Neighborliness and Hospitality

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NEIGHBORLINESS

The ancient Stoic philosopher Hierocles argued that we should care about every human being as much as we care about our friends, family members, and even ourselves (Taylor 2012). To illustrate, he proposed a simple but compelling way of thinking about our relationships with others. Imagine yourself sitting at the center of many concentric circles. Each slightly larger circle includes people according to their increasing social distance from you and therefore—if you're like most people—your degree of compassion for them. The farther away, the less compassion. The circle immediately outside you represents your closest family members. Then there is a circle for extended family, and another for more distant blood relations. The layers continue with separate levels for the local community, residents of neighboring towns, co-nationals, and finally the entire human race. Hierocles recommends that we try to draw the larger circles closer to us, so that we regard global strangers with the compassion that we have toward our children or neighbors.

Hierocles's advice might remind some readers of more modern moral theories—certain versions of utilitarianism, for example—that demand we treat all human persons impartially. Your child is, from the perspective of morality, no more important than the child dying of an easily preventable disease in a Monrovian slum. To privilege your children or neighbors—or even yourself—over those in distant lands reveals an arbitrary and morally objectionable partiality. You and your friends aren't more special than they. These thoughts have led some philosophers to argue further that it is wrong to devote time and material resources to benefit those close to us if we could do much greater good by giving them to others. How could it be OK to treat a friend to a nice dinner, they ask, when you could instead donate that $100 to save the Monrovian child's life?

In *The Virtues of Limits*, David McPherson proposes that the Hierocletian picture errs in denying the moral significance of "our particular attachments to family, friends, and fellow citizens but also the moral significance of proximity" (2022, p. 73). One problem with the picture is that none of us can treat every human on earth with the same care and compassion that we offer to our close friends and family. We cannot "level up" our care in this way. But if we are to treat everyone impartially, then our only remaining option is to "level-down." We would consequently treat even our close friends and family as if they were distant strangers. Sure, we ignore the needs of our friends and family, but at least we treat everyone as equals! There is a dan-

ger, McPherson writes, "in an abstract love of humanity, which is that in loving humanity in general we may, in fact, love no one in particular, since particular human beings can be difficult to love, given their various imperfections (and our own)" (2022, p. 75).

The Hierocletian picture can lead us astray in another way. Enthralled with an "abstract love of humanity" we might go so far as to reverse the direction of ordinary human partiality. Instead of privileging those near to us, we focus on those afar. You may have met such a person, who never tires of professing how much they care for "humanity" or for those in distant lands all the while finding it impossibly difficult to extend the most basic kindness to his neighbor who votes the wrong way. Such a lover of humanity, as Edmund Burke said of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "melts with tenderness for those only who touch him by the remotest relation" (1992, p. 49).

McPherson rejects the Hierocletian picture. He argues that the common tendency to show partiality to those physically close to us, far from being morally benighted, is in fact morally required by the virtue of neighborliness. Neighborliness is but one example of what McPherson calls the "limiting virtues," which are "concerned with recognizing proper limits in human life" (2022, p. 1). Virtues themselves are "modes of proper responsiveness to that which is of intrinsic value (or goodness) and which makes normative demands upon us, and in being properly responsive the virtues constitute for us the good life, that is, our human fulfillment understood as a normatively higher, nobler, more meaningful form of life" (McPherson 2022, pp. 1-2).[1] Now as McPherson notes, there is a sense in which all virtues recognize proper limits insofar as they rule in some ways of acting or thinking and rule out others. Acting honestly, for example, precludes acting dishonestly. Thinking carefully excludes thinking recklessly, and so on. However, McPherson targets four specific domains of limits: existential, moral, political, and economic. The particular limiting virtues that interest McPherson correspond to one or more of these domains and include humility, reverence, moderation, contentment, loyalty, and neighborliness.

Neighborliness recognizes proper limits in the moral domain, and specifically, those limits on "what we can be required to do on behalf of others" (McPherson 2022, p. 71). Hierocles implores us to extend our limits of compassion and care for all of humanity equally. Similarly, utilitarians tell us we should divert considerable time and resources away from our friends, family, and neighbors, and instead give them to the global poor. McPherson argues that there are some virtues the very exercise of which require us to limit how we use our time and resources. This is not to say that we should not care about or show compassion to people in faraway places, or that we should not do more for them than we already do. Rather, McPherson's point is that there are some virtues the exercise of which means we *must* be partial. Here, McPherson echoes Mencius, Aristotle, Jesus, and G. K. Chesterton: the virtuous life involves being a good neighbor. And being a good neighbor means giving special attention to those physically close to you.

What exactly is neighborliness? Neighborliness, McPherson writes, is "a kind of human solidarity that recognizes the moral significance of proximity." It is "the virtue of being properly responsive to the dignity of other human beings in face-to-face (or close) encounters and the demands they can make on us" (McPherson 2022, p. 73). These remarks suggest that neighborliness has at least two crucial aspects: *recognition* of the moral significance of those physically close to us, and *responsiveness* to their dignity and their demands on us.

McPherson's guiding illustration of neighborliness is Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus tells an inquisitive lawyer that to inherit eternal life he must love his neighbor as himself. "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answers that it was the Samaritan alone who showed compassion and stopped to help the man in dire need who acted as a neighbor. The message, McPherson writes, is that to be neighborly we must be prepared to "act with solidarity with any human being we come across" (2022, p. 74).

On this approach, neighborliness is a relatively broad virtue. By this I mean that there is a comparatively large and diverse range of contexts in which one can be responsive to the others in close physical proximity as well as a large range of characteristic neighborly behaviors. By way of analogy, consider the virtue of honesty. Honesty has a broad behavioral range, encompassing truthfulness, forthrightness, proper compliance (not cheating), being respectful of property (not stealing), and promise-keeping (Wilson 2018; Miller

2021). What unifies these aspects of honesty? According to one recent account, they all involve reliably not distorting the facts (Miller 2021). Honesty can therefore be understood as a broad virtue with several sub-virtues falling under it.

Let's explore the idea that the virtue of neighborliness works similarly. Consider:

- Allowing a mother and her four children to cut you in line at the supermarket because you have only two items to purchase, and their cart is full
- Stopping in a parking lot to help a stranger charge his car battery
- Inviting your new colleague and his family to your home for dinner
- Letting the city street repair team use your home's bathroom because their portable toilet wasn't delivered
- Offering to mow your next-door neighbor's yard when they go on vacation
- Giving your child a bandage after she scrapes her knee on the sidewalk

It seems to me that all these are good candidates for expressions of the virtue of neighborliness as McPherson understands it. Each involves a recognition of the moral significance of physical proximity and a response that in some way shows solidarity, meets a need, or honors a demand. So, on the one hand, it looks like we have here six candidate examples of the exercise of neighborliness. However, some of these examples perhaps strain the linguistic breadth of the 'neighborliness'. Are you being neighborly by treating your child's scrape? I'm not sure. One objection then is just that neighborliness has been characterized so broadly that any compassionate, helping behavior shown toward someone physically close to you will count as neighborliness. I said that on McPherson's account, neighborliness is a relatively broad virtue. But maybe it has been defined too broadly. I won't develop this line further, so let's just think of neighborliness broadly, in the way McPherson describes.

If, like honesty, we can understand the virtue of neighborliness as possessing several sub-virtues, each with a characteristic field and set of behaviors, what are those relevant sub-virtues? I won't try to offer an exhaustive list. But let me suggest three sub-virtues of neighborliness: hospitality, friendliness, and what we can clunkily think of as neighborliness proper.[2]

Hospitality is the virtue that concerns the welcoming of guests, characteristically (but not exclusively) in our homes. In the above cases, the invitation to a colleague for dinner and letting the workers use your bathroom are candidate instances of hospitality. I'll say more about hospitality shortly.

Friendliness is the virtue that concerns the common decencies and pro-social acts we perform toward people we meet in our day-to-day lives. Allowing the mother of four to cut in line and stopping to jump someone's car are friendly acts. It seems to me a bit much to call these acts of "compassion" or "charity." They don't typically involve much by way of pity or empathy, and they don't relieve pain or suffering, even if they do help others deal with the unpleasantries or inconveniences of life. It also seems a mistake to me to describe the parent's giving a bandage as an act of friendliness. Characteristically, friendliness is a virtue in those contexts where we interact with others for the first time, or in more casual social situations. Your spouse might think you are friendly when it comes to how you treat her friends or co-workers, but it would be odd for her to praise you for being so friendly to her.

Neighborliness proper is the virtue that concerns residing in proximity to others. It's the virtue of being a good neighbor in the narrower sense of 'neighbor' than McPherson's. Offering to mow your next-door neighbor's yard will often be an expression of the virtue of neighborliness proper. Neighborliness proper can be exercised toward those on your apartment block or your street or perhaps toward a roommate. But I cannot practice neighborliness proper for Monrovians.

Each of these sub-virtues is a virtuous way of responding to particular others who are in physical proximity to us. In this respect, they are forms of neighborliness in McPherson's broad sense. And yet they differ with respect to their characteristic contexts and action types. Hospitality can be shown at your home or perhaps your place of work, but you cannot show hospitality at Walmart, even if you can be friendly there by letting someone cut you in line. Offering to mow your next-door neighbor's lawn can be neighborliness

proper, but it is not neighborly in this narrower sense to drive across town to a stranger's house and offer to mow their lawn whenever they happen to go on vacation.

HOSPITALITY

I want to devote the rest of this essay to developing McPherson's virtue of neighborliness by reflecting on one of its sub-virtues: hospitality.[3] My remarks will be brief and impressionistic, but I hope they serve two purposes: first, to give more shape to the broad virtue of neighborliness; and second, to explore an ancient virtue that seems to have both fallen out of favor in American cultural practice and been largely neglected as a topic of study in contemporary moral philosophy.

Let's begin with what hospitality is not. First, hospitality is not mere charity. You can show charity to distant strangers with whom you never interact. You can, for example, donate money to poverty relief organizations without having a clue who you are helping. But hospitality is not generic giving to unknown persons. As a form of neighborliness, hospitality targets particular people in our lives with whom we come in close physical contact: neighbors, families, and strangers. Furthermore, unlike charity, hospitality requires an act of welcoming.

Neither is hospitality the mere hosting of guests. Owning a bed and breakfast is not hospitality even if, unlike the charitable donor who donates to distant causes, you exchange emails with your guests to arrange their stay and payment. Hospitality requires a level of attentiveness to your guests, primarily through the recognition and generous meeting of their needs, which requires spending time with them.

Yet hospitality also goes beyond attentiveness to and meeting of a guest's needs. A hotel staff member who waits on you hand and foot may be an attentive servant. Hospitality requires more than mere serving. Rather, (at least in some cultures) it requires sharing things together, characteristically but not necessarily a meal, drinks, and conversation.

Let's say, then, that hospitality is the act of welcoming particular others, meeting their needs, and sharing things together. More simply, hospitality is the activity of *attentive welcoming*. Hospitality differs most crucially from friendliness and neighborliness proper insofar as only the former requires an act of welcoming.

What counts as attentive welcoming will vary to a significant degree from one culture to another, depending in part on local norms of manners and etiquette, tradition, expectations, wealth, and a whole host of other potential factors. We learn from the *Odyssey*, for example, that hospitality to guests at one's home involves providing a meal even before the host asks the guest's identity or business, as well as the offer of a bath. This differs from the norms of ancient Bedouin hospitality we find in Genesis 18, as well as the norms of modern American hospitality (such as they are). What is crucial is that, across cultures, hospitality makes a guest feel welcome so far as it is possible.

Homes are the most natural place to show hospitality. Attentive welcoming requires a setting where the host has significant authority and control. You can't welcome someone to a place you have no right to be in the first place (your boss's dining room). Homes are also prime settings for hospitality because, as private spaces, they offer a level of comfort that's hard to attain elsewhere. At home you can relax and follow conversation where it leads without worrying about eavesdroppers or interlopers. Guest and host can let their guards down, which is less likely to happen in more public spaces. It must be said, however, that not all homes lend themselves to hospitality. No guest wants to stay in a dangerous home. And who enjoys being a guest in a stressful, chaotic home? It is the safe, peaceful, welcoming home that is the most natural setting for hospitality. Of course, there are other contexts where hospitality can be offered, even if they are less than ideal: a place of work, a classroom, even the taxi you drive.

Who are the "particular others" that hosts attentively welcome when exhibiting hospitality? We can distinguish, rather crudely, hospitality to strangers from hospitality to friends. The ancient Greek notion of *xenios*—friendship to strangers—was so important a virtue that Zeus himself was sometimes called "Zeus Xenios": the stranger's god. To be *in*hospitable to strangers at one's door was an afront to Zeus himself and

put one at risk for divine retribution. But hospitality to strangers will make different demands on hosts than hospitality to friends, neighbors, or family. Across contexts, attentive welcoming will take a form appropriate to the relationship. The hospitality you show your closest friend will naturally look much different from the hospitality you show a stranger.

Is hospitality a virtue? I've suggested that hospitality is a sub-virtue of McPherson's broad virtue of neighborliness, one way of being "properly responsive to the dignity of other human beings in face-to-face (or close) encounters and the demands they can make on us." Hospitality, it seems to me, is one such way to respond properly to those with whom we come into contact. But according to McPherson's more general understanding of virtues, virtues contribute to human fulfillment and meaning in life. Hospitality does well on this score. For starters, hospitality forges social bonds. Plato called the connection formed between guest and host *exenothesan*: "ties of hospitality" (Plato 1892, 5:21). These ties are formed in many ways. In offering hospitality you provide a safe and peaceful place for people who may not otherwise have one. Hospitality can also convert strangers to friends. By opening your home to neighbors through hospitality, you create local bonds of trust, support, and enjoyment. Hospitality also helps build bridges because it offers an explicitly pro-social context where strangers can become friends and enjoy each other's company, irrespective of their politics or other differences that might cause conflict in other contexts. In a culture where everything from pop music to professional sports to young adult fiction has been thoroughly politicized, contexts where people can be friends and share activities with those across the political divide should be preserved and prized. Widely practiced hospitality in the home is one of the more promising ways to lower the political temperature and build social trust.

Influenced by Aristotle, many have thought that virtues will always or at least typically occupy a mean between two vicious extremes. Courage, a common example, is the virtuous mean between cowardice and foolhardiness. Does hospitality occupy a mean? What are its corresponding vices? I suggest that in the context of hosting others, hospitality does occupy a virtuous mean. If hospitality is something like attentive welcoming, then there will be a spectrum of attentiveness. The hospitable person will know how to be properly attentive in contexts of hosting. The person deficient in attentiveness will be a neglectful host. They will ignore their guests' needs and display a general lack of interest in them. The person who displays excessive attentiveness will be an overbearing host. A host can be overbearing in two ways. One is through hostility. As an act of welcoming, hospitality offers your guest significant freedom to be themselves in your home. This precludes inviting them to your home to lecture them or correct their political views. You cannot be hospitable while also being a moralizer. But just as a hospitable host must avoid hostility, he must also avoid being smothering. You have probably had a host who was too friendly, hovering over you, anticipating every conceivable need, or insisting too strongly that you stay longer than you'd like. The hospitable host avoids the extremes of neglect and overbearingness (in both its hostile and smothering forms).

Finally, what motivates those exercising the virtue of hospitality? It seems to me that such a person will fundamentally be motivated by some mix of altruistic and dutiful motivations.[4] They want to meet the needs of others, take care of them, offer them a refuge—or they believe they have a duty to extend generosity, forge social bonds, or overcome political or socioeconomic divides. Although a host may also be motivated by self-regarding reasons such as enjoyment, these will not be fundamental, nor will they be most prominent. The danger here is that when a host is motivated by concerns for herself, hospitality can turn into something dark:

> [H]osting can be a power play. The host has the opportunity to be the guest of honor, the center of all praise and attention in the comfort of their own home. Guests must fawn and thank them whether or not the hospitality or food is any good, and often feel obligated to reciprocate whether they want to or not (Hudson 2023).[5]

The virtuous host—the one who practices hospitality—will not be so motivated.

CONCLUSION

One of the virtues of *The Virtues of Limits* is that it serves as a powerful response to a kind of morality—call it commencement speech morality—that tells young people that if they are to live good lives, they must do big things, start revolutions, save the world, rescue distant strangers, and make a name for themselves. However, if McPherson is correct, and I think he is, virtue often requires that we set our sights much lower and put limits on our aspirations, goals, and good intentions. Some important human goods are made possible only when we do so.[6]

NOTES

1 For more on McPherson's notion of virtue as such, see McPherson (2020).

2 As David McPherson pointed out in conversation, none of these sub-virtues seems to capture the case of the Good Samaritan, his own guiding illustration of neighborliness. McPherson suggests the sub-virtue of "Good Samaritanism," a virtue of immediate compassionate response to the dire needs of those in physical proximity, such as when one rescues a drowning child from an ornamental pond. Here, I'll set aside this additional proposed sub-virtue.

3 In this section I draw from Tosi and Warmke (2023, chapter 6).

4 See Miller (2021).

5 Here, Hudson discusses a pitfall of hosting noted by Margaret Visser (1992).

6 I am grateful to Matthew Slaboch for the kind invitation to contribute to this symposium, and to David McPherson for his generous comments on a previous draft of this essay. Some of these ideas on hospitality were previously developed with Justin Tosi.

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