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Hospitality: Possible or impossible?

ABSTRACT

This article explores two main philosophical approaches to the relationship between hospitality and hostility. First, the hermeneutic approach, inspired by Paul Ricoeur, committed to a paradigm of reciprocal exchange between host and guest. Second, the deconstructive approach following Derrida, which endorses an asymmetrical rupture between host and guest. In the second part of the article the author applies these respective models to critical readings of hospitality in the Greek and Biblical traditions and in some contemporary political examples.

KEYWORDS

hospitality
stranger
hermeneutics
deconstruction
Ricoeur
Derrida

My theme is the wager between hospitality and hostility. When faced with the stranger, do we open the door or close it? Do we reach for a weapon or extend a hand? This is one of the inaugural dramas of human civilization. In this article I will address how the western understanding of this social and ethical wager is originally informed by two major narratives – the Indo-European and the Abrahamic. And I will suggest that hosting the stranger is not just some abstract virtue but a living existential struggle with crucial contemporary implications. The ethos of hospitality is never guaranteed. It is always shadowed by its twin: hostility. In this sense, hosting others – aliens and foreigners, immigrants and refugees – is an ongoing task, never a fait accompli.

I.

Let me begin with a current debate in philosophy regarding two different approaches to hospitality. The first is the 'deconstructive' approach; the second is the 'hermeneutic'.

Deconstruction sees true hospitality as unconditional. If you truly welcome a stranger, you don't ask where he or she comes from or for what purpose. You don't ask for an ID or passport. Pure hospitality, this argument goes, is not about a contract or conversation; it's about radical receptivity and exposure to the other, a welcome without why. When there is a knock on the door, you don't know whether the person is a monster or a messiah. That's the level of risk that absolute hospitality requires. As soon as you put it into laws, rules, norms and pacts, you are removing the original challenge, taking the daring and adventure out of it. Here is what Derrida says in his book *Of Hospitality*:

> Let us say yes to who or what turns up, before any determination, or anticipation, whether or not it is to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an uninvited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female.
>
> (2000: 77)

In short, absolute hospitality is a 'yes' to the stranger that goes beyond the limits of legal conventions which demands checks and measures regarding who to include and exclude. It defies border controls. By putting it in such a hyperbolic way, Derrida bids us make a leap of faith towards the stranger as '*tout autre*': a stranger always unknowable and unpredictable, a stranger of radical alterity.

Derrida acknowledges that such hospitality – deeply inspired by Levinas's ethics of messianic hospitality[1] – is impossible. Every empirical act of hospitality is, *in practice*, conditional. Our welcome to actual foreigners, bound by law and finitude, is always limited. Pure unlimited hospitality – open to all comers, whoever they may be – must be subject to the demands of 'the laws (in the plural), those rights and duties that are always conditioned and conditional' (Derrida 2000). Law – *nomos* and *le nom*, norm and name – situates and claims the stranger under the category of 'foreigner', defined by national and international conventions; while, contrariwise, the stranger qua absolute 'Other' vertically transcends law's purview. Thus the kind of 'pure hospitality' described above can never actually be achieved. If it existed, it would transgress the bounds of any practical politics. It would be blind, holy, mad, a dream.

But if pure hospitality is indeed 'impossible', Derrida seems to suggest at times that it might serve as a regulatory ideal, unachievable but desirable. One senses a tacit 'ought' whispering behind the deconstructive 'is' (2000: 159). It is hard to keep the ethical at bay, in spite of Derrida's demurrals and deferrals. Yet if there is ethical persuasion here, there is also caution. For if pure hospitality is truly impossible, is not one's everyday agency – bound by the laws of relativity – severely compromised? And, moreover, if one seeks to pursue pure hospitality to its hyperbolic 'impossible' limit, how can one avoid the perils of extremism? Derrida himself seems to hint at such dangers in his conclusion to *Of Hospitality* (2000: 151) when he cites the story of Lot and the strangers in Sodom, when the host offers his daughters as concubines rather than betray his guests.

1. For a more critical account of the relation between Derrida and Levinas, see Baring and Gordon 2015, especially the debate between Martin Hägglund and John Caputo.

In sum, deconstruction leaves us to puzzle over the aporetic relation between the 'foreigner' and the radically 'Other' (*Tout Autre*) – that is, between (1) *l'étranger* as identified by conditional rules of hospitality and (2) *l'étranger* as transgressor of all such rules. We are left with the troubling questions: if deconstruction is good for thought, is it good for life? What is the agency of host or guest? What is to be done?

A second contemporary philosophy of hospitality is characterized by what I call the 'hermeneutic' approach. This takes its cue from Paul Ricœur who argues for a prudent interpretation between different kinds of strangers. Here we are dealing with conditional rather than unconditional hospitality, with discerning between what is possible and impossible. Ricœur bases his hermeneutic approach on the model of a 'linguistic hospitality' that one enacts, for example, when one translates a guest language into a host language. The host language welcomes its guest and, of course, in the act of translation is transfigured by the guest language and vice versa. Antoine Berman refers to translation accordingly as *l'épreuve de l'étranger* ('trial of the stranger') (1984) – the test or trial of the foreign – because we can never have a perfect translation that totally assimilates or accommodates the stranger's language. In translation the host and the guest are both transformed and may in fact be reversed in their roles. That is to say, because a total or absolute translation is impossible there is always a remainder, an untranslatable kernel, which we are forever seeking to render in better or alternative ways. (Hence the inexhaustible character of classics. Think of the multiple vernacular translations of the Bible, from the Septuagint to King James, Luther, Rosenzweig, Chouraqui and beyond. I will return to this.) This ineradicable difference between languages calls in turn for an ongoing creative collision between ideas, sentiments, convictions and life-views. And it is often this very dialogical tension between the translatable and untranslatable which represents what is best in our cultural histories.

The task of translation is accompanied by a task of discernment. We need, Ricœur reminds us, a capacity for practical judgement – *phronesis* – in order to avoid the hyperbole that bypasses or suspends differences between hostile and hospitable others (1992: 339). An ethics of everyday existence requires hermeneutic mediations between self and stranger, where the risk of translation becomes a wager of 'linguistic hospitality' (Ricœur 2006: 10, 29, 23–24). Between the place of the self (*lieu*) and the no-place of the other (*non-lieu*) there is the *mi-lieu* of translation (Ricœur 1992: 338). This task of translating the stranger is indeed an '*épreuve*', understood as 'experience', 'trial', 'test', 'ordeal'. But it is, insists Ricœur, an *épreuve* that is *difficile* rather than *impossible* (2006: 3). And here Ricœur differs markedly from both Derrida and Levinas, for whom the act of translating or mediating the stranger seems to imply an act of hermeneutic betrayal (Derrida 2000: 15; Ricœur 1992: 336–40).

Far from remaining a reader trapped in a labyrinth of signs, the truly hospitable translator concerns himself or herself with persons and worlds beyond the text – and responds to their summons. Linguistic hospitality denotes a basic human capacity to communicate between distinct human beings – across different languages or within one's own (Ricœur 2006: xxii). It is both interlinguistic and intralinguistic. Estrangement happens not only when we travel, but also in the most familiar places. Even within one's own language, one can become 'a foreigner in one's mother tongue' (Ricœur 2006: 9). Just as the child finds herself thrust from the womb of the mother, so the language speaker often finds herself estranged from her *langue maternelle* (slips of the tongue, loss for words, linguistic invention). Ultimately, Ricœur claims, 'there is something

foreign in every other' (2006: 25). Already in love and friendship with those closest to us, we translate others while observing their untranslatable 'secret' (2006: 28–29). We encounter the other's double summons: translate me, don't translate me. Before we ever get to immigrants, refugees or those beyond our borders, we are already strangers to ourselves and each other at home.

Linguistic hospitality, whether between languages or between one human being and another in the same 'native' language, rewards the efforts of the translator. In addition to difficulty and challenge, translation can also grant pleasure and happiness even as the translator mourns what is lost in translation (Ricœur 2006: 10). The events at Babel, far from recounting a tragic story of a Fall, should be recalled as a happy opportunity (Derrida also speaks positively of Babel; see Derrida 2002), indicative of openness to a plurality of foreign tongues (Ricœur 2006: 13, 18). As Ricœur notes, in our concrete political and historical world, we find not a Platonic ideal of one *Language* but the felicitous multiplicity of *languages*.

In sum, linguistic hospitality means that translation involves multilateral transitions between host and guest languages. It is a way of hosting the speaker of a foreign tongue by serving two fidelities: the first to the possibility of receiving the foreigner into one's home, the second to the impossibility of ever doing so completely. Thus we respect the 'untranslatable kernel' that resists the lure of a 'perfect translation', the temptation of a final account, the mirage of a total language (which is either utopian or only imagined in the innocent state before the biblical Fall). To yield to such temptation is to run the risk of compelling otherness to suppress itself by becoming the same (Ricœur 1992: 356). Hospitality is not fusion but transfusion.

The hermeneutic paradigm of translation thus serves as bridge between identity and strangeness. Echoing Baudelaire's phrase '*Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère*'/'Hypocrite reader, my fellow, my brother' (which also serves as epigraph to Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves* [1991]), Ricœur speaks of '*le semblable*'/'the fellow, the one like me' as the paradox of the Stranger: the one who is recognizable enough to appear but who nonetheless retains a distance. Similarity allows a tentative and approximate 'equivalence' of host and guest tongues. But such provisional equivalence is never consummated in exact or adequate correspondence: 'the same thing can always be said in other ways' (Ricœur 2006: 25). And these ways are invariably strange, no matter how *semblable*. In a good translation, difference never effaces similarity any more than similarity effaces difference. '*Traduttore, traditore*'/'translator, traitor', yes; but while acknowledging the element of loss in every translation, we should understand this as a loss mourned by the translator who, far from being a linguistic traitor, serves and suffers the differences between languages. In sum, the good translator is committed to the Other who represents itself in absence. Like Antigone in Heidegger's reading of *Der Ister* (1996), the homely harbors the unhomely within itself, the Stranger who betrays itself to me withdraws into its strangeness. The guest is never totally assimilated to our home for it always remains, deep down, alternative to our native tongue. Translation remains an endless task.

II.

Let us now return briefly to the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. This classic event involved a productive exchange between two very different notions of being. In the Septuagint, the specifically Hebrew notion of being as

becoming – as in the phrase 'I am who shall be ...' (Exodus 3: 14) – challenges the whole Greek notion of being as self-identity. The host language, Greek, has to open up its notions of 'being' (in ancient Greek *ontos on* or *einai*) to accommodate the guest language, Hebrew, with its idea of divine being as personal revelation, promise or epiphany. Likewise, the Hebrew guest has to accommodate the Greek host. So in one sense, Biblical language acts like a Trojan Horse, upsetting and sabotaging the Greek metaphysical notion of being; while in another sense it is creatively reckoning with a strange culture – the Hellenic world of mythology and ontology. In the shock encounter of mutual translation, host and the guest engage in an event of interlinguistic hospitality.

However, the hospitality of translation is not unconditional or arbitrary. If the foreigner knocks on your door, you have a right to say: 'If I invite you into my host language are we both going to benefit or are you going to destroy me?' The ethical conditions of hospitality require that sometimes you have to say 'no'. We are often obliged to discern and discriminate; and, so doing, one generally has to invoke certain criteria to determine whether the person coming into your home is going to destroy you and your loved ones or is going to enter in a way that, where possible, is mutually enhancing. One never knows for sure, of course, what the outcome will be. It is always a risk. To cite Derrida once more, the stranger who arrives into your home could be a murderer or a messiah. Or sometimes, a bit of both!

Linguistic hospitality, then, is not indiscriminate. It has a right to maintain a certain fundamental difference between languages, thereby resisting the temptation to reduce host and guest to a single identity of meaning. Good translation seeks to avoid fusion or confusion – the error of reducing the other to the same, the stranger to the familiar. Genuine hospitality can only occur where the unique singularity of each stranger and each host, each author and each reader, is respected.

III.

Bearing these two models of unconditional and conditional hospitality in mind, I want to offer a brief account of two traditions in western culture that have informed our contemporary understanding of hospitality. The first is the Indo-European; the second is the Abrahamic.

The Indo-European has been well analysed by Émile Benveniste in his classic work *Indo-European Language and Society* (1973). Here he looks at the double meaning of the root of hospitality – *hostis* meaning both guest and enemy. Originally *hostis* carried the meaning of guest and only gradually took on the meaning of enemy. Benveniste suggests that originally the notion of *hostis* involved someone in an equal reciprocal relationship demanding trust, a laying down of one's weapons, a conversion of hostility into hospitality. It was only later, when interpersonal or intercommunal relations of trust were replaced by abstract relations between impersonal states, that *hostis* assumed the connotations of enemy. Henceforth, hospitality was intrinsically linked to the possibility of hostility and so became a drama of choice and decision. Benveniste writes of this transition of the meanings of *hostis* thus:

> The primitive notion conveyed by *hostis* is that of equality of compensation. Thus, like its Gothic counterpoint *gast*, the Latin *hostis* denoted the guest. The classical meaning 'enemy' must have been developed when

reciprocal relations between clans were succeeded by exclusive relations of *civitas* to *civitas*.

(Benveniste 1973: 71)

In other words, once communities evolved into large sovereign states, the intimate relations between people, which were the basis of *hostis* as guest, were transformed into a suspicion of the *hostis* as a potential threat. Why? Because at that stage the abstraction of state sovereignty had been detached from interpersonal relationships as the basis of early community life.[2]

The other main term at the root of hospitality is *hospes* and here also Benveniste notes a basic ambivalence. He makes the point that the terms *hospes* and *hospites* contain the root word *pet, potestas* – power. So the host served as a sort of guest-master who had the capacity and authority to welcome or refuse foreigners into his home. In other words, the guest-master had the power to include or exclude whomever he wished.

And so we witness within the evolution of Indo-European societies the notion of both a favourable stranger developing into the guest and a hostile stranger developing into the enemy. The wager of hospitality then becomes a wager of 'hostipitality' (a coinage of Derrida). We can't talk about hospitality without the possibility of hostility and vice versa. In sum, *host* is a double term at the root of both hospitality and hostility. One can turn into the other, and back again. Hospitality is never a given; it is always a challenge and a choice.

2. Benveniste shows how the positive sense of host relates to one who receives the guest as an other (stranger or foreigner) in a reciprocal gesture. But this positive sense is gradually overcome in the development of anonymous states and regimes. In historical times, as Benveniste points out, the custom had lost its force in the Roman world, for it presupposed a type of intimate relationship that was no longer compatible with the established regime. When an ancient community becomes a nation state 'the relations between man and man or clan and clan are abolished'. All that persists is the distinction between what is inside and what is outside the *civitas*. The word '*hostis*' thus assumes a hostile flavour and henceforth it is applied only to the enemy (Benveniste 1973: 77).

IV.

The distinction between inside and outside can be seen in the development of modern notions of sovereign identity, but it goes back to much older oppositions between Greeks and Barbarians, Romans and Etruscans. Or, to give another example, it also expresses itself in the colonial polarization of English and Irish. One of the first usages of the political term *gens* – from *genus* or *genitus* – to connote a 'nation' arose around the Statutes of Kilkenny. The *gens* designated those inside the law whereas the *de-gens* referred to those outside of the law. This meaning was grafted onto the spatial division between those residing inside the pale (a wooden palisade surrounding the city of Dublin) and those outside the pale. To marry outside of the pale, outside of your colonial class, and eventually outside of your religion, was to become 'degenerate'. Those inside were the 'gentry', the 'gentlemen' who obeyed the laws of 'gentility'. Those 'beyond the pale' were the uncivil and uncultured natives. Hence, the two original terms for nation (*natio* and *gens*) came from the claim that to be citizens of a sovereign nation state was to be defined over and against those who did not possess the natural birthright (*natus/genitus*) of the legitimate State. This political strategy of inclusion/exclusion finds more egregious expression in contemporary forms of exclusivist divisions between Aryan or non-Aryan, Serb or Bosnian, Jew or Palestinian and so on.

With the emergence of the notion of absolute sovereignty, which is 'one and indivisible' according to Rousseau, there is a potential danger. What happens to those who are not part of the 'one and indivisible' state – the alien, outsider, emigrant, non-resident, non-conformist? What happens to those who represent a minority – religious, ethnic, linguistic, cultural? Does the State isolate them or send them home? If they are within the nation, do they exist if they are not part of the nation? For Nazism, the Jewish, Gypsy and other non-Aryan communities did not belong and so lost their right to 'exist'.

This is the danger of others being demonized as 'aliens', of strangers becoming 'scapegoats'. But against such binary exclusivism, one witnesses important counter-examples. We already find such counter-examples in the Homeric Greek code of *philoxenia* (love of strangers) epitomized in the fact that Zeus was the protector of strangers. This ethic of sacred hospitality was continued into Plato's philosophy where Socrates is celebrated as a truth-telling Stranger who in turn welcomes the Stranger from Elea in the *Parmenides*, one of the foundational texts in western culture. And yet, in Greco-Roman societies – as in our modern societies – there are many narratives of strangers, guests and enemies who come into the home and destroy it. One of the most ancient instances of hospitality-turned-hostile is the story of the Trojan Horse where the Trojans open their gates to the gift of their adversaries only to find their hospitality betrayed. This raises again the critical question of conditional or unconditional welcome to the stranger: were the Trojans right to make that act of trust not knowing whether it would go wrong, or should they have been more suspicious of their Greek counterparts? An ethic of absolute hospitality would have us take the risk without asking for identity papers or guarantees of good behaviour. Each person faced with a stranger at the door is faced with this age-old dilemma of conditional and unconditional welcome.

V.

Let me now move to the second tradition of hospitality – the Abrahamic. In the first Biblical narrative of hospitality, we find Abraham and Sarah welcoming three strangers in the desert. The strangers appear out of nowhere and the hosts accept them without asking if they be friend or foe.

This is how the story goes: it is a hot dry day in the desert and Abraham is sitting under the shade of an oak tree at Mamre. His wife Sarah is inside the family tent sheltering from the mid-day sun. She is not happy. She is over 100 years old and she is barren. Her servant woman Hagar is younger and more attractive than she and more fertile. Abraham is brooding about his unhappy wife and the future of Israel when suddenly a shadow flits across the sunlit ground in front of him. He looks up to see three foreigners standing before him and he is filled with fear. Why have they come? he wonders. To kill him and his family? There are, after all, three of them and he has two women to protect, his wife and his servant girl. Should he fight the strangers? But instead of reaching for a weapon or closing his tent, Abraham finds himself running towards the visitors. He greets them, bows to the ground and invites them to a meal. He asks Sarah to knead three measures of the best flour for loaves while he catches a calf and prepares it with curds and milk. Then Abraham stands under the oak tree and watches his guests eat. When they have finished the strangers announce that when they will return in a year Sarah will be with child. The barren Sarah, standing inside the entrance to the tent laughs when she hears this; for it is quite impossible for her to be with child.

But the visitors repeat the promise – nothing is impossible to God. The child will be called Isaac, which in Hebrew means 'laughter' because it is absurdly impossible for Sarah to conceive. The strangers are thus revealed to be divine. Just as Zeus appears to Philomen in the guise of a stranger, Yahweh appears to Abraham in the guise of three strangers who invite Abraham and Sarah to an ethic of absolute hospitality.

In keeping with this tradition of the sacred nomadic stranger, Abraham is recognized as the wanderer par excellence, the tent dweller, celebrated in Psalm 119: 'I am a stranger on this earth, I am a wandering Aramean'. To this day the Jewish festival of Sukkut is a time when Jews erect a tent to remind themselves that they are descended from a nomad who showed hospitality to strangers. But this does not mean that hospitality always wins the day. The shadow of hostility is never far off. In the Genesis narrative of hosting strangers, the hospitable Abraham, having welcomed the visitors and received the gift of Isaac, becomes in a subsequent chapter an immoral despot. He banishes Hagar into the desert with her son Ishmael where they would have died if it were not for Yahweh intervening. So the great founding host capable of the greatest act of hospitality is also capable of the greatest cruelty when it comes to the exclusion of his second 'slave' woman and their son.

The same goes for Abraham on Mount Moriah with his son Isaac. He hears two voices. One says, 'Kill your son' in conformity with the ancient ritual practices of human blood sacrifice. But another voice says, 'Do not kill your son, welcome him as a gift from God, not as a mere possession to dispense with as you will. Receive Isaac back as a stranger, a gift'. This scene is wonderfully dramatized by Søren Kierkegaard (1985). The choice between hostility and hospitality is always one taken in fear and trembling because 'every angel is terrifying' (Rilke 2009: 11); and we don't know if the terror that we recoil from is a shock which may destroy us or transfigure us. There is always that difficult and inescapable wager at the cusp between welcome and rejection. (And it is telling that the God who commands Abraham to kill his son has a different name [Elohim] from the God who bids him to reconceive his son in love [Yahweh], suggesting a narrative mutation in the biblical understanding of the divine Other.)

VI.

The entire Bible, it could be said, is made up of struggles between two different ways of responding to the alien. Let me cite some further examples. Saul goes out to bring destruction on the Amalekites but in the battle against the foreigners decides to abandon bloodlust and commit instead to mercy. Jacob wrestles with a dark anonymous 'someone' (*eesh*) right through the night, struggling with what he perceives to be a threatening adversary, until he finally opens himself to the Other (Genesis 32: 25). Receiving a divine mark upon his hipbone – and the new name of Israel – Jacob opts for peace, ultimately acknowledging 'the face of God' in the visage of his mortal enemy. Indeed it is significant that the day after he has wrestled with the nocturnal Stranger, Jacob is able to finally embrace his estranged rival brother, Esau. The message seems to be this: the divine stranger is in each human other who faces us, defenseless and vulnerable, asking to be received into our midst. The face that serves as trace of transcendent divinity is also a portal to humanity in its flesh and blood immanence. Or as Emmanuel Levinas puts it, 'The epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity. The face in its nakedness as a face presents to me the destitution of the poor one and the stranger'.[3]

My hospitable relationship with the stranger, in sum, gives meaning to my relations with all others, proximate or distant, human or divine. In this sense it is an option for justice over murder, recalled in the famous prayer

3. Levinas 1981: 213; see also my analysis of the face of the other in Kearney 2001. For more elaborate critical discussions of the dialectic of hospitality/hostility towards the stranger, see Kearney 2003, 2010; Kearney and Semonovitch 2011; Kearney and Taylor 2011.

of Passover: 'You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt'.[4] In support of this reading we might also recall how three of the earliest books of the Bible are about hosting strangers – Job, Ruth and the Song of Songs. Job challenges Yahweh before finally accepting his strange ways. Ruth is a Moabite alien welcomed by Boaz into his home, thereby initiating a long line of hybrid descendants including David and Jesus. The last of these books, The Song of Songs, may be cited as paradigmatic of the coming together of Israel and its Egyptian rival: King Solomon hosts the foreign 'Shulamite' woman, defying tradition to embrace this 'black and beautiful' stranger as his bride. Indeed it is telling that the Song itself celebrates a Jewish love story about human-divine love in the adapted form of a Babylonian Egyptian marriage poem or epithalamium. Hosting your Other is more divine than protecting your own, which is arguably why the Hebrew Bible has 36 commands to 'love the stranger' (Deuteronomy 27: 19, 10: 18, 24: 17, 16: 11, etc.) and only two to 'love your neighbour'.[5]

Deuteronomy is one of the richest books in references to the stranger. Let me cite a few characteristic passages: 'He shows his love for the stranger by giving him food and clothing' (Deuteronomy 10: 18. The term *ger*/'stranger' here is rendered as *xenos* in Greek and *peregrinus* in Latin). 'Cursed is he who distorts the justice due a stranger, orphan and widow' (Deuteronomy 27: 19. Here *ger* is rendered as *advena* in Latin, and variously as 'alien' in English). 'You shall not pervert the justice due a stranger or an orphan, nor take a widow's garment in pledge' (Deuteronomy 24: 17). Or again: 'You shall rejoice to the Lord your God [...] and the stranger and the orphan and the widow who are in your midst, in the place where the Lord your God chooses to establish His name' (Deuteronomy 16: 11).

There are several telling things about these references to the stranger in our midst. First, the stranger is associated with the name of God. Second, the stranger is invariably linked with allusions to orphans and widows – vulnerable and defenseless ones without family or guarantor. Third, the advent of the stranger calls for a 'justice' that seems to go beyond normal conventions of homeland security, which tend to exclude strangers, orphans and widows. The very fact that the Lord must repeatedly enjoin hospitality to prevent hostility towards the foreign is itself an acknowledgement that initial responses to aliens are more likely to be fear rather than love. So that if Deuteronomy recalls that 'Our father was a wandering Aramean' (Deuteronomy 26: 5), the same text is also guilty of the most egregious expressions of exclusion towards wanderers beyond the tribe (viz., the numerous exhortations to smite the enemy in the holy war, the *milchemeth mitzvah*). Finally, the Latin translations of the Hebrew *Ger* as *advena* and *peregrinus* are particularly suggestive in that they connote one who comes from outside, from afar, from the future (*advena*), and one who migrates across borders of nation, tribe or home (*peregrinus* as in the English peregrination) (Kearney 2010, footnotes 30–31).

The stranger, in short, is the uninvited one with nowhere to lay its head unless we act as 'hosts' and provide a dwelling. There is a sense of radical surprise about the coming of this estranged and estranging outsider – a sense of unknowability calling for risk and adventure on our part. Hospitality to the irreducibly Other does not come *naturally*. It requires imagination and trust. So while the Torah acknowledges the predictable impulse to persecute intruders, it exhorts us to overcome our murderous impulses and welcome the one

4. Exodus 23: 9. Another Passover text, *Sefer Ha-Hinukh* 431, explains this Exodus passage as a reminder that 'we have experienced the great suffering that one in a foreign land feels. By remembering the pain that we ourselves have undergone, from which God, in God's mercy, delivered us, our compassion will be stirred up towards every person in this plight'.

5. See how Jonathan Sacks (2003) treats this. I am grateful to my brother, Tim Kearney, for pointing this out.

who arrives. 'What is hateful to you do not do to another. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary'.[6]

It is noteworthy, I think, that the stranger is often treated as the human persona of the divine. Indeed what appears as an all-too-human stranger, emerging out of the night to wrestle with us, is only subsequently recognized as divine. The Latin translation of the Hebrew 'man' (*eeshliysh*) as *vir* in Latin and *anthropos* in Greek carries this sense across multiple tongues. Though some English versions speak here of 'angels', most remain faithful to the original biblical sense of the divine revealing itself in and through the human, e.g. 'Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak' (Genesis 32: 24). And, we recall again, it is only after the long struggle with the stranger in the dark that Jacob realizes that he has been marked and blessed by the 'face of God'. God is revealed *après coup*, in the wake of the encounter, in the trace of its passing. And this episode demonstrates that if divinity moves towards us kataphatically (it can be grasped positively and rationally) in the face of the stranger, it also absolves itself apophatically (its presence remains unspeakable, radically mysterious) from the immediate grasp of cognition. Once God is revealed as having been present, God is already gone. That is why God remains a stranger even in the most intimate embrace: 'for my thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways' (Isaiah 55: 8). The Other remains foreign in its most familiar guise. The divine and the human are neither separable nor the same, neither divorceable nor identical.

6. See Hillel, Talmud, Shabbat, 31a. I am grateful to my Boston College assistant, Sarit Larry, for research on these etymologies and for bringing several of these passages to my attention.

VII.

The great stories of the biblical tradition that characterize the three Abrahamic religions – Jewish, Christian and Islamic – are, I am suggesting, testaments to the paradoxical origins of religion in both violent conflict and peaceful embrace. This, in effect, makes every dramatic encounter between the human and the divine into a radical hermeneutic wager between compassion or rejection. You either welcome or refuse the stranger. Monotheism is the history of this wager.

The fact that the Abrahamic legacy has witnessed both traditions of action and interpretation speaks for itself. On the one hand, there is ample evidence for those critics who see monotheism as an irremediable source of intolerance and war (from Enlightenment atheists to the likes of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens). On the other hand, the Abrahamic legacy provides multiple testimonies to practices of recurrent hospitality – practices that provide powerful resources for those who wish to 'anatheistically' (to God after God; see Kearney 2010) retrieve a liberating message in the Bible, one which fosters radical attentiveness to the stranger as portal to the sacred. In sum, the Abrahamic legacy, along with its Greek Indo-European counterpart, deeply informs our inherited notions of hospitality and hostility. And it is still operative in the theatres of war and peace throughout the world today.

There is no escaping the drama of decision between welcoming or repudiating the stranger at our borders or in our midst. Ireland, to mention my own native land, is a country which has known centuries of bitter conflict between opposing peoples and religions, nationalist and unionist, Catholic and Protestant. If the Belfast Agreement of 1998 offered an example of the open hand of reconciliation – permitting the citizens of Northern Ireland to

be 'British or Irish or both' – there is a long history of the very opposite: the closed hand of refusal. And similar challenges are witnessed in other dramas of violence and reconciliation in recent international history – from Rwanda and South Africa to Latin America and the Middle East. The difficult wager of hospitality is live for every citizen in conflict zones throughout our troubled globe today.[7]

7. See our Guestbook Project which seeks to bring together young people in divided communities through a process of narrative hospitality, in particular the recent 'Exchange Stories, Change History' Project (guestbook-project.com).

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Ethics, power and space: International hospitality beyond Derrida

ABSTRACT

This article argues for the importance of hospitality in discussions of international ethics, suggesting that, while Jacques Derrida's thought on the concept ought to be central, we also need to go beyond it. In particular, Derrida's focus on the threshold moment of sovereign decision has the effect of reinforcing International Relations' focus on the state as the only ethical actor and space. In contrast, this article suggests that we think of hospitality as a spatial relation with affective dimensions and a practice that continues once the guest crosses the threshold of the home. Conceived as such, hospitality reveals a constitutive relation between ethics, power and space, which directs us to the way hospitality produces international spaces and manages them through various tactics seeking to contain the resistant guest. This argument is illustrated through an examination of perhaps the most urgent of contemporary international ethical spaces: the refugee camp.

KEYWORDS

Derrida
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Jacques Derrida's writings on hospitality make him, along with Emmanuel Levinas, perhaps the concept's foremost theorist and describe a rich textured web of paradoxes and uncertainties. While it is conventional to begin with a definition of hospitality, Derrida (2000: 6) warns us that 'We do not know what hospitality is', as it 'rebels against any self-identity, or any consistent, stable, and objectifiable conceptual determination'. Yet, despite this chronic