More Than Where the Heart Is: A Philosophical Consideration of the Home

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When we say that there is no place like home, we offer a platitude for why homes are special. Underneath the cliché, however, I believe that there is something substantive to this claim: home is a special place, one that is important in ways that others are not.

My project seeks to consider both what a home is and why it might be the special place that we imagine it to be. To do so, I will consider the arguments of Kirsten Jacobson for the importance of home. Jacobson has two main arguments: first, that homes are refuges of a particular sort, and second, that as such refuges, they provide one with the ability to successfully operate within the wider world. The basis of both arguments is the claim that a place is a home if and only if it is a place of familiarity and security.

This claim is Jacobson’s definition of home, and it is also where my primary critique lies. Despite the ways in which this definition may seem intuitive, it is not able to account for many home spaces, including those that are abusive, unstable, or unsafe, among others. To account for these homes, Jacobson is left with two possible responses. She can claim that these spaces are not homes, or are not homes in the sense that she intends. Doing so, however, renders her goal of providing a universal definition of home a failure. Alternatively, she can revise her definition to include a shallower, more inclusive sense of familiarity and security. Redefining the home in this way, however, would defeat the purpose of claiming that home is unique, as it would account for spaces we do not consider to be homes.

Despite the apparent stalemate, I will show that for Jacobson to preserve her larger project goal, she must sacrifice the universality of her argument and instead offer a normative claim about the home. This move is not without adverse consequences; in making it, Jacobson either revokes the home-status of many home spaces, or claims that such spaces are bad homes. Those within the non-home or bad home spaces will also not have the tools to succeed in the world, per Jacobson’s argument.

Although these are not ideal statements to make, we might think that there is some truth to them, and I will argue that the larger insight she provides about the importance of home is worth this sacrifice. In choosing the normative definition, however, Jacobson has not resolved all issues with her conception of home. Familiarity and security are complex ideas, and neither are necessarily good things. After considering further critiques of familiarity and security, as well as the perspective of Martin Heidegger, I will argue that we should imagine a normative conception of the home that differs in important ways from that which Jacobson has given us. This conception must account for the importance of home as a refuge space, but it must also describe the value of a home that enables growth through risks and discovery. It is this home that we can successfully argue will prepare one for the wider world.