



Imagining Hospitality

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Abstract

I discuss the use of the concept “hospitality”. I discuss Heidrun Friese (2004), who explores the conditions for adequately conceptualizing hospitality. I point out how her analysis can show that the concept “hospitality” is often used only in name, as with the segregated social category of the “immigrant”, for example. I then discuss José Medina (2016) and his concept of “resistant imagination”. I argue his idea can be useful for fielding the difficulties Friese sets out for adequately conceptualizing “hospitality”. I argue that in addition to physical sensitivity, an epistemic variety of sensitivity is vital for respecting others in a global community.

Keywords: hospitality, imagination, epistemic justice, political philosophy

1. Introduction

I discuss the use of the concept “hospitality”. María Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman (1983) pointed out that internalized oppression presupposes living life “in terms of the impoverished and degrading concepts others have found it convenient to use to describe” that life (Lugones and Spelman 1983, 573-574). Yet, the concept of hospitality seems, by definition, a matter of attentive consideration for another. I will suggest a reason why hospitality involves such consideration, why it is something imperative in a global context, and moreover, its hollow and handwaving use is something terrible. It is one thing for a person or institution or polity to claim to offer hospitality, and quite another for them to in fact offer it. I discuss Heidrun Friese (2004) and José Medina (2006) and suggest a synthesis of their ideas can suggest politically, socially, and ethically useful insight.

2. Conceptualizing Hospitality

Sally Haslanger (2005) and others have offered a theoretical account of a certain sort of conceptual analysis Haslanger calls ameliorative. Ameliorative projects do not simply describe or characterize a

concept, they outline “the concept we are reaching for” in its use (Haslanger and Saul 2006, 96). These projects focus on connecting the concept we are reaching for up with how we usually use it, connections to encourage improved use. Dictionary.com lists two definitions for the word-entry “hospitality”:

1. the friendly reception and treatment of guests or strangers.
2. the quality or disposition of receiving and treating guests and strangers in a warm, friendly, generous way. (Dictionary.com 2017)

Friese takes on such an ameliorative project to illustrate the conditions this sort of treatment means: friendliness, warmth, and generosity are the relations the hospitable intend toward guests. As Ann Cudd (2006) and others have shown, there are situations where hospitality as such fails.

Cudd discusses oppression as operating within hierarchically situated social groups and through various sorts of oppression (e.g., psychological, physical, affective). Social groups are an important part of social and self-identity. Similarities and differences between individuals are accentuated to facilitate the development of positive self-identity and a role within pertinent social categories (or social groups). An evolutionarily beneficial side-effect of this socio-cognitive process are stereotypes, “quick and dirty” generalizations about the general social environment which may or may not be accurate, and can be biased in favor of groups one identifies themselves as being a part of (their “in-group”) while biased against groups one is not a part of (“out-group”) (Cudd 2006, 70-3). In a global context, the common experience of immigrants in their country of arrival is often what Cudd calls *de facto* and *de jure* segregation, where their identity as immigrants is both “legally defined and enforced” as well as “practiced and enforced” by social groups without explicit legal requirement (Cudd 2006, 137-8). This total separation illustrates how hospitality can fail to operate on its own conceptual terms. The identity of being an “immigrant” can itself operate against being hospitable, as the preeminent socio-political out-group.

Friese introduces her project with a quote from Franz Kafka (1929) in posthumous novel *The Castle*. In the quote, the main character, K., is an uninvited guest to the castle and the village, and his hosts are overt in their existential distance from “one who does not comprehend, acts in an odd manner and disrupts familiar comforts, the usual order of things” (Friese 2004, 67). Friese notes the image of a “ridiculous tangle” of bureaucratic hang-ups that sustain K. in an ambivalent presence and distance, an example showing that “what is at stake” in an adequate conceptual account of hospitality is the fact that the notion of being a stranger or a guest itself – so, as such a social group – can be a form of imposition upon those who receive the hospitality. Any academic effort in facilitating global association, to keep from dissolution into contradiction, must remember that a space of “permitting difference and negotiation” that “resists claims of identity and belonging” is essential to a coherent concept of hospitality (Friese 2004, 74-5). We can read this in the definitions from Dictionary.com: the word guest is associated with “stranger”: an individual we have no understanding of, whether they are in or out, friend or foe. A guest is to be given their own space to be themselves, and even that, in the sense of what that means for them as who they are, and yet Friese notes that the host also make demands of their guests, drawing the metaphorical line in the sand where their hospitality goes no further, “to regulate the transformation of a stranger’s status and fashion him as socially acceptable” *qua* guest (Friese 2004, 71).

This resistance to identity and belonging as characteristic of hospitality means the concept is inherently problematic for social formation. Cudd has described how the sociological aspects of group

formation show we use categorization and stereotypes to help develop cohesion between disparate individuals by accentuating similarities and downplaying dissimilarities. A concept that instead requires the consistent accentuation of dissimilarities – the relation between guest and host underwriting where the familiar “person from here” stops and the foreign “person from there” begins – seems at resolute odds with the development of social cohesion and group formation. The wide array of historical and contemporary evidence attests to this: it seems more often the rule that immigrants fare badly in their new society and the exception that they live comfortably. Friese seems to show that hospitality is something hard to achieve, something that is more often merely attempted or even just said just because how society operates.

Sara Ahmed (2016) has pointed out that academic institutions often state a commitment to anti-racism efforts to not have to make such a commitment. Picking up where J. L. Austin left off with the concept of “performatives”, Ahmed offers the concept of the “non-performative”: how to “use words as a way of not doing things” (Ahmed 2016, 1). Friese’s project, too, shows that the use of the word “hospitality” may be more one of stating one is hospitable than being hospitable. Cudd’s project shows the facts of social formation seem to rest in large part on this being desirable, since hospitality, as something that imperatively accentuates dissimilarities between individuals, is problematic. And yet the world continues to grow, and with it the association between disparate societies becomes more common. To develop our conceptual resources in such a way that explains how to be and not just claim to be hospitable, helping us in this more socially complex world, I turn to José Medina and his concept of “resistant imagination”.

3. Imagining Hospitality

Medina’s project has a range of potentially insightful recommendations for both Friese and Cudd. Medina is thinking big and begins his 2013 *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* by discussing conditions for an adequate concept of democracy. Positioning his account against other epistemic models, which offer adequate epistemic conditions for democratic society, his central concept of resistance finds its first application as the “heart and soul” of democracy (Medina 2013, 4). This resistance-based model of democratic society is the general social framework within which Medina proposes and describes his concept of resistant imagination. Medina cites John Dewey’s account of democracy as an example of where imagination is critical, for individuals to think through and explore what others different from them experience and, accordingly, with those possibilities in mind, to think through how best to organize society democratically. An important element in this work, however, is to ensure that our imagination is continually grounded in the real experiences of those different others. Working closely with others while working closely on our imaginative sensibilities is an imperative element of democracy, for Medina, and the real differences between us equally so.

For Friese, for hospitality to be adequate, qualities like friendliness and generosity must be to leave open space for “forms of exchange” allowing for mutually beneficial encounters between fundamentally different people (Friese 2004, 71). This space is along the lines as that discussed by Medina, thinking through the epistemic limits and important elements of democratic interaction.

Medina writes in terms of blindness, where even those individuals who conceive of themselves as clearly aware of and responsive toward others different than themselves are still stuck in ways of relating which they take to be normal, what he calls “dominant other-regarding attitudes about normalcy, about what counts as normal or mainstream or to be expected.” In thinking to have

succeeding in directing their attention and efforts toward, they succeed instead at making those different others visible “as a problem.” (Medina 2013, 152). A catchphrase for phenomena of this sort is “insensitivity to insensitivity”. The essentially epistemic aspect here, where the blindness is cognitive, is a lack of understanding of others on their own terms and happens without awareness. We are unaware of how much of which we are unaware about ethical interaction with those who we do not understand. We just do not see it.

This lack of awareness adds a new way to look at Cudd analyzing group formation, who had pointed to scholars who have shown that “no actual facts about the groups have to be involved” in the stereotypical categorization of in-group and out-group membership (Cudd 2006, 71). Cudd shows that there are both voluntary and involuntary social groups. We can be fully aware of and actively involved in, even fully decide, to take part in some social groups, while for others, we can not only have no or little say in being in them, often we can even be unaware that we are in them (Cudd 2013, 41-46)! I think an illustrative example is the social group of “immigrants”. It may be that a person has consciously and voluntarily become an immigrant. It may be instead that their life depends on asylum and they are an immigrant more involuntarily than voluntarily (unless we consider living a mere choice?). It may be that they have parents who are voluntary immigrants but, conceived at home and born abroad, they are an immigrant *ex post facto*. Yet, as made all too clear in political rhetoric, it is the general category, the stereotypical immigrant simpliciter, that is to be dealt with, that is judged legally and evaluated socially, in a lack of awareness of who those “foreigners” are, a sort of blindness to how they have each come to be in the social group.

In his book, Medina explores the importance of the imperative of our “need to reimagine our categories . . . so that our reconceptualizations redirect our ordinary practices and our ways of relating to each other” (Medina 2013, 253). The personal and political effects of injustice and oppression merit more than merely our working within the common and accepted practices of knowledge creation and production, but going further, to leave open the possibility of an effective and proactive response to the experiences of others who live (let alone work) within those practices that are not common or accepted. Medina offers various concepts we might use to better understand this need from the point-of-view of someone who is outside those othered experiences, with the key concept being the imperative for resistant imagination. If we are to critically examine and morally improve how we engage with others, if the hospitable look closely at what is habitually recognized as permissible and unacceptable possibilities of social and group interaction, one area that can be relevant to opening conceptual space is our imaginative sensibilities.

Medina directly positions his account of resistant imagination as direction for this potential. Exploring the concept of imagination, he begins in the context of fiction, a common area for such exploration, and initially asks a question drawn out of the work of Tamar Szabo Gendler:

Why do we experience such resistance when invited to entertain fictional scenarios that violate our moral intuitions and values, and not when asked to imagine fictional worlds that violate our factual sense or the laws of physics? (Medina 2013, 251)

We have a difficult time with the invitation to imagine a moral world different than ours, especially if that world conflicts with our own, or even causes us to imagine ourselves with more culpability than the real moral world we feel comfortable and live in. This causes us to develop what Medina calls imaginative resistance, where instead of the usual hypothetical reasons we use in other forms of reasoning (“cold counterfactuals”), we are presented with scenarios where our affective and

sociopolitical realities are put into question (“hot counterfactuals”). Presented with a fictional scenario that implicates us in moral harm, our imagination itself becomes resistant, and places us further away from such a possibility to sustain our individual stability in the real world.

This reaction is precisely what Medina recommends we switch out: imaginative resistance for resistant imagination. Instead of our allowing our imagination to control how we react to moral scenarios that are uncommon or harmful to our sense of stability within our real “positionality and relationality,” we can instead use these fictional differences to instigate epistemic counterpoints, where the difference we experience itself becomes a cause for moral education and the possibility of better understanding what we do not experience ourselves: the lives of others. The resistance of our imagination not to the transgression of its limits but, inversely, to the limits of our transgression where what is “to be avoided is letting one particular imaginative horizon or frame rule the day and become hegemonic . . . and making the subjects who grow under their influence become insensitive to the blind spots of the frame” (Medina 2013, 254). Medina suggests this resistance can move beyond our thoughts of fictional worlds, into our engagement with the real experiences those others who live lives we can only imagine, so we can watch out for and repair “the circulation of ways of imagining collective subjectivities (e.g., racial or sexual identities) that demean them and prevent their inclusion in the community or their equal standing within it” (ibid.).

Medina offers several methods for working within and against these hard-to-spot cognitive and behavioral tendencies toward inadequate – and oppressive – social interaction. For example, we can develop what he calls “epistemic friction” by pursuing “epistemic counterpoints”: actively working to see things from many sides, considering and reconsidering things to try “to identify the blind spots of our social gaze in different contexts, including our own contexts” (Medina 2013, 180). The salient feature of such work vis-à-vis Friese’s ideas about hospitality is the effort put to ensure our work is multirelational and heterogenous. We are guided by Medina to continually look out for and repair ways we may be yet still be blind, without presuming that we will have succeeded at some point in the future at achieving some sort of ideal clear sight. We do so both individually and collectively. Medina takes pains to point out that the work he suggests is for us all, and so the concept of being hospitable as articulated by Friese, of the consistent, open-ended maintenance of a space for difference and negotiation between host and guest, regardless of whether that “all” and that “space” is local or global, is a place for such epistemic work.

A combination of Medina and Friese’s projects seems to point to specific ways of showing friendliness, warmth, and generosity toward guests as a host. Identifying just how to show these qualities qua host will depend on the particular guest. The relationship between them in this project of identification can benefit from imagining epistemic counterpoints. Each works to consider how the other lives in and experiences the world, how they each might best work towards a mutually beneficial, a hospitable encounter. There will be, of course, friction. There will be the need to be continually be aware of the reality of the other, and to change with time. It may be that what was desirable for one changes, and thereby the desire of the other to be their host or guest also changes. The relationship between host and guest is dynamic. There is something to be said for negotiation. Friese points out not only the need for space, but for clear agreements. The etymology of the word, the “semantic and conceptual field” of hospitality, is originally “reciprocal exchange, a mandatory pact” made by the “master of the house (i.e., the family, the household)” with guests (Friese 2004, 69). The work of being hospitable is one of a moving equilibrium that changes with the identity of both guest and host. In a global context, this equilibrium is one that involves imagining how things might be for others not just

beyond the neighborhood or the city, but beyond the state, beyond the continent. It means imagining friendliness, warmth, and generosity to be quite different than they are within our family or culture.

4. Conclusion

Hospitality, then, is a form of mutually beneficial association. As Cudd notes, closing her study of oppression, it may be that in our nature as social animals, there is a social element that can learn to appreciate “expanding our circle of concern to others who were once excluded” (Cudd 2006, 236). At the least, I think, without any Neo-Aristotelian essentialism, any “nature”, there are intuitive, philosophical reasons for a sense of hospitality without determinable extension: a sense of continually open awareness to the variety of others. I, myself, am motivated by purely Kantian sentiment. The space of reason is ever and always the space of reasoners; and space, infinite.

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