INTRODUCTION

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1. Introduction

The word "home" is familiar yet means different things. It most often evokes warmth, safety, rest, nourishment, and direction. Some commonplace lyrics and colloquialisms suggest the richness of its meaning: "home is where the heart is"; "home is a person's castle"; "homeward bound"; "there's no place like home . . ."; and computer keyboards are equipped with a "home" key. Contrasted with these secure images is a poignant scene in the Italian film *Cinema Paradiso*. We hear the cries of a person who appears disheveled and who sleeps in the town square; he shouts with authority, "Get out of my square!" For him—as for those who are homeless around us on our streets, in abandoned buildings, in train stations, in bus depots, and cars—this city is defined in terms of ownership. They own the sights, sounds, and pain of these places that lie hidden from us in our homes. Most of these persons dream of having, one day, a place apart from those sights and sounds of the street. One homeless person I spoke to in Washington, D.C., put his wish in these words: "All I want is a place that opens with a key."

Who are the "homeless"? And do the homeless represent a new phenomenon produced by our society? A brief history of homelessness puts our social condition in perspective. As early as Colonial days there were the very poor and homeless who sought assistance. Town leaders would consider their applications for aid and make a decision based on whether they lived locally in the town or whether they came from elsewhere. If a person showed promise of becoming self-supporting in a short period of time and was a local resident, the chances of receiving assistance were very good. Those people who were "new comers" did not have "settlement rights" and did not receive support. They were required to leave and seek support in another town, most likely the one they originally came from. These groups of people became "transient homeless" as they continued to search for a place that would give them the help necessary to settle down.

We find this same type of transiency among people in the Post–Civil War period. The added factor is the railroad extending westward that attracted young unattached men with low-level skills. Many found work on farms during harvesting season. Temporary employment forced them to sleep where they could, without hope of permanent residency. The actual number affected during this time was difficult to determine since no one actually kept records of unemployment and homelessness until the late nineteenth century.

The homeless population increased during the Great Depression of the 1930s. In cities like Buffalo, New York, Transient Centers were provided for

many homeless families. Most of them had traveled from nearby states (Pennsylvania and Ohio) in search of work and a place to stay. The Center offered beds and enough food for a few days. But after that time they were sent back on their journey. In order to have an extended stay, they needed to comply with a residency requirement of one year or more. Only families with extreme needs and with young children were permitted to remain a longer time.

During the late 1930s and 1940s, especially during World War II, much of the homeless population was absorbed into the relief effort. Low-income work was widely available, putting within reach the cheap housing known as "skid row." These low-tier housing units could be found in most major cities throughout the country. The best-known was the Bowery in New York City. The Bowery population in skid row began to decrease, from 14,000 in 1949 to 8,000 in 1964, and by the early 1970s skid-row housing units had all but disappeared. Housing units for the needy were found in single-room-occupancy units (SROs), converted rooms in low-quality hotels in downtown areas of the cities. They were made to serve as residences for people with very low incomes. As urban development projects got underway in the 1970s and 1980s, many of the SROs were either destroyed or upgraded into condominiums or professional office space in a process of displacement often referred to as "gentrification." The resulting shortage forced the very poor into shelters while others were cast into the streets to make a life for themselves.

This "gentrification" is one cause of our homeless today. Several other factors also make our society's homeless different from those in the past. In response to the question, "Who are the homeless?", we recognize a mixed group, affected by economics, education, and health-care factors. The baby boomers represent the greatest percentage of our population. They compete fiercely amongst themselves for even lower-level employment. The standards of higher-income positions require a specialized education to keep pace with an economy quickly changing from production of goods to professional services; this change leads to increased unemployment and a growing inability to make rent payments or, for some, mortgage payments. As the standard of living increased sharply and the numbers of people unable to find employment grew, there grew a new composite of homeless on the streets and in shelters. Among them are older educated males and single-parent families, those addicted to drugs and alcohol, and the mentally ill persons who have been struggling in the street life for decades. As one shelter director remarked, "homelessness is not a problem; it is a condition," one that presents people with high risk of illness and psychological frailty with marginal hope. The following case is a typical profile.

Edward (name is changed), a twenty-year-old from Illinois, was in the care of foster parents for the first fifteen years of his life. He was a victim of abuse by his foster parents throughout his time with them. Shortly after the abuse was

learned, he was sent out of that household to an institution that was funded by Department of Human Resources until he was eighteen. Without parents and employable skills, Edward, left to fend for himself, remained homeless on and off for two years. While in shelters he was beaten by people he called "mean spirited." They were either crack addicts or alcoholics. To escape the noise and domination of the others he would visit the nearby library. There, Edward found peace of mind on Queens Street. He said that now the folks at the library are becoming annoyed with the increased number of homeless using the library as a respite. He feels humiliated by the verbal abuse and glaring of both library staff and patrons. The city has decided to destroy the building. In a reflective pause, Edward turned his eyes away and said "Why am I homeless? I didn't want to be here and I didn't do anything to get like this! I just want to have it stop. . . . It must change. I don't want to die this way!"

2. Overview

A delicate and complicated condition, homelessness requires collaborative perspectives from individuals, institutions, and communities so that we can develop an appreciation and a deeper understanding of its impact. The sight of homeless people has always made the greatest impression on communities, but this book compensates for their silence. *The Ethics of Homelessness* is a volume of original essays that give voice to the underlying ethical components of the homeless condition. The opening chapters of Part One are perspectives arranged so as to invite the reader, as though on the streets, to encounter a homeless person. The three works provide the external climate a passerby might experience when encountering the homeless. Poems by Dennis Rohatyn and the story by Noah Berger culturally situate the reader. Verse and story both craft an image of people living in a void, where life's meaning is deliberated on a day-to-day basis. In a reflective dialogue, Robert Ginsberg muses over painful questions about one's moral, social, or personal obligations to these people. The casual style of Ginsberg's meditation raises key questions that are addressed in the three middle parts of the book, beginning with Part Two. These chapters use formal philosophical investigations of homelessness, beginning with Pio Colonnello's chapter on homelessness as *Heimatlosigkeit*. Colonnello's work provides the presuppositions of later essays as he presents the estrangement of humankind through history as unique on an ontic level. The wandering nature of being human, according to Colonnello, is part of an unstable origin that existentially propels the individual to find a place.

Whatever it means to have a "place" either ontologically or politically, moral and legal obligation become a central theme in the remaining chapters of Part Two. Patricia Anne Murphy argues that having a place is integrally a part of personhood. Without a place a person is existentially diminished. Rights,

then, ought to be acknowledged for the exercise of a person's freedom which is necessary for one's sense of self. David E. Schrader's chapter on "Home Is Where the Heart Is" extends Murphy's argument, claiming that without a home, people are denied a personality. Furthermore, the United States Constitution justifies this provision for good citizenship and membership in the moral community. Keith Burkum closes this section by implementing virtue ethics in order to assess the moral practice of communities toward the homeless. A community's goal of a common good suffers incoherence if members remain indifferent to the homeless. Children, the most vulnerable among the homeless, feel most crushingly the gravity of this indifference.

In Part Three, Michael Parker and René A. C. Hoksbergen examine the "runaway" children who abandon homes to avoid mistreatment. Ethical negotiations are invoked between individuals and community to recognize rights of children as members of society. This will be a start to provide a safe recourse for support. Hoksbergen's chapter, "Psychic Homelessness," focuses on adopted children in the Netherlands. All, whether born in Holland or abroad, lack a bond with a family which results in a family's being rootless. This phenomenon persists among well-adjusted foster children as well, so that Hoksbergen recommends a way for children to learn acceptance of an "in-between" existence.

The moral and political arguments presented by the scholars in Part Four respond in large part to a lack of policies protecting the homeless. Some also expose policies designed to make their presence and way of life illegal. Seeking refuge is a common human instinct. When the homeless take shelter in public dwellings they are asked to leave. The two chapters that open this part—Anita M. Superson's "The Homeless and the Right to 'Public Dwelling'" and Uma Narayan's "No Shelter Even in the Constitution? Free Speech, Equal Protection, and the Homeless"—argue that ordinances to remove the homeless from public dwelling and bans on begging are denials of rights. Narayan shows these bans to be forms of legislative harassment. In the chapter that follows, Natalie Dandekar writes in "Social Policies, Principles, and Homelessness," that models proposed for solutions such as social engineering are incompatible with participatory democracy. Because engineered policy, like technological systems, are prone to catastrophic accidents with no identifiable loci of responsibility, policy involving homelessness requires a different approach.

In the last two chapters of Part Four, both Shyli Karin-Frank and I argue that the moral rights of the homeless have been denied. I focus on the mentally ill homeless who, I argue, illustrate failed libertarian policies. After presenting the background of the libertarian's role in deinstitutionalizing the mentally ill, I develop a "conventional" autonomy that empowers the mentally ill homeless as recognized members of the same community. Since the homeless deserve this regard as moral agents, we are morally obligated to provide them the necessities to live as autonomous moral agents: a home. Karin-Frank extends this claim in

her chapter by underscoring the value of privacy to being human. Autonomy and individuality are basic moral concepts of liberalism which, she maintains, enhance moral activity. Since homelessness involves placing moral activity at risk for other human beings, we are morally obligated to provide privacy for them to flourish; we are obligated to provide a home and to eradicate the risk.

Part Five, the closing part of the book, offers a timeless example of a philosopher who, for a part of her life, was homeless. The book moves to closure, as it opened, with a story about a homeless person. Joseph Betz's account of Hannah Arendt's homelessness philosophically animates the social/political life of homelessness. Betz explains how, for Arendt, "to secure a home is the precondition of political action." The government ought to provide what is necessary for full citizenship, namely, privacy. Ron Scapp's chapter, "Talking About Those Home Improvement Blues," leads the reader to consider the type of government that plays with words and images constructed for momentary reactions, that plans homes but denies them simultaneously. The cultural critique provided by Scapp leaves us with a paradox of contemporary values, building homes for improvement but not for need.