To think ecologically is to think of home. “The environment” is where one lives. Our habitats, our habitations, our homes are where we are in our own, in our element. To be at home is to be one with one’s surroundings, if only for a moment. More than this—to be at home is to be one’s surroundings. To think ecologically is to remember that it is not just human beings who seek and find home. Flora and fauna also live at home. We call such homes “habitats.” The biosphere is a network of homes for living things. Those spaces in which one dwells, however, are not simply inhabited by biological beings. Landscapes and seascapes, terrain and topography, give shape to one’s being. The stars above are hardly biological, yet even they demarcate home. As a human being, my home at once is and depends on a network of other homes, both human and nonhuman.

I want to argue that to be at home, or at least to seek home, is a fundamental feature of the human condition. This is Edward Abbey’s view, and he gives it voice as he reflects on his time in Arches National Park in Utah:

This is the most beautiful place on earth. There are many such places. Every man, every woman, carries in heart and mind the image of the ideal place, the right place, the one true home, known or unknown, actual or visionary [...] there’s no limit to the human capacity for the homing sentiment. Theologians, sky pilots, astronauts have even felt the appeal of home calling to them from up above, in the cold black outback of interstellar space.¹

This ‘homing sentiment’ will surely vary for individuals across time and space—one’s notion of home is bound up in history, culture and politics. The homing sentiment may be fundamental to the human condition, but to explore it requires local analysis, not broad analytical brushstrokes. Yet we might be able to interrogate the sentiment’s foundations, as I will attempt to do here.

**Economics and Ecology—the Materiality and Spirituality of Home**

Economics and ecology share a common etymology, both tracing back to the ancient Greek oikos—home. Economics is the ordering of the home (oiko-nomia) and ecology is the study of habitats—that is to say, homes (oiko-logia). Both deal most explicitly with the material structures and systemic

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processes of homes writ large. My research seeks to bring the study of at-homeness back into our thinking about economics and ecology, which are related to one another both materially and spiritually.

Since Adam Smith, political economy has been the objective science of property as a political and economic phenomenon. In both its classical and Marxist instantiations, however, political economy has too often devoted itself to the ideal of objectivity and has thus lost sight of the immaterial meanings and experiences that are always coupled with the materiality of property. My home, for example, is always more than a (mere) house. Its meaning for me is not exhausted when I chronicle its economic history, its material composition, or the scientific description of its being. Objects, including homes, are wellsprings of meaning. They are not just a collection of atoms or the outcomes of productive forces in an economic system.

This is especially true of the natural world, which in economic thought is often treated by the catch-all signifier “land.” If labor is the human work and energy required for any economic productivity, and if capital is the product of that labor made manifest in products and value, then land is the collection of natural resources required to sustain labor and produce capital. It should strike us that this economic category of “land” is reductive, clumsily encapsulating flora and fauna, land and sea, soil and rock. The clumsiness of the word accompanies a clumsiness of accounting, in which the spreadsheets of our modern economies have remarkable trouble recording the value of the diverse ecological inheritance enjoyed by humanity, an inheritance it is rapidly consuming.

The reductionism that plagues modern economics leads to a mischaracterization of property, and thus what a “home” is, as an objective quantity that can be measured and labeled. This risks obscuring the connection between property and that which is my own. For example, we can say, legally speaking, that my domicile is in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on the 42nd block of Spruce Street. My domicile is thus a marker for my political representation, my voter registration, my point of contact for fellow citizens as well as corporations, and a locus of taxable property. My home is an important legal category, but the
legal category hardly exhausts the essential character of my home as a home. With regard to legal title, my current home is not mine at all. I am a renter, so my landlord bears the legal title to the building in which I reside. I retain the right to live there temporarily in exchange for a monthly rent payment. Yet there is an obvious (but elusive) sense in which the apartment is mine and not my landlord’s. Importantly, there is a particular sense in which my apartment (which is legally owned by my landlord) is more my own than, say, my savings account, which is unambiguously mine by law but is not as profoundly my own as my place of residence. I do not dwell in my savings account, I dwell in my apartment. I eat, sleep, think, and pass much of my leisure time there. My lived experiences are housed in my apartment. They are in no sense housed in my savings account, which amounts to an abstract quantification of value I have allowed a bank to use for its own investment purposes in exchange for interest payments. Importantly, the homogenous category we call “property” would become more complicated if we took seriously the differing shades of my-ownness. Perhaps the right I have to my home is more fundamental than my right to my bank account. Perhaps it is the fundamental right.

Our current conceptions of property and home are in error with regard to scope as well as sense. My home not just my apartment. I am also at home in a particular neighborhood (University City) in a particular city (Philadelphia) in a particular state (Pennsylvania) in a particular nation-state (the United States) on a particular continent (North America) on a particular planet (Earth). To be sure, my inhabitance of each of these homes is by no means the same. Nonetheless, to limit my understanding of my at-homeness to the walls of my apartment would risk grossly limiting and oversimplifying my experience of home. At the very least, my at-homeness is shaped by what I see and do when I walk out my door in the morning, by who comes in and out of that door to visit me, and what common bonds of friendship, kinship, culture, citizenship, and humanity bind us together in a common home. At-homeness is fundamentally political for human beings—I am always at home with others. Others are always my own.

At-Homeness in the Anthropocene
The foundations of home—that which is most our own—are at once material and spiritual, physical and affective, structural and mystic. Indeed, viewing the world through the lens of home should remind us that any divisions between the material and the spiritual risk distorting our understanding of existence. This is especially true in an age when human processes are shaping the non-human on a massive scale. What is more, the non-human is reciprocally shaping the human on an equally massive scale. Global warming presents the most sublime (in the classical sense) instantiation of what is the dominant fact of our times—the human and the non-human are becoming wrapped up in one another in both an uncanny and an intimate way that goes beyond even the fundamental facts of ecological coexistence. It is not just that biological beings depend on one another for sustenance, or that biological beings depend on non-biological objects and processes for survival (water, air), but that the basic activities of one species are becoming a force of nature. These processes range from the economic and political to the demographic and the sociological, and they test the parochial boundaries of the modern social sciences. They also test our understandings of what it means to be at home in the world. What does being at home mean when the human species becomes a force of nature? What does it mean when the human species has become sublime?

To be sure, a cursory glance at environmental history should be enough to remind us that humanity has long been a force of nature—from mass extinctions to desertification and soil erosion, human beings have left a massive footprint on the earth since long before the industrial revolution, which has only given exponential increase to the quantities and scales involved in a fundamentally human process of using and changing one’s non-human surroundings in pursuit of sustenance, fulfillment, wealth, and power. Nonetheless, what some have called the “Great Acceleration” has certainly brought the human force of nature to disturbing heights. Some have even called our geologic era the “Anthropocene,”

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indicating that human beings have become a force of geologic proportions. For better or worse, what it means to be a social and political being—that is to say, what it means to be human—has become a sublime enterprise, at once terrifying and awe-inspiring.³

Early-modern studies of aesthetics have long been attuned to the sublime, but not exclusively. In addition to the sublime, whose aesthetic power comes from the forces that pose an existential threat to human beings, there is the beautiful, or that which is pleasant and pleasing. It should be clear to anyone who values the natural world that the non-human is fundamentally both sublime and beautiful. The beautiful image of the natural world and the human being’s place in it often has the flavor of the pastoral, typified by idyllic scenes of gentle streams flowing between rolling hills and green pastures inhabited by virtuous people who enjoy the simpler pleasures of life. The pastoral aesthetic is green and its ethic is agrarian.⁴ The debates in social theory about the proper aesthetic for our time of ecological crisis often amount to a referendum on the pastoral vision, with proponents arguing that it best illustrates humanity’s right relation to the natural world and opponents replying that the pastoral is a false paradise with regressive and even reactionary fantasies of stasis and nostalgia lurking beneath. The pastoral ideal endorses the rural over the urban, with critics noting that humanity cannot whimsically return to its predominantly rural past. The agrarians often place blame on the insatiability of human beings, implying that something endemic in human nature is to blame for the ecological crisis, whereas others retort that economic structures and the logics and elites that dominate them are to blame.⁵

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³ For two classical treatments of the aesthetics of the sublime, see Immanuel Kant, Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime (1764); Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757).
⁴ See the remarkable essays of Wendell Berry for an eloquent emersion into the agrarian mind, which sees itself as the necessary opponent of the industrial mind that so dominates the modern world. J.R.R Tolkien’s literary creation of “the Shire” invokes a thoroughly English version of the agrarian aesthetic and lifestyle.
⁵ For an avowedly leftist take on the ecological crisis posed by global warming, see Naomi Klein, This Changes Everything, 2014. For a recent aesthetic and philosophic critique of the pastoral ideal, see Timothy Morton, Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics (2009) and Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World (2013).
Such a divide, however, may distort more than it illuminates. The agrarian idealization of the rural and the Marxist’s emphasis on structures both risk glossing over the lived experiences real human beings have of their places and spaces. As I indicated above, one’s experiences of space and place are at once material and spiritual, physical and affective, structural and mystic. The structural or objectivist thinker often wishes to relegate the spiritual, the affective, and especially the mystic to mere “subjective” experience to be explained away by objective facts and forces.

**Mysticism of Home—the Everyday and the Exceptional in Being at Home**

One must proceed with caution here. It would be incorrect to simply equate the mystic with the mythic, just as it would be incorrect to equate the mythic with the fictional. The mystical experience of place should not be facilely correlated with religious faith either—as Abraham Maslow persuasively argued decades ago, atheists and agnostics as well as religious believers are capable of mystic experiences, and human (even secular) values cannot be understood without taking such experiences into account. It is telling, for example, that Martin Heidegger would look to Catholic mystic Meister Eckhart for inspiration while crafting a philosophy that follows Nietzsche’s proclamation that “God is dead.” Even an avowedly secular culture cannot avoid confronting questions of spirituality and mysticism, and this is even (especially) true with questions of economics and ecology.

Environmental political thought cannot deal properly with the question of home—the question of that which is most one’s own—without dealing with the mystic, spiritual, and affective dimensions of our experiences in homely places and natural spaces. Nor, of course, can a reorientation toward those dimensions be taken as an excuse to brush aside the important claims that economic structures, political power, and scientific understandings have to our attention. The key is to understand the two purported “sides” (material and mystic) as a variegated whole, one that is complex and never fully self-contained.

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and tests the boundaries of the parochial wings of social science. To think ecologically is to think in terms of interconnections and interdependence, and this is just as true of thought itself as it is of the interrelations of physical entities in the natural world. The human experience is multifarious. This is especially true of one’s experience of one’s natural surroundings. Those surroundings can be encountered as alien or one’s own, sublime or beautiful, threatening or empowering. This ambivalence of the human experience of the natural demands a serious treatment of the spiritual and the mystical. Is religious thought and practice not the attempts of humanity to grapple with the existential questions of being and non-being, life and death, good and evil? Surely a relation as ambivalent as that between the human and non-human requires a mystic treatment, if anything because we so often experience that relation as a mystic one.

Perhaps part of the problem with blending science and mysticism is that the mystic is so often equated with the other-worldly. As a non-believer I reject this equation. As a former Catholic and a presently spiritual human being and scholar, however, I can appreciate the complicated relationship between the everyday and the mystic. Being at home is surely wrapped up in the quotidian side of life, in routine, repetition, and sustenance. But is the everyday not in some sense grounded in the exceptional? Here too religious ideas, mysticism, and Maslow’s “peak experiences” come to the fore. Every home, whether built anew or discovered as an inheritance, must first be newly found. Childhood and adolescence are thus formative years in building the homing sentiment, and it is instructive that both the Christian faith and the 19th century romantics praise the childlike as the key to one’s connection with the divine. But newness is not only a characteristic of childhood. The mystic experiences of adults can also be characterized as new, fresh, and pure. Indeed, it is instructive that the Christian faith describes a return

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7 I do not mean to imply that religious thought and practice are purely mystical. Rather, I acknowledge that religious thought and practice often are better suited to serious treatment of the mystical side of the human experience than purely secular alternatives.

8 For endorsement of the childlike in the New Testament, see Matthew 18:1-4. For romantic thinkers who valorize the child, see especially Wordsworth and Nietzsche.
to God as being “born again.” The link between natality, newness, and mystical moments that serve as a foundation for one’s being-at-home is worth greater exploration. Doing so may shed some light on why it is that our sense of being-at-home is so often influenced by places of origin, by a longing for one’s homeland. For my part, Minnesota and Wisconsin will forever be more of a home than any other region on Earth. It is where I grew up, where my family and friends come from. The link between natality and at-homeness also comes into play in religious conceptions of the family and the home. A certain version of at-homeness is at the heart of Catholic teachings about the family as well as the human being’s right relation to community.

**Conclusion—Home and Homelessness in Ecological Crisis**

What is the state of at-homeness in an age of globalization and the dislocations that come with it? What becomes of home when refugee crises, mass migration, and general dislocation have tragically become a norm rather than an exception? This question, which looks eminently human, is revealed in our age of ecological crisis to be inextricably intertwined with the non-human in two related senses. First, the sublime power of human technology and economic systems drastically change the natural environment, giving rise to unintended consequences that are a prime cause of human homelessness today. Global warming, pollution, and resource depletion resulting from human activity boomerang back to humanity and the costs to human wealth and well-being are already mounting. Second, human activity lead not just to human homelessness but also to homelessness of the non-human, with habitat depletion decimating wildlife to such an extent that humankind is the perpetrator of the what scientists consider to be the sixth

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A mass extinction event in the planet’s history. Natural disasters caused by humans are throwing increasing numbers of humans into homelessness, and human activities are rendering multitudinous species homeless and thus extinct.

What is to be done? The economics and politics (they are always intertwined) of climate change and environmental degradation more generally are infinitely complex. A thoroughgoing environmental critique implicates much of our current economic systems and lifestyles. Naomi Klein may be right when she argues that the onset of global warming changes everything. But how, and in what way, does the ecological crisis change everything? It should be clear to all that our economic system must be changed, or at least limited and redirected, to avert (further) catastrophe. But what will motivate such a change?

Setting aside my theological reservations, I think Alberto Methol Ferré, often touted as “the pope’s philosopher” for his influence on Pope Francis, provides an intriguing interpretation of the problems of our age, especially for the developed world. Methol Ferré argues that the primary threat to the Church is no longer “messianic atheism” inspired by Marxism, but rather what he calls “libertine atheism,” which is not primarily an ideology but rather a set of practices and arises from “a buried need for beauty.” Importantly for Methol Ferré and for Pope Francis, libertine atheism divorces beauty from truth and goodness, thereby degrading it and leaving deprived of higher purpose. Most instructive for our purposes here, however, is Methol Ferré’s prescription for the Church.

[...] one cannot redeem libertine atheism’s kernel of truth with an argumentative or dialectical procedure; much less can one do so by setting up prohibitions, raising alarms, dictating abstract rules. Libertine atheism is not an ideology, it is a practice. A practice must be opposed with another practice; a self-aware practice, of course, which means one that is equipped

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11 None of this is meant to gloss over the important role of class (as well as race and gender) in the more complex story of technology, economics, and politics that drives the ecological degradation of our times. It is both logically and morally absurd to hold poor subsistence farmers in Bangladesh equally responsible for global warming as fossil fuel corporations based in the developed nations, for example.
12 Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything*, cited above.
13 My thanks to Ricardo Simmonds for directing my attention to Alberto Methol Ferré.
intellectually. Historically the Church is the only subject present on the stage of the contemporary world that can confront libertine atheism. To my mind only the Church is truly post-modern.\textsuperscript{15}

As a non-believer, I hope that the Church is not the only institution equipped to address the problems of global warming and worldwide ecological degradation, and I would place more emphasis on the economic structures that produce and reproduce the practices in question. Nonetheless, Methol Ferré’s insistence that a set of practices cannot be displaced by ideas alone but must be confronted by an alternative set of practices is well-taken. He correctly diagnoses the spirit of the age as one hungry for beauty. I agree. The question, then, is this—what sort of image of the beautiful will spur the changes in practice that facing the ecological crisis requires? I agree with Methol Ferré and Pope Francis that the Catholic Church should be in the business of presenting such an alternative. The world will welcome such a contribution from its largest religious institution. My research seeks to contribute a language that can reach “libertine atheists” and orthodox Catholics alike in its appeal to what is true, good, and (especially) beautiful in the human condition—a place we can all call home.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}