter him from the inclemencies of the weather, to hide him from enemies or the importunate. And yet, within the system of finalities in which human life maintains itself the home occupies a privileged place” (152). The home defines a realm of “interiority” where “the primary hospitable welcome” and “intimacy” are offered to the Other (155). The home thus warrants acknowledgment as being a dwelling place of genuine

openness for the practice of acknowledgment and where it can be said, as Levinas (1991) does elsewhere, “‘Thanks to God’ I am another for the others” (158).

Be it at home or elsewhere, the face of the Other, in its mere presence before it subscribes to the socially circumscribed rituals of self-presentation, is its own good showing—a showing that is good first and foremost because it speaks of the miracle of the meaning and mystery of life and, in so doing, grants the self a dwelling place where ethical behavior and moral integrity can be practiced and developed. Levinas (1989) would have us keep in mind that

The proximity of the other is the face’s meaning, and it means from the very start in a way that goes beyond those [media created] plastic forms which forever try to cover the face like a mask of their presence to perception. But always the face shows through these forms. Prior to any particular expression and beneath all particular expressions, which cover over and protect with an immediately adopted face or countenance, there is the nakedness and destitution of the expression as such, that is to say extreme exposure, defenselessness, vulnerability itself . . . The Other becomes my neighbor precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me [with its interrupting call of conscience], and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question. (82–83)

And the more we learn to respect this call the more we can feel at home with its presence, with what it shows and says of its truth.

The saying of the face speaks of otherness; its call is the primal discourse that the face announces and that Levinas (1987b) describes as the original “event of communication” (125) that occurs between the Other and the self. The event is nonverbal communication in its most original form. Arnett (2017) thus claims that “Silence is the home of saying” (106); although, as indicated above, the claim is first made by Heidegger when describing the communication that comes from the interruption sounded by the otherness, the original homeland, of our spatial and temporal existence. The difference, however, is important. Levinas is talking about the self-Other relationship, not the self’s relationship with its own interruptive nature. The face speaks, and the self is made aware of an “exposure” (a showing) of otherness coming from the presence of the Other. Levinas (1969) refers to this evocative event as the “epiphany of the face” (199) from which emerges a “call of conscience” (a knowing together) (see Hyde 2001). The importance of this call and its educational value cannot be overemphasized in Levinas’s philosophy. The call defines an act of “teaching” that informs the self about the status of its existence and its obligation to serve the Other. Levinas (1984) offers what I take to be his most explicit description of this process when he notes:

I am defined as a subjectivity, a particular person, as an “I” [or self], precisely because I am exposed to the other. It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual “I.” So that I become a responsible or ethical “I” to the extent that I agree to depose or dethrone myself—to abdicate my position of centrality—in favor of the vulnerable other. . . . The ethical “I” is subjectivity precisely in so far as it kneels before the other, sacrificing its own liberty *to the more primordial call of the other*. . . . I

can never escape the fact that the other has demanded a response from me before I affirm my freedom not to respond to his demand. (62–63)

Levinas grants priority to the primal home of the otherness of the Other, not to the primal home of the otherness of the spatial and temporal fabric of the self's existence. But is it not the case that in listening to the face, to its voice, to the call of the Other, so as to come to terms with the question of ethics, Levinas is giving thought, albeit in a restricted way, to what Heidegger has to say about the primal home of human being? I have not forced the issue until now: Heidegger deciphers the scope and function of the home and its directives of saying, showing, truth, conscience, acknowledgment, openness, perfection, interruption, language, communication, and rhetoric. Levinas (1994) appropriates these directives in his analysis of the primal home of ethics, but listen to what he has to say about the "truth" of rhetoric:

Rhetoric brings into the meaning in which it culminates a certain beauty, a certain elevation, a certain nobility and an expressivity that imposes itself independently of its truth. Even more than verisimilitude, that beauty we call eloquence seduces the listener.

Clearly in our time the effects of eloquence are everywhere, dominating our entire lives . . . The media of information in all forms—written, spoken, visual—invade the home, keep people listening to an endless discourse, submit them to the seduction of a rhetoric that is only possible if it is eloquent and persuasive in portraying ideas and things too beautiful to be true. (138–39)

Levinas's understanding of rhetoric is sophomoric. Heidegger never spoke of rhetoric in this way, although it is not hard to imagine that he would associate such rhetoric with the world of the "they." But as should be clear by now, this is not the rhetoric that Heidegger favors and that is announced and called for by the primal home of human being. With Levinas's understanding of rhetoric in mind, one wonders how Arnett can speak so positively of Levinas's teachings about the "rhetorical demand" announced by the face of the Other. As best as I can tell it is possible, but only if this demand is understood to originate in the gift of the showing and the saying of the primal home of the spatial and temporal fabric of human being. Despite Arnett's (2017) praiseworthy reading of Levinas, a judgment on the matter is clear. Levinas's use of the right words, in the right way, and at the right time is far less original than he and Arnett would have us believe. Jacques Derrida's (1978) response to Levinas supports this claim: Any discussion of the otherness of the Other presupposes that the Other exists first and foremost in the primal home of the spatial and temporal fabric of human being. Put another way, Levinas could not argue his position unless he was already dwelling in this primal home and seeing and hearing what it has to show and say. Or think of it this way: For Levinas, the self's existence is dependent on the Other. But the Other has to be a self before it is the Other, otherwise there would be no Other to call the self into question.

Despite this critique of Levinas, however, I strongly believe that his philosophy warrants high praise for its commitment to appreciating the ethical nature and truth of the Other; I feel the same way about Arnett's book on Levinas. A commitment to securing the ethical and truthful treatment of others should be unending (see Hyde 2001, 2018; Smith and Hyde 2022). Along with Levinas, Arnett is a model for the commitment that is required to take on the task with all of one's heart. Heidegger neglected this commitment in his philosophy, which caused him much grief and shame given his brief association with National Socialism in the early 1930s. This neglect can be rather stunning whenever Levinas (1969) emphasizes the topic of "suffering" to illustrate the plight of others who are desperately in need of help (see Hyde 2001, 2006).

### **Where Art Thou? Here I Am!**

In concluding this essay, I offer a case that allows me to relate in a positive way the thinking of Heidegger, Levinas, and Arnett. The case marks one of the most important moments in the history of Jewish thought: Moses' conversation with G-d on Mount Sinai. Heidegger, Levinas, and Arnett have an interest in religion.<sup>8</sup>

When Moses first stands in G-d's light, the burning bush, and is told that the Jewish people have a future, he asks for G-d's "Name" and is told, "*Ehyeh-asher-ehyeh*." English renders this reply in a static way: "I am who I am." In Hebrew, however, the dynamic of being open to the future is unequivocal: "I shall be who I shall be." G-d's name is ambiguous. So, what is the case? Is the Word a static, all-in-one, never-changing, complete and thus perfect presence, or is this presence rightly understood as a dynamic happening whereby "the whole truth and nothing but the truth" is yet to come? The static and the dynamic depiction of the Word need not oppose each other, for it is possible to hear the name calling for attention by saying "I am what I shall be." In this case, the dynamic takes priority. According to Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, "Here is a Name (and a God), who is neither completed nor finished. This God is literally not yet" (Kushner 1993, 28).

G-d needs acknowledgment and help in materializing the future; hence, G-d's reply to Moses, which admits as much. The perfection of G-d's being ("I am") is still in the process of becoming ("I shall be") whatever it is. We have a responsibility to answer the call for both G-d's sake and our own. G-d needs our assistance to achieve this goal. According to Rabbi Marc-Alain Quaknin, as human beings accept the responsibility of offering this assistance, their "ethic is no longer that of perfection but of perfectability" (Quaknin 2000, 200). Not being G-d, that is the best we can do for the One who, with an awesome interruption of nothingness—what was there before the big bang—acknowledged our existence in the beginning. We return the favor by heeding G-d's call for help. Rabbi Abraham Heschel's way of phrasing the last point is noteworthy: "All of human history as described in the Bible may be summarized in one phrase: *God is in search*

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<sup>8</sup> Arnett is the former editor of the *Journal of Communication and Religion*.

of man" (Heschel 1955, 136). Rhetoric plays an important role in achieving this result. G-d employs the rhetorical device of ambiguity to initiate the interruption that makes us wonder about all that perfection entails. A moment of communication ethics is unmistakable.

I think it is fair to say that what is going on here is a particular use of the perfectionist impulse of language. G-d warrants acknowledgment for demonstrating a high level of rhetorical competence. G-d is an orator of the first degree. G-d employs the right word (name), in the right way (ambiguity), and at the right time (given the trials and tribulations of Moses and his people) to call attention to what G-d's name names: the truth of its Presence and the concerned thought and behavior that it calls for in order to respect the most holy instance of otherness to be found in the cosmos. Following G-d's ways, we thus have an obligation to perfect our ability to be rhetorically competent—a mainstay of communication ethics. With G-d as our audience, not considering this matter is out of the question. The truth of perfection, of G-d, is on the line.

With G-d's name and what its saying entails, we have directives that were first introduced in Heidegger's analysis of the primal home of human existence: interruption, rhetorical competence, the call of conscience, acknowledgment, perfectibility, openness, language, and truth. It might thus be said that the ontological workings of our being are designed to have us think about and work in the ways of One who asks the question, "Where art thou?" The following remarks of Heidegger are relevant.

Only from the truth of Being can the essence of the holy be thought. Only from the essence of the holy is the essence of divinity to be thought. Only in the light of the essence of divinity can it be thought or said what the word "God" is to signify . . . How can man at the present stage of world history ask at all seriously and rigorously whether the god nears or withdraws, when he has above all neglected to think into the dimension in which alone that question can be asked? (Heidegger 1977, 230)

Although writing long before Heidegger, the radical Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1999) saw the light: "The essential sermon is one's own existence" (263). And this existence is the primal home of human being. It might be said that G-d structured existence in such a way to have us consider G-d's presence whenever the truths that we hold so dear are interrupted and we are wise enough to ask: Are you sure? The question grants Levinas a chance to respond to Heidegger.

G-d is present in existence: "I shall be what I shall be." The primal home exists because G-d made it so. Otherness begets otherness. And it is the presence of others and their interruptive influence that, for Levinas, grants them special significance in the dwelling place of the primal home of human being. Recall Arnett's earlier cited reading of Levinas: "The face of the Other functions as an original dwelling, a primal home for the possibility of transcendence." And the original presence of ethics "dwells in a home composed of unending responsibility for the Other." To repeat part of an earlier noted claim by Levinas: "I am defined as a subjectivity, as a particular person, as an 'I,' precisely because I am exposed

to the other. It is my incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual 'I.' . . . I can never escape the fact that the other has demanded a response from me before I affirm my freedom not to respond to his demand."

For Levinas, the Other is a major interruptive and ethical force in the life of a self and a sign of G-d's presence in the spatial and temporal directives of the home of all homes. Levinas (1987a) thus assures us that "the other must be closer to God than I" (56; see also Hyde 2006, 134). Heidegger disclosed many of these directives, Levinas never admitted as much, Arnett followed suit, but both Levinas and Arnett confirmed and added additional directives: respect for the Other and the transcendence of G-d.

Being true to what I have argued here, the question must be asked: Are you sure? I believe so, at least for the time being. The conversation should continue. I have encouraged this conversation with the help of many case studies included in a number of my books. My endeavors abide by what Arnett describes as "the unending obligation of communication ethics."<sup>9</sup> The task is forever at hand. I am what I shall be. I have grounded this obligation in the home of all other homes, which I believe is composed of the primal home of the otherness of the spatial and temporal workings of human being *and* the primal home of the otherness of the Other. The two go together, otherwise each harbors deficiencies that call into question their integrity. It is important to hear and answer the call for oneself and for the Other. Where art thou? Here I am! It's good to be home.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Hyde's *The Call of Conscience: Heidegger and Levinas, Rhetoric and the Euthanasia Debate* (2001, 119–263), *The Life-Giving Gift of Acknowledgment* (2006, 98–221), *Perfection: Coming to Terms with Being Human* (2010, 181–210), *The Interruption that We Are: The Health of the Lived Body, Narrative, and Public Moral Argument* (2018, 84–140), and Craig R. Smith and Michael J. Hyde's (2022) *The Call: Eloquence in the Service of Truth* (1–28, 203–26).

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