

Introduction to Hospitality

The essays included in this section are taken from a conference held at Viterbo University in La Crosse, Wisconsin in April 2001. The title of the conference was *Hospitality: Serving Strangers in Our Homes, Hospitals, Prisons, Schools, and Churches*. The conference was the first in a series that are intended to provide opportunities for discussion of concepts that are deeply rooted in historical practices and narratives and yet have relevance to our contemporary understanding of teaching and ethics.

Over the past twenty years or so there has been a gradual but powerful shift in the study of ethical theory from deontological and consequentialist views to an emphasis on virtues. But although the consensus among philosophers specializing in theoretical ethics has shifted toward an understanding of ethics in terms of virtues rather than rules or principles, the practical shift toward an understanding of our everyday behavior in terms of particular virtues and vices is just getting underway. Most «applied ethics» textbooks, for example, while containing a chapter or two on virtue ethics, rely primarily on deontology and consequentialism for the analysis of particular issues and cases. Also, businesses and hospitals are spending greater efforts on developing codes of ethics and ethics policies with little attention to the examination of character traits encouraged or discouraged by organizational structure and environment. Most significantly for educators, recent attempts at many colleges and universities to develop «ethics across the curriculum» goes little further than the articulation and recitation of codes of professional conduct relevant to the various academic disciplines.

One of the reasons for the lack of practical attention to particular virtues is that virtues tend to be nurtured and sustained in communities where certain specific traits of character are encouraged and others are discouraged. Not only that, but the worth of those virtues may only be evident to those who are fully accustomed to a way of life in which certain practices are an integral part. Virtues tend to be passed on through narrative and example rather than discursive rule giving. The result is that any large organization such as a university or hospital or corporation will be unlikely to reach initial consensus about the worth of particular virtues because individuals in the organization come from a wide variety of upbringings and lifestyles.

There have been attempts in our society to reach consensus about some basic virtues. A good example is tolerance. The contemporary attempt to endorse tolerance is an attempt to find a character trait that any rational being in a modern democratic society can endorse. It is, in effect, an attempt to use Rawlsian motivations to support virtues. But even though virtues can be defended against reasoned criticism in that way, they cannot be formed in that way nor can they be sustained in the face of largely unreflective social practices and attitudes that run persistently against them.

In contrast to tolerance, hospitality is a trait with a rich history of practice in various specific communities. It is, in brief, the practice of taking upon oneself the burden of providing for the stranger's need. Its paradigmatic story in the Christian tradition is the parable of the Good Samaritan. As with any virtue, its practice entails certain costs, and that means that its desirability will not be immediately evident to people with modern democratic sensibilities. But by looking carefully at the stories and practices that both exemplify and give rise to the virtue of hospitality, we gain a better and wiser perspective on our contemporary moral situation. We also may gain insights into how to improve certain long-established institutions.

Hospitality is especially important for the teacher who deals with strangers on a regular basis and who has the task of making them at home in the classroom, but also, and more importantly, of finding a home in the world. What would a school or university that dedicated itself to the practice of hospitality look like? I'm not sure of the answer to that question in many respects, but I think it would significantly change the expectations with which both teachers and students begin each day. The stories of hospitality develop in us a perception of the ways in which the roles of host and guest are frequently reversed, so that while we may go into teaching with the aim of serving the student, we often find ourselves being served in surprising ways.

- Richard Kyte

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