Ethics for the Common Man:
A Personal and Structural Approach for Those Living As, Amidst, and Alongside the Homeless Population

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In contemporary American society, we find ourselves divided into one of two categories: the housed and the homeless. How do we go about erasing this division and bridging this gap? What ethical principles should we stand behind? Do we turn to personal charity, religious missions, or politics? Are some ways to engage and support the homeless community more effective than others? There is not one correct way to address homelessness, because it is a multifaceted national and global issue. Every attempt, however, must contain both aspects of critical reflection and practical service. Every successful attempt should approach from a structural and individual standpoint, strive to create an environment that fosters virtue, and treat the homeless as humans with dignity. If this is done, both groups will be able to engage in a deep, mutual form of hospitality that has transformative results for all.

I had the opportunity to participate in coexistent cognitive and practical service learning through my simultaneous studies in the *Moral Philosophy* class at Dominican University of California and my work at St. Vincent de Paul's Society of Marin. Through the class, we became familiar with various ethical and moral theories with an emphasis on ethics from the margins – training our perspective to begin with those who are oppressed and voiceless within a society. The course also included a service learning component in order to apply ethical theory to reality, and conversely so that practical serving would inform our theorizing. I chose to work at St. Vincent de Paul's Society of Marin, a free dining facility in our immediate community. At the end of this journey, we were prompted to reflect on our experience and theory-driven learning by analyzing the connection between specific concepts highlighted within class and our experiences at the respective service-learning sites, which I will expand upon within this essay.

My experience was a positive and enlightening one. St. Vincent's is primarily a free dining room in downtown San Rafael that serves breakfast and lunch to whomever walks in the door, no questions asked. It mainly serves the homeless and working poor communities, giving out more than 250,000 meals each year. I chiefly worked bussing tables, but also filled a variety of roles as needed on any given day. I was able to interact with diners as I took care of dirty dishes and restocked utensils and other supplies. I dried dishes and prepared food in the kitchen, organized pantry items, and helped when food donation deliveries came in. These were simple, everyday tasks, but gave me entry into a new dimension of insight pertaining to myself and those that I served and worked alongside.

First of all, through this essay I would like to present a context for the issue of homelessness at large and for the specific situation within Marin County, California. I will emphasize how through my service learning partnership, the importance of the fusion between cognitive moral philosophy and practical service became increasingly apparent. This dynamic process highly informed the way I interacted at St. Vincent's and the ethical conclusions I came to. Most significantly, the concept of adopting a mindset of a shared mutuality between the homeless and the housed and creating spaces for this to happen emerged. Out of this, three distinct concepts became clearly central in approaching homelessness in Marin, and by extension, throughout the U.S. Particularly, approaches to homelessness should be viewed and

evaluated through the lenses of Laura Stivers' approach to homelessness with hospitality and justice, virtue ethics according to Alasdair MacIntyre, and Timothy Harris' idea of the (de)humanization of the homeless population.

Homelessness is a widespread global, national, and local issue. The U.N. reports there are an estimated 100 million homeless individuals worldwide. This is a very conservative number at best since the U.N.'s definition only accounts for the visible homeless, and moreover, a mere seven percent of countries even give statistics on their homeless residents (United Nations 2004). According to the most recent point-in-time count conducted in January 2013 within the United States, 610,042 people are considered homeless throughout the country. The National Alliance to End Homelessness reports this as a decrease, in part due to the fact that federal funding for homelessness relief has reached a record high (National Alliance 2014, 4). Although progress has been made in decreasing total existent homelessness through federal assistance, the number of those that *become* homeless has not decreased because root problems have not been addressed and affordable housing in communities remains largely unavailable.

This national issue is exemplified in Marin County, where the disparity between the affluent and homeless is very significant and clearly apparent. Consistent with the state of the nation, the homeless population of Marin has decreased from 1,770 in 2009 to 933 in 2013, but those at risk of homelessness has increased (Marin County 2013, 3). One major cause is the lack of affordable housing. First of all, the list to obtain Section 8 housing vouchers is completely closed. Also, there is extreme disproportion between the need for low-income workers and the supply of low-income housing within the county (Marin Health 2012, 8). It is clear that more attention should be given to the issue of homelessness, globally and locally. Rather than becoming overwhelmed at the immensity of the situation, personal engagement and reflection in one's own community is an effective method of approach.

As previously stated, service learning and moral philosophy education should not function as separate entities, but should be a fused, complementary partnership. Critical reflection is necessary to accompany "charity" work that is done to help those in our wider community, because being knowledgeable and aware of our intentions and the greater effects resulting from service work gives us the capability of being powerful agents of positive change. If we have not deliberately and thoughtfully evaluated the work that we as individuals and as collective service organizations (such as St. Vincent's) do, we may be unintentionally caught in traps made by our own habits, instead of pursuing the most ethically and functionally sound way of engaging in the community around us.

Conversely, limiting our application of moral philosophy to in-class hypothetical scenarios misses crucial real-life application, the essence of living as ethical human beings that function in community with others. Being challenged to think in new ways about ethical issues/situations is one half of the picture; the other half is being challenged to act in real space and time upon these ethical theories and live out the responsibility that we have as global citizens.

Throughout my own experience with this fused application of theory and practice, another rich paradox emerged: the concepts of hospitality and justice. According to Laura Stivers (2011), homelessness should be approached with the application of both hospitality and justice (123). This corresponds to seeing the issue as both structural and large in scope and as individual and immediate. Generally speaking, the term justice connotes a masculine sensibility that deals with righting a wrong, whereas hospitality holds a more feminine understanding of generousness without value judgment. Going deeper still, the term and use of the word hospitality has rich

layers of paradoxical meaning. By viewing hospitality as a valid and necessary approach to the global issue of homelessness, I do not refer to it as politeness or social nicety that the word is often currently diminished to. Hospitality has much more profound implications. Christine Pohl (1999) explains that hospitality derives from the Latin root "hostis," which means guest and also carries the implication of stranger or enemy (9). Its Greek counterpart is *phenoxelia,* which, according to Pohl, "combines the general word for love or affection for people who are connected by kinship or faith (phileo), and the word for stranger (xenos)" (31). It is clear that hospitality involves an openness and generosity shown equally among close kin, unknown strangers, and even enemies. In his essay "The Audacity of Hospitality," Dale Jacobs (2008) presents hospitality as a horizontal intersubjectivity oriented toward the future, in which the outcome is hope (564). The necessary precondition for this hospitality is a kind of listening, or the creating of an empty space that gives room for the guest to discover personal change without forcing him/her to conform to the image of the host. In the words of Henri Nouwen (1986): "When we want to be really hospitable we not only have to receive strangers but also to confront them by an unambiguous presence, not hiding ourselves behind neutrality" (70). This "tension" (571), as Jacobs puts it, between adopting an attitude of open listening and maintaining an "unambiguous presence" falls in line with Jacques Derrida's philosophical theory of hospitality. In his deconstruction of prevailing dichotomies, Derrida views the concept of hospitality as an inherently interdependent possibility and impossibility. This is precisely because hospitality requires the host to both have ownership and possession of that which he/she is giving (an unambiguous presence), and a complete giving up of all that he possesses for the sake of the guest (creation of an empty space) (Reynolds).

In light of this radically altruistic form of hospitality, I would argue that practicing hospitality is essential to addressing homelessness as it creates the open space for both the host and guest to grow and benefit. Moreover, it should always be accompanied by the complementary approach of social and structural justice. We recognize that homelessness is a complex issue that must be addressed from multiple vantage points. Stivers (2011) advocates that we "see and address the root causes of poverty and homelessness, in addition to ministering to those in need of direct hospitality and charity. There is no one perfect response to poverty and homelessness, but any adequate response must include both compassion and justice" (123). These two concepts could easily be perceived as opposites. Compassion and hospitality have to do with personal interaction and an emotional caring quality, whereas justice carries ideas of correcting long-ingrained cultural inequalities through political strategies. However, Stivers argues for the linking of hospitality and justice. She points to biblical narratives that illustrate this connection. For instance, the people of Israel regularly brought the homeless and poor into their homes, thus individually affecting the larger cultural and economic systems as a part of God's covenant with them. Likewise, Jesus often took a bottom-up approach in regards to justice, first caring for those individuals who were poor and outcast (124-126). We also see this in the Hebrew word *tsedeq* in which our modern idea of justice is derived. It evokes the idea of the righting of relationships as integral to justice.

At St. Vincent's, the primary work involves immediate compassion and hospitality to serve urgent needs of those in the San Rafael community. Its work fills necessary gaps in people's lives when they don't have basic provisions or can't both pay the rent and buy groceries. I think that this is absolutely necessary. St Vincent's work could be critiqued in this area, as it does lack an overarching structural outlook in addressing homelessness. However, I think that this critique should instead be mostly directed toward those that volunteer at St.

Vincent's rather than the organization as a whole. If those who serve think that they are doing their adequate part in relieving homelessness by chopping vegetables in St. Vincent's kitchen, they are making the above mentioned mistake of serving without critical reflection. We as community members also have a duty to go beyond immediate services to the homeless and poor and venture to change some of the structural stigmas, policies, and ideologies that lead to such income disparity as there is in Marin County. St. Vincent's is one organization that may do well to only address limited aspects regarding the issue of homelessness. Even so, although St. Vincent's does not directly deal with structural issues at the root of homelessness, it does a lot of work reducing negative stigma and establishing meaningful communities for the homeless and working poor, which goes a long way to indirectly affect structural problems.

To prevent St. Vincent's from sinking into what Laura Stivers (2011) describes as a "charity model" (4-6) that produces an "us and them" dichotomy between diners and servers, and inadequately addresses the depth of both hospitality and structural justice, there are several practices that the organization could benefit from. To promote a true hospitality that is open to both giving and receiving, St. Vincent's and other organizations like it should actively encourage those that work there to eat their meals with the public in the dining room. Currently, there is a small space tucked away in the back where servers and kitchen workers eat their meals. Enacting this small change would give the opportunity to everyone involved with St. Vincent's to experience the deeply transformative kind of hospitality that Jacobs and Nouwen describe. The atmosphere of the facility itself would become one of mutuality when the line between server and served becomes blurred and people share meals and conversations. Additionally, St. Vincent's would do well to consciously place itself within the larger picture of the root structural issues contributing to homelessness in Marin County. As an organization that addresses immediate needs, the leadership should be aware and inform volunteers of the larger framework of structural causes that need to be addressed, perhaps through regularly held workshops. This way, volunteer workers would become empowered to make changes in the community regarding fundamental issues such as inadequate low-income housing, immigration laws, and educational inequalities. And consequently, St. Vincent's would become an agency of change in the societal structure instead of a source of perpetuation.

Additionally, while working at St. Vincent's, I found its role in promoting community based virtue ethics immensely significant, perhaps an aspect of the organization that often goes unnoticed. Virtue ethics promotes the development of good character within a person as the essence of morality, placing emphasis on the motivation behind moral acts. A virtuous person becomes virtuous through habitually acting virtuously, not necessarily from an inherent goodness. Furthermore, according to Alasdair MacIntyre (1993), this virtuousness is developed within a particular practice. He defines a practice as "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity" (328). Thus, goods are identified as specific to the terms of the practice and "recognized by the experience of those participating in the practice." In a largely homeless community, individuals who attend St. Vincent generally lack the opportunities to fit into roles within socially constructed practices. Without jobs, and often treated as outcasts to some degree, homeless individuals may not be able to develop the virtues that come about as a result of participating in specific practices within our society.

However, during my interactions with diners, staff, and volunteers at St. Vincent's, I have noticed the development of a supportive community in which individuals have the opportunity to

engage in meaningful roles through which they can exemplify virtuous traits and make them habitual. This is not to say that I believe developing good character in the homeless and working poor that visit St. Vincent's is going to solve their economic and situational problems. Rather, I think that St. Vincent's gives them a meaningful place to engage and grow within a community of often forgotten people. Diners at St. Vincent's generally demonstrate generosity, gratitude, and respect. I observe a sense of ownership that individuals have regarding their place within the St. Vincent's community. It is not uncommon to see diners generously serving by taking the initiative to clean out the microwaves, wipe down some of the tables, and care for the space that they use. I have seen an older woman talking to and supporting a younger pregnant woman, and there is visible comradery between the diners and the staff. I have been sincerely thanked by diners time and again for sweeping the floors and taking dirty dishes back to the kitchen. Individuals who visit St. Vincent's have the opportunity to be treated with respect and treat others around them with respect in order to accommodate a peaceful dining experience, a safe place to belong. Some of the staff members have themselves been homeless or without financial and social support; they were given not only a job, but also meaningful work as part of a team in which they develop as virtuous persons.

Timothy Harris (2012) puts it this way: "Work and community are what make us what we are. When you take these things away, people don't have much left." He argues against the co-related structural problems inherent in homelessness and the stigmatization and dehumanization of this portion of our population. Harris identifies not only negative attitudes of disgust toward homeless people from those that are housed, but also between fellow homeless people that adopt this view as a result of self-hatred. He also emphasizes the role that stigmatizing homelessness has on actual policy making. Often, the media adopts rhetoric of filth and disgust surrounding homelessness that serves to justify injustices against the homeless, such as the destruction of tent dwellings. This is a large scale structural issue, but we can find an entry point into changing the stigma of the homeless through individual interaction.

St. Vincent's plays a significant role in dissipating the negative stigma that often accompanies the homeless. From the moment a person walks in the door to receive a meal, no questions are asked about his/her personal life as a requirement to obtain a meal. Thus, an individualistic behavioral view of the homeless is already absent. Volunteers are also given the invaluable opportunity to interact with the diners and adjust their perceptions of these individuals accordingly. One of the staff members that I worked under remarked how he began to assume a non-judgmental attitude after working at St. Vincent's, and has found that outlook to be invaluable in many areas of his life. I was struck at how quickly I personally became comfortable and at ease interacting with the diners. My realization points to our cultural concept that it should be difficult to interact with the homeless because they are "other" from us. Still, I was able to move past this and hold some rewarding conversations with individuals about life, school, movies, and houseboats in Sausalito.

This change in the way I view the homeless population is a significant one. Last week as I was walking down B Street toward St. Vincent's, I was ashamed to remember my attitude toward the people that congregate around the building prior to my volunteer work there. I recollected how, when I was first getting to know the area of San Rafael after moving here, my roommate and I labeled B Street "Creepy B." I didn't even know about St. Vincent's location on that street, or anything about the people who walked those sidewalks. From a distance, however, I labeled them with a negative stereotype. I am thankful to say that I walk down that street

currently with a new outlook. I recognize many of the faces that I see, and acknowledge our shared humanity.

Thus, it is apparent that both active service engagement and critical reflection alongside the learning of moral theory are essential to make a significant difference in our community. Furthermore, the issues of homelessness must be addressed through the approach of mutual hospitality and openness. Through my work at St. Vincent's, I have been able to observe the areas that the organization could improve upon in order to move away from a charity model of service and address more directly structural root problems of homelessness.

I have also been able to see where it succeeds as an organization that provides immediate aid to those that need it and also where it contributes less obviously to larger causes and effects of homelessness. Namely, St. Vincent's promotes virtues of generosity, gratitude, and respect within a meaningful community, and is important in the de-stigmatization of the homeless and working poor communities. This work will cause less misunderstanding and hatred both within the homeless population and across social and economic classes, eventually leading to more just and compassionate actions and policies in favor of the marginalized homeless.

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