



The Underdeveloped Offering of Housing Ethics: New Possibilities for Housing Studies

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Abstract: *Despite the significant presence in other disciplines, ethics remains a topic that is under-explored in a housing context. This paper posits the implications of employing a framework of housing ethics, demarcating ethics from a notion of politics. The central contention: that housing ethics already exist and structure housing systems and approaches, as evidenced in three examples from policy, theory and philosophy. This framework, with an outlined two-part grammar, illuminates the importance of descriptive claims behind the normative context that is of great interest to housing studies. Therefore, the argument presented does not just valorise the framework of housing ethics but too the necessity of philosophical engagement in the assumptions underpinning housing research, namely any foundational claims on the phenomenon of housing and the human relationship to it.*

Keywords: ethics; philosophy; neoliberalism; housing systems; politics.



Introduction

In the halls of scholarship, ethics appears as a suffix to a plethora of different disciplines; environmental ethics, healthcare ethics, business ethics, engineering ethics, energy ethics, care ethics amongst many others. What has escaped great attention and conceptualisation is housing ethics. Spare few scholars have offered something to this regard, like Iglesias (2007), Fitzpatrick and Watts (2018), Power and Bergan (2019), and Rogers and McAuliffe (2023), with minimal further exploration or production of something conceptually concrete. So, housing ethics remains an underdeveloped, almost undeveloped, field of study. Perhaps this is no surprise as housing remains a field of study overly devoted to the empirical, as King (2011) ceaselessly lamented. The philosophical continues to be neglected in housing studies, though new literature is remedying this (see Richardson 2018; Taylor 2018).

Attending both the absence of housing ethics and the avoidance of philosophical considerations of housing, in this paper I affirm the importance of housing ethics as a framework in housing studies. Such a framework, as I outline, reveals that the normative context of housing is underpinned by descriptive statements of existence – what I call the two-part grammar of ethics. Thus, my new contribution to the development of housing ethics is the advocacy for the necessity of greater philosophical engagement by housing researchers with the arguably ontological claims implicit yet foundational to housing ethics, so far undiscussed in associated theorisation. Particularly, I valorise the possibility of continental philosophy here, so far absent in papers on housing ethics, in the exploration of the phenomenon of housing and the human relationship to it. I too here outline support for the calls elsewhere to make explicit the normative ethical claims structuring housing systems (e.g. Stephens 2018).

First, I briefly set out a definition of ethics, consider this in the context of housing and suggest a distinction between housing ethics and housing politics. With a limited scope, this definitional work is by no means conclusive and should be read as the opening, not the concluding, of discussions on how we could define a framework of housing ethics and its relationship to politics. Second, I detail three examples of housing ethics, one historically delivered, neoliberalism, one drawn from analytic philosophy, the capabilities approach, and one unexplored in housing studies drawn from Emmanuel Levinas's (1969) short phenomenology of home. Reflecting on these examples, I then discuss the implications for housing research, namely the necessity for greater philosophical awareness of the assumptions behind the normative context of housing researchers study.

Ethics, Housing Ethics and Housing Politics

Ethics have a two-part grammar. First and foremost, an ethic has a normative statement, for instance: 'I ought to look after the environment because that is the right thing to do'. The normativity of ethics regards relations, seeking to organise them in a claim on how they ought to be, namely in the form of a principle, as per the example regarding the environment. Such relations may be personal, between the self and an entity, interpersonal, between two individuals, collective, for example within a community or, in keeping with my argument, systematic, as in how the relations of a housing system ought to be organised.



The second part of the grammar of ethics is a descriptive statement. The normative statement can be justified with a claim to that action or way of organising the world being ‘right’, but, what does ‘right’ mean in this context? Take the latter statement; why might I think caring for the environment is the right thing to do? Perhaps, I recognise my interdependence with its infrastructure, or I believe it is God’s creation that I live in. These statements are descriptive, ways of understanding the environment and the self. An ethic moves from these descriptive statements to consider, in light of the entities described and the value they present to each other, how their relationship ought to function, the aforementioned normative statement. For example, the environment maintains me, as I am interdependent with it, therefore I should look after it, or I believe God created the environment for me, I should respect this as I love God, and therefore care for it accordingly.

This grammatical relationship, between an ‘is’ statement and an ‘ought’ statement, is the famous ethical structure that Hume (1739) investigated that, beyond the scope of this paper, has been subject to much debate, valorisation and critique (see Hunter 1962; Falk 1976). I, therefore, define ethics as:

Normative statements organising relations how they *ought to be* drawn from descriptive statements on what entities *are*

A housing system is an organised set of relations. The determinants to its compositions are multivarious; for instance, material context, socio-cultural structures and historical processes are all at play. Part of this composition is unintentional, like limitations from context. However, part of the composition is intentional, a matter of envisioned design; actors with power exert their ability to produce certain practices and policies that look to create specific outcomes, that the actors desired or wished. Now, some of this intentional shaping will, undoubtedly, have self-serving interests, garnering power or wealth. However, often this shaping can be understood as an ethical endeavour. Firstly, such shaping looks to organise relations, the subject of ethics, whether that be the design, delivery, ownership or management of housing. Second, it is intentional and intention is founded on a normative statement: either these powerholders look to retain the housing system ‘as is’ or alter it to have a specific composition, thus hold a contention that the housing system ought to be composed in a specific manner – “a normative goal” (Fitzpatrick and Watts 2018: 224). Pursuing this, there is an implied claim that this way of organising housing is the ‘right’ way.

These claims are not unsubstantiated. Underneath them are understandings of what housing is, what the human relationship to housing is, the descriptive elements of ethics, that support the powerholders’ conclusions on what housing ought to be or how housing ought to be delivered. For example, policymakers may contend that housing should be provided for all, a normative statement that shapes the housing system, and thus pursue an agenda of legislating against forced evictions or looking to eradicate homelessness. Why? Because they may perceive housing as an essential space for the human condition, a descriptive statement. So, in sum, my claim is that where individuals, governments or organisations look to intentionally shape the housing system, they do so, if not seeking personal ends, in an ethical manner, pursuing what they believe is right, for humanity and for housing. Thus, as Clapham (2018) argues against Kemeny’s (1992) seminal work, theory, in this case at a minimum an assumed conception of what housing is, is always at play in housing policy, even if subtle and not explicitly discussed.



What then of politics? Are my claims seeking to replace political discussion of housing with ethical ones? The distinction between politics and ethics is a disciplinary and conceptual territorial dispute with much attention (Parker 2003), especially in continental philosophy (see Williams 2016). Lacking a great scope here, I will suggest a distinction that operates alongside my ethical definition, but welcome further development on their demarcation in relation to housing ethics. The most established interpretation points to ethics regarding the personal and politics regarding the social (Parker 2003). Yet, such a separation is not just incompatible with my previous definition of ethics but irreconcilable with the application of ethics to disciplines far beyond the personal, like environmental ethics. Instead, ethics and politics can be defined, through an intention and delivery distinction. The conceptual world of ethics, where relations ought to be a certain way, is not replicant to the material world, where relations are a certain way. When a housing ethic looks to shape the housing system, the multiplicity of the system ensures its intention will never match its delivery. Unless there is absolute power, an impossibility, the application of an ethic will always be imperfect; other influences desiring a different composition of the system exert themselves, a contest that unfolds in a context which constrains all the various influences.

After all, as Rogers and McAuliffe (2023) suggest, there is no singular housing ethic. Even in hegemonic conditions, there will always be differing claims of how the housing system ought to be organised, ethics that vie for dominance in “tournaments” (Rogers and McAuliffe 2023: 7). What ‘wins out’ in these tournaments is a matter of power, of politics. Thus, it is in this messiness and complexity that politics enters; it being the material constitution and regulation of the idealised claims inherent in ethics, their delivery. Through politics, ethics are negotiated and, where supported by power and influence, sought to have their intentions delivered. The difficulty of these enterprises, given the constitution of context particularly, means politics seldom, if ever, delivers the intentions of ethics, though that does not mean the efforts are fruitless, oft with strong resemblance to the intention.

Ethics is, therefore, the driver behind politics. Housing agendas are ethical endeavours, looking to craft the world in a certain way, where the political manifestations of these endeavours take form in policies and practices. Therefore, we can both find ethics within existing political projects and conceive new ethics to create new imaginings of the housing system, as I outline with three examples below.

Three Examples of Housing Ethics

I have chosen three examples that reveal the widespread presence of housing ethics in the various halls of scholarship, both potential ethics unimplemented and an ethic with historical and material impact. First: neoliberalism, an overstudied yet clear example of a housing ethics that shows how ethics can be politically manifested. Second: the capabilities approach, a popular approach that offers an ethics inspired by analytical philosophy. Third, Levinasian housing ethics, an example from continental philosophy currently not considered by housing scholarship which reveals the possibility of using the framework of housing ethics generatively. Other examples present in housing studies include Taylor’s (2018) work exploring Rawlsian principles in housing or the imperatives of welfare economics (see Lawson 2018).



Though out of ‘vogue’ in housing studies, broadly now replaced by an interest in financialization, neoliberalism did in its heyday have hegemonic influence on many nationalised housing systems like the UK, Canada, Australia and the US. It was a clear winner, at least for some time, in the tournaments of housing ethics, replacing a welfare-led view of housing. Despite literature claiming neoliberalism’s unethical composition and I acknowledge, as Jacobs (2024) claims, parts of it may have been co-opted to serve the interests of the wealthy, there was, especially at its advent, a set of housing ethics behind its interventions in housing systems. Drawn from of Hayek’s and the Mont Pelerin Society’s readings of neoclassical theory and work of the Austrian School among others, neoliberalism presented a theoretical proposition that: the market is efficient, effective and self-regulating, government intervention impedes this, and individuals are free and totally responsible for themselves (Slattery et al. 2013; Venugopal 2015). A set of descriptive statements, with accompanying normative statements qua ethics: the market should be used to provide goods, government involvement ought to be limited and individuals should be empowered to look after themselves. When, in the 1970s and 1980s, economic and fiscal crises induced a rethink in government policy and approaches, the perceived theoretical soundness of neoliberalism, aided by the appeal of a low-cost approach to government, saw its take-up, especially in Anglo-American nations. Translating its descriptive and normative statements to housing, two ethics emerged. First, as individuals are responsible for themselves, they need to be empowered to do so (Dufty-Jones 2016). So, homeownership was idealised and became the tenure how housing ought to be provided (Dufty-Jones 2016; Arundel and Ronald 2021). It is through homeownership that individuals can accumulate wealth, look after themselves and seek welfare from the market (Power and Bergan 2019). Second, to achieve efficiency, housing should be provided by the market, given its ability to distribute effectively (Dufty-Jones 2016). Such a translation is underpinned by an accompanying descriptive understanding of housing as a concurrent commodity and investment good.

These ethics can be observed in the political manifestations of neoliberalism. Take Margaret Thatcher’s premiership in 1979, the beginning of neoliberalism in England (Jacobs 2019): firstly, homeownership was a bedrock of her campaign and a ceaseless policy objective and, secondly, she valorised the market’s power. For example, credit, via deregulation and expanding credit providers’ purview, was made accessible to more households and Right-to-Buy, allowing social housing tenants to purchase their homes, was introduced, increasing the proportion of households for whom homeownership was a possibility (Ryan-Collins, Lloyd and Macfarlane 2017). Likewise, the deregulation of privately rented accommodation, the creation and stock transfer to housing associations and demand-side policy making were all indicative of a valorisation of the market in English housing policy (Jacobs 2019; Taylor 2019). Thus, the politics of neoliberalism can be read as ethical endeavours, attempts to design the housing system in a certain way. Of course, there may be disagreement with the intentions, foundations or delivery of neoliberal ethics, but this does not take away from their existence as ethics.

Lacking a specific political manifestation but in ‘vogue’ in housing scholarship is the capabilities approach. Developed from the thinking of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, the capabilities approach, prevalent across disciplines, is focused on the possibility of human flourishing, a concern for what a person “is able to be or do – irrespective of whether they choose to exercise these capabilities” (Fitzpatrick et al. 2014: 450). The search for justice, accordingly, is the proliferation of opportunities for individuals, if they wish, to pursue this flourishing, a different approach from the Rawlsian concern for the just distribution of goods that is perceived to not account for the differences between individuals (Nicholls 2010).



Translated to a housing context, a normative statement arises: housing should be a “resource” for people to exercise, if they wish, these capabilities (Kimhur 2020: 266). This is underpinned by a descriptive statement of what housing is; as Nicholls (2010: 38) sets out, conceiving:

“housing as more than a material unit, but as a part of a broader complex system of interconnected factors that operate to constrain and enable the capability that individuals have to lead a well lived life”

The key question of what capabilities, beyond the overarching capability to flourish, should be enabled by housing is heavily debated: Sen refused to provide a set list of capabilities to work from, Nussbaum outlined an intentionally inconclusive list of ten, many not related to housing, and others like Nicholls (2010) and Kimhur (2020) have offered sketches of similar lists in a housing context (see Fitzpatrick et al. 2014). Admittedly, without consensus on these capabilities the normative statement of the ethic appears somewhat abstract. However, this does not detract from its structure as a housing ethic.

The framework of housing ethics is not solely a tool for ‘reading’ a structure of existing policy approaches, like neoliberalism, or theories, like the capabilities approach, but too can function generatively, moving from the descriptive to the normative. I evidence this through a brief consideration of Levinas’s (1969) phenomenology of home. Levinas (1969) describes the self primordially nourished by the world but concurrently exposed to its insecurity. The house to Levinas (1969: 158) offers a space where this insecurity is “calmed”. Separated and not facing the “horror” of this insecurity, the self can then go within themselves into their interior world, a matter of being “at home” (Levinas, 1969: 143). Here, they understand who they are, their possibilities and their responsibilities, in a process he calls ‘recollection’, human self-discovery (Levinas, 1969). For this process to happen, the house must have security, from outside incursion, and stability, over time (Levinas 1969). This summary is a cursory one that does not cover the richness and nuance of Levinas’s thought, however does evidence that behind Levinas’s descriptions of the relationship between the self, the world and the house, a normative statement could be suggested, one that he does not admittedly focus on: a house must be stable and secure. By no means a groundbreaking conclusion, but nevertheless an example of the framework of housing ethics operating generatively.

What particularly this last example reveals is the pertinence of the movement from the descriptive statement to the normative statement in the grammar of ethics, a conceptual structure unrecognised in the small collection of writings on housing ethics. The illumination of this structure highlights, as I discuss below, the importance of future academic attention to the descriptive statements behind the normative endeavours of housing.

Discussion: An Orientation Towards Philosophy

Alike to the spare few scholars discussing housing ethics, I note the value of housing ethics as a framework for policy evaluation and generation. By explicitly placing normative value on certain aspects of housing, ethics offer facets that can be translated into evaluative metrics or priorities in a transparent manner. An ethic can then be used to assess the quality of a previously implemented policy agenda or design a new intervention. For example, a neoliberal could use the ethic of marketisation to assess degrees of deregulation, or a Levinasian scholar could suggest policies to help individuals explore their inner selves through the home. Thereby, the



enterprise of housing ethics is, despite its more abstract elements, potentially useful for policy design and configuration.

More importantly, however, I believe the implications of a framework of housing ethics are not just a matter of making explicit normativity. What other writers on this topic have so far missed is the importance of the accompaniment to the normative statements outlined in the two-part grammar of my framework: the descriptive statements. As the above examples indicate, any housing ethic or normative claim hinges on how the entities within the claim, like housing, are conceived and understood. For instance, in the capabilities approach, housing should be a positive ‘resource’ for individuals because it is part of a system of enabling or constraining factors. If it was not conceived as such, the following ethic would not be sought. What matters is not just the understanding of housing but also how the human and our relationship to housing is conceived. For example, away from housing studies, Butler (2009) argues for the disorientation of the human self, in contrast to the neoliberal claim of our responsibility for ourselves; if we agree with Butler over the neoliberal contentions, surely homeownership would not be valorised as the ideal tenure for housing? Thus, when scholars like McCallum and Papadopoulos (2020: 291), albeit without much specificity, call for greater transparency in housing research to one’s theoretical “premises”, I would argue that the framework of housing ethics spotlights the underlying conceptions of housing and the human as perhaps the most important assumptions to attend to. For it is these that the well-studied normative claims of housing are built on.

What is then critical for housing research to engage with are the ontological questions that arguably are too often answered implicitly and, in turn, uncritically by housing researchers (see Lawson 2018). This potentially propels housing research into a terrain it has long avoided: philosophy. Thankfully, this is not a ‘blank slate’. As outlined previously, a housing ethics framework can be used to reveal the theoretical claims on the existence or phenomenal constitution of entities, e.g. the human and housing, already ‘in play’ in systems and approaches, an endeavour for future research to undertake comprehensively. However, I encourage housing researchers to not solely ‘read’ the claims pre-existing in housing systems and approaches; there is too, as I explored with Levinas above, the possibility to bring new claims, both on housing and the human, into housing research as well as develop existing ones. Continental philosophy, I suggest, is a fertile philosophical landscape to turn to, having both housing-specific thinking, like those in the phenomenologies of Bachelard (2014) and Bollnow (1961), and broader relevant meditations on the human, the self, space and place. For the theoretical assumptions in housing should not be static but explored actively by scholars.

I would be remiss if I did not note that my argument appears in support of theories *of* housing, that notably Ruonavaara (2018) has warned against. For the descriptive statements behind normative policy agendas are, in part, theories of housing. Though Ruonavaara (2018) looks to discourage a focus on creating these theories, favouring instead theories *about* or *from* housing, my contention is that, revealed by the two-part grammar of housing ethics, they already exist. Whether their general existence is desirable is therefore less the question as the frequent assertions on how housing ought to be delivered will never not be supported by such theoretical foundations, implicit or explicit. Present and pertinent, us housing scholars must then recognise such theories of housing and the multiplicity of these theories. Most importantly, we must acknowledge our own orientation within this landscape. A task, I contend, requires a philosophical awareness.



Conclusion

I have investigated housing ethics by first defining ethics generally, relating this to housing and then considering three examples of housing ethics: one a historical formation, one a popular theory in housing studies and one a new phenomenologically derived proposition. My framework of housing ethics, with its two-part grammar, highlights both the normative claims and the descriptive claims underpinning the design of housing systems and approaches – indirectly revealing the omnipresent theoretical foundation of housing policy. Given the discussions elsewhere on the former, my focus here has been the importance of attending to the latter; namely, that we as housing researchers need to recognise that all normative endeavours of housing are founded on understandings of what housing is and what our relationship to housing is. Housing research must, therefore, engage explicitly with these claims through, as I have suggested, philosophy. Retaining an engagement with the proposed housing ethics framework is crucial here; it orientates the abstract towards the material and, in turn, offers an effective means to bridge philosophy and politics to create improvements to housing systems.



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