

In Praise of Welcoming

Remarks on the Ethics of Politics

By **Matt Rosen**
Colorado College



If we are going to speak of perspectives in the plural, it is imperative that we speak of welcoming. It is imperative that we speak of what is happening outside the invisible yet solid walls of our campus, what is happening in this city and this state, this country, and ultimately, what is happening in a truly global sense.

The plurality of perspectives has never been more prominent, and yet this remains an uneasy time to be classed as 'different.' Difference proliferates, but it does so in the shadows. Here at Colorado College, the word is 'diversity,' but it is a word with no referent. It masks the troubled space in which desire for otherness and fear of otherness intersect, in which a student body yearning for new perspectives and an institution tasked with capitalist accumulation meet. Since 'diversity' refers to no one in particular, it's safe, but it can never be acted on. It is only about the count of bodies. There is nothing to do with it, and its impact on discourse is indirect at best. It is a purely theoretical locution that never forces us to pose the question of practice, even the practice of theory.

In Colorado Springs, difference is in peril. We all know this to be the case; we call it 'conservativism,' but what we mean is that the status quo, the same, is always conserved. Strangers are expected to conform in some way, to enter into communal bonds in which they can be categorized and set into place. Taxonomy carries the day. You are either 'with us' or 'against us,' you are either part of 'us' or one of 'them.' The community itself is to

be preserved, even at the cost of locked gates and high walls.

This rhetoric is also the rhetoric of our nation. Our southern border is being fortified to keep out the veritable other, the other who apparently threatens our nation's stability, although we can't quite say why or how. Visas are more challenging to obtain, citizenship seems a farther stretch for many than it used to, and some have already begun to leave. At the

Since 'diversity' refers to no one in particular, it's safe, but it can never be acted on. It is only about the count of bodies.

helm of our nation, we've placed a man terrified of outsiders, terrified of difference in any form whatsoever. The law of the land is being rewritten: "conform or leave." "Either be 'like' us by a degree of not-too-many standard deviations or go somewhere else."

But it is not just our nation that is closing the door to the stranger. In the rest of the world, borders are defended by increasingly substantial military presences, travel is increasingly costlier and more dangerous, and migration is increasing-

Matt Rosen

ly seen as a threat, not only to national security but to the security of families, communities, neighborhoods, and so on. Nationalism, which is just the political form of xenophobia, is on the rise, and it's not hard to see why. If we permit someone who is totally unlike us to speak, they may dissent, they may seek to rupture the bonds that hold us together as a nation, as a people, as a community, as a cohesive unit. And yet, these bonds have never seemed more fragile or more illusory than they do now.

Differences in perspective have become (or have remained) a thing to be rooted-out. In the re-education-through-labor of our school system, children are taught to think and act alike, to work together insofar as their goals and the stipulations of the project at hand are shared, but only in that case. We must all use the same grammar, speak the same language, learn the same material ('core curriculum'), and prepare ourselves for the same future. We must all chant the same pledge of allegiance to the same country, a country with values that we all must share: 'one nation, indivisible.'

In lieu of egalitarianism, the liberal capitalism of 'democracy' runs amok. Our politicians are not humans among humans, but the first of humans, the chosen representatives who can conjure up what is in our best interests better than we can, or so we are told. Unity of voice and mind trumps alterity. Showing hospitality to others is a gamble, so we choose the angst of the self-same instead. "Who cares if the world looks bleak and desolate, if it is characterized by a boredom with no parallel, as long as everyone speaks, acts, and thinks like I do?" And if we're feeling especially generous, we call this I, 'we.' But

Philosophy cannot think the position of the ordinary person because it always thinks it as a position.

'we' remains a singular subject; 'we' remains univocal and must. The linkage of 'like me, like us' is taken to be prior to difference, more important than difference.

And in this world devoid of difference, in a world in which otherness is the fear par excellence, we refuse to imagine that things could be otherwise. Not only do we expel the stranger, but we expel along with the stranger the possibility of another relationship with the future. We expel the capacity for change or novelty. We do not seek a 'new symbolization,' a new way of being in the world, either because we think that this is the best it can get and we're comfortable here, that this is the best it's ever been, or else because we are afraid that the project of re-imagining the world is just too risky to undertake. Under the mark of 'liberty,' or some 'realistic' principle, we dismiss the egalitarian hypothesis as ineffectual or fantastical, as a youthful dream. We set aside the youthful 'idealism' to which, instead, we must stake a claim as the only true realism.

In the war against perspectives that differ, and sometimes radically, from our own, the Academy is not a bastion of openness and hospitality. Indeed, philosophy has long perpetuated the insider/

outsider, us/them dichotomy; philosophy has long been culpable in the locking of doors and the shutting of gates, or else it has remained silent. Philosophy cannot think the position of the ordinary person because it always thinks it as a position. The generic thought of the person is given another name and thought as that name: Being, the One, the All. Even the exceptions to the name are thought as inhuman, naming what cannot name the person: the Event, Contingency, Void, the Real.

Philosophical ethics replace people with principles or think people structurally, as implicated always in systems or apparatuses larger than themselves. In the last instance, philosophy always poses the question of the structure, the question of politics, and dispenses with anything generically human as naïve.

Kant tells us that people have dignity and deserve respect insofar as they can be deemed rational; a person is an 'end in themselves' only if a principle (rationality) can be validated. Bentham and Mill posit a principle of utility that measures people in a qualifiable, even quantifiable, manner. Ethics becomes calculation, the weighing of a scale, a cost/benefit analysis. Aristotle and Confucius determine ethics in the position of virtues, the oscillation towards a virtuous mean of thought and of behavior. In each case, the generic person is re-thought according to an inhuman apparatus: the quality of rationality, the principle of utility, a list of virtues. In each case, those who are different must conform to the given arbiter of worth in order to be seen as ethical subjects. The southern border gets renamed: rationality, utility, virtue. But the problem is the same; the gates of our discipline should

read 'no one who is too different shall enter here.'

Philosophical ethics, as embodied in Kant, Mill, and Aristotle, among others, poses a single question: how do we think the stranger? But the question of generic ethics, of the ethic of the ordinary person, is different: how do we think with the stranger? How do we think alongside the stranger?

Around the world, tragedy remains and becomes a feature of life; affliction is a fact outside of the control of people and in the hands of those who do not have to live it. The victim of this affliction is, for philosophy, the unthinkable; the victim is impossibility itself. Philosophy cannot think with the victim but can only think the victim under one of its other guises, in the donation of another name: Utility, Dignity, Rationality, Moral Worth. That which is rigorously human, through and through, is unavailable to a philosophy that always determines the person in advance as part of a structure, as implicated in a system, or as a participant in a shared 'yes/no' discourse of 'reason' or 'common-sense.'

It is not fashionable to ask the question of the human, to speak of people. Today, the post-human, the after-human, the inhuman, are in vogue. But the generic person should not be confused with the disastrous humanism that proved so horrific in the twentieth century. The person is not a conception of the person because the person cannot be thought under one of its other philosophical names that would be its concept, such as Being or the One. The person refuses the violence of subsumption under the logic of the concept. The human that I am speaking of is the human in the most general of terms,

Matt Rosen

the human of a lived experience which is not at all open to a philosophy which demands that it be thought in terms of its abstraction. This is the human who always flies under the philosophical radar.

It is easy to fall back into the conceptualization of the victim, the other, the migrant, the person in any sense, when they appear only on the television, in the news, as a headline which speaks of some faraway place. Philosophy triumphs in the distance between us and the victim. But sometimes the victim is you, sometimes it is someone or something you love, sometimes it is right next door, in your home, your neighborhood, your community. And in this case, the distance of philosophical ethics, the thinking of all perspectives under a new and unifying name, seems strange and problematic. Suddenly, the question of the victim is absolutely immanent; it is an immediate matter. It is in this moment that a generic ethic is called for, it is in this moment that welcoming is really no longer a question at all because the person who cannot be seen by philosophy is, all of a sudden, the clearest thing in the world, the supreme unquestionability.

A generic ethic does not seek to explain or re-create a law by which the human can be set-into-place, a law in which differences of perspective can be reconciled. But it is also not a relativism; it does not say 'to each, their own.' It rather demands that each be welcomed in a no matter what fashion, without regard to the qualities or identities that they bring to the table. For a generic ethic, the words 'you are welcome here because' or 'you are welcome here despite' signify a return to the philosophical ethic. Welcoming pays no attention to predicates but is universal

Since there are always many strangers at our door, it is often the case that resistance can be derived from the absolute hospitality of a generic ethic.

towards every singular thing. These gates read: 'let each enter here.'

But this does not mean that tolerance is also universal, that we must surrender and give ourselves over to whomever we encounter. There are times in which welcoming calls for, even demands, resistance. Imagine welcoming two people, a refugee and a nationalist. As we have said, a generic ethic which thinks alongside the ordinary person and does not think them under another name demands an absolute hospitality; both the refugee and the nationalist must be welcomed in a no matter what fashion. But this does not mean that the refugee's perspective and the nationalist's perspective, that all of their qualities as distinguished from whatever they may be in themselves, also must be welcomed.

Welcoming strips away all of the qualities of those who are shown its hospitality, it pays no attention to them. In welcoming both the refugee and the nationalist, we may find that the nationalist's qualities impose a form of colonization

In Praise Of Welcoming

onto the refugee, thinking that refugee under a non-generic name such as Enemy, Opponent, Danger, Terrorist, and so on. In this case, welcoming both the refugee and the nationalist condemns us to resist the nationalist's predicative imposition, the nationalist's violence towards the refugee. And since there are always many strangers at our door, it is often the case that resistance can be derived from the absolute hospitality of a generic ethic.

In a world filled to the brim with undeniable difference, our politics and our philosophies often aim precisely at its denial. And since alterity is undeniable at the level of ordinary people, these politics and philosophies strike us as utterly inhuman, as structural or systemic, as out-of-touch or out-of-control. So let this be a call to action, a call to theoretic arms, an ode in praise of welcoming: let each, no matter who they are, enter here. Instead of thinking each and every other under a name or perspective which is our own, which is given by a givenness which is self-same to us, may we think alongside all of those others who philosophy pronounces as in-existent, who philosophy denies. May we think with the other who we have welcomed in a no matter what fashion. ●

