

Unnatural Borders

'Belonging' as Human Need and Contemporary Challenge

In January of 2014, the American physicist Brian Greene was interviewed by Krista Tippett for her program *On Being*. At one point in the conversation, Dr. Greene was asked to briefly explain the Higgs-Boson particle and how we encounter this particle as we navigate through the world every day. Greene began by noting that the universe is filled with an invisible substance, the Higgs 'field,' and that the mass of any particle is actually a result of the resistance that it encounters as it tries to burrow through the Higgs field. The difficult thing to accept here is that there is an invisible substance that surrounds us and fills our world, and all that we do entails an effort to cut through this invisible substance. Although we may not directly experience it, there is an inherent resistance 'in-the-world' that confronts us in all that we do. To better situate human activity with respect to this resistance, Greene likened the human situation to that of fish; the fish is everywhere confronted by the resistance it meets while swimming through water, yet if the fish were able to articulate its experience it would presumably understand this resistance as simply a part of its world; it would be unable to imagine a way of being in the universe that does not entail this invisible substance that resists its movement. The water is the universe for the fish, and it is likewise that which resists the movement of the fish. In a similar fashion, Greene contends, the Higgs field *is* our universe, and it is likewise that which resists all human movement. This conceptualization of the human encounter with the Higgs field, the invisible substance that constitutes the universe, may provide a helpful analogy for the constant, if often overlooked, human

confrontation with the fundamental *limits* that are inherent in, and perhaps ultimately define the meaning of, human existence. Limits are *everywhere*; in all that we do we are brought into conflict with that which limits us. As Greene summarized, “we are in the Higgs field all the time, we experience our interaction with it all the time, [and]...we don’t even know it”; likewise, we are confronted with limits all the time, even if we don’t know it. What’s more, the constant confrontation with limits prevents a full immersion in the world in which we find ourselves; we are left like an exile on the threshold, longing to fully commune and connect with the world.

Traditionally, ‘exile’ is presented as a social, political, religious, or anthropological state of being physically displaced from one’s home and left to live in a place or manner that is *different* from what was one’s own. The exile is an *alien*, and the place of the exile is ‘other than’ *home*. Within this conception of the exile dynamic, the exiled individual is subjected by a will or power outside of oneself, resulting in a new manner of being in the world which is not of the individual’s choosing nor within the individual’s understanding or control. Without diminishing the trauma that such an experience of exile must inherently entail, I would suggest that the characteristics of this sort of existence in exile parallel those of a more fundamental, if less immediately traumatic, experience of exile; this experience may be classified as ‘existential exile,’ and it arises when one recognizes one’s fundamental otherness with respect to the world. In this sense, ‘exile’ is the loss not of ‘home’ but of ‘being-at-home’ in the world. Existential exile is the name for how one experiences oneself and one’s identity in the world, as constituted *in relation* with the world; it is the longing for a fundamental understanding of, and connection with, the world in which one exists, a completion and consummation of the relationship one has with the world. Our position in exile is a universal condition which results from the limits that define our existence as human; because we are fundamentally limited in what we can truly know and experience of the world, we are ultimately condemned to a position of estrangement from such knowledge and experience.

I have argued elsewhere¹ that the characterization of the human condition as ‘in-exile,’ though perhaps not usually explicitly articulated as such, has permeated the history of Western thought.

¹ Steven A. Burr, *Finite Transcendence: Existential Exile and the Myth of Home* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

The Judeo-Christian myth of original creation, as the beginning of human existence, is dependent upon an act of exile: human existence, precisely as 'human,' truly begins after an exile from paradise to the anxieties of freedom, imperfect knowledge, and mortality. Adam and Eve, as the first humans, represent not just the *origin* of the human but also the essence of what 'human' *means*—imperfect, limited, finite, banished from their original home. For Adam and Eve, to be exiled is to be human, and to be human is to be exiled. This is, of course, only one story; yet it is not alone in its implicit contention that the experience of exile is somehow at the heart of what it means to be human. Socrates did not fear his impending death because he believed that though his body may die his soul would be freed from the constraints of the physical and thereby endure forever. For Socrates, physical existence is not the boundary within which the soul exists exclusively; rather, physical existence marks the soul's period of exile—to be an embodied human is to be a soul in exile. All living is thus living in exile, and death, by freeing the soul from the body, thereby ends the soul's exile *in* the body.

Even now, millennia removed from these originary Western myths of exile, there remains a contemporary recognition of 'exile' as synonymous with the human condition. In a 2007 lecture delivered to the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy in Chicago, Illinois, Donatella di Cesare, while commenting on the increasing tendencies toward 'globalization' in our time, concluded that these same tendencies have only amplified and increased the occurrences and experiences of exile:

The globalization of the world has had and continues to have numerous effects. Among these effects there is the need of communities that try to go beyond the 'nation state.' But the nation state has constituted a form of inhabiting in which there was a convergence of place and self. This convergence has been cracked and the relation between place and self almost dissolved. What emerges...is a self without place and a place without self.²

² Donatella Di Cesare, "Exile: The Human Condition in a Globalized World," trans. David N. Levy. *Philosophy Today* 52 (suppl 2008), 85.

In this final depiction, exile is again presented not exclusively as a literal physical condition but also as a name for how one experiences oneself and one's identity in the world, an experience that is characterized by incompleteness, absence, and loss.

Existential exile is, ultimately, a single and immediate manifestation of the finitude that defines human existence. Simone Weil anticipated the condition described here as existential exile by noting that "to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul."³ Existential exile emerges as a sense of *groundlessness*, or as Weil characterizes it, *rootlessness*, which in its most realized form is experienced as not being-at-home in the world. Without roots, without a ground for Being, the exile is at odds with the world while longing for a place within it.

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The 2018 AGLSP annual conference, "Borders and Migration," is predicated on the contention that any meaningful and productive engagement with the contemporary moment *must* entail a substantive engagement with the challenges of borders, migration, and belonging. The conference CFP explicitly cites Gloria E. Anzaldúa, who in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* wrote the following:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.⁴

The outcome of much contemporary rhetoric and action, whether intentionally or not, has directly fostered the creation and perpetuation of the kinds of borders that Anzaldúa so poignantly described. What's profoundly worse is the fact that, by their very

³ Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, trans. A.F. Wills (New York: Routledge, 2002), 40.

⁴ Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 3.

presence, these borders have imposed an existence of separation, fear, anxiety, and despair upon scores of individuals, families, societies. In some sense, this imposed existence echoes the conditions of existential exile described above: it is undoubtedly a forced state of not belonging, of not being-at-home in the world. Yet it is obviously so much more besides, as constant threats to personal safety, security, livelihood, access to resources, and equal political participation accompany the existential threat of estrangement.

My intention here is not to compare the conditions described above. Although it should be obvious which condition poses the more profound threat and imposes the deeper trauma, any such evaluation does nothing to mitigate the plight of those suffering in either condition, to allow for an individual or collective realization of home. Thus, rather than pursue such comparisons, I will make one further observation. If, as I have argued, individual human existence really can be understood, at a fundamental level, as a kind of exile experience, then *all of us*, regardless of our temporal and spatial location and any dis/advantage afforded thereby, can empathize with anyone who suffers in any way from the creation, perpetuation, and enforcement of the unnatural boundaries to which Anzaldúa alludes. *We all know what it's like to feel that we don't belong, to not feel 'at home.'* Perhaps then what is needed now is a willingness to see in others the presence, the *ever*-presence, of the struggle to belong in the world—to recognize that this ongoing struggle to belong is motivated, at its most fundamental level, by the basic needs and longings that constitute what it means to be human. And although we may ever struggle to fully fulfill those needs, both for ourselves and for others, perhaps we can at least diminish this kind of suffering through our refusal to impose unnatural, and unnecessary, borders. Through a realization of solidarity-in-exile, perhaps a perpetual and universal belongingness can be reached and a shared and safe home, experienced literally and existentially, immediately and permanently, can be achieved.

Thank you for reading, for thinking, and for taking up the dialogue. Contact me any time: Editor@confluence-aglsp.org

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