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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.

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 civilizations. 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.

KEYWORDS
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In sum, deconstruction leaves us to puzzle over the aporetic relation between the ‘foreigner’ and the radically ‘Other’ (Thuat Autru) — that is, between (1) the stranger as identified by conditional roles of hospitality and (2) the stranger as transgressor of all such roles. 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 Ricoeur who argues for a pradent interpretation between different kinds of strangers. Here we are dealing with conditional rather than unconditional hospitality, with discernment between what is possible and imposssible. Ricoeur bases his hermeneutic approach on the model of a ‘linguistic hospitality’ that one enacts, for example, when one translates a guest language into host language. The host language includes the 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 the prototype of the stranger (‘trial of the stranger’) (1984) — the test or trial of the foreigner — 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 intranslatable kernel, which we are forever seeking to render in better or alternative ways. (Hence the intranslatable character of classics. Think of the multiple vernacular translations of the Bible, from the Septuagint to King James, Luther, Rosenzweig, Chouqui and beyond. I will return to this.) This intranscendence of difference between languages calls in turn for an ongoing creative collaboration 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 discrimination. We need, Ricoeur reminds us, a capacity for practical judgement — praxis — in order to avoid the hyperbole that bypasses or suspends differences between host and hospitable others (1992: 339)....
foreign in every other" (2006: 29). Already in love and friendship with those closest to us, we translate others while observing their untranslatable "secret" (2006: 28-29). We surrender the other's double monocular, monad, and monad. This accommodation of the host language, Hebrew, with its idea of divinity being, as personal revelation, promise or orphany. Likewise, the Hebrew guest has to accommodate the Greek host. So in one sense, Bible language acts like a Trojan Horse, upstaging and sabotaging the Greek metaphysical notion of being: while in another sense it is creatively reconciling 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. Being 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 compensations. Thus, like its Gothic counterpart gast, the Latin hostis denoted the guest. The classical meaning 'enemy' must have been developed when
In other words, once communities evolved into large sovereign states, the intimate relations between people, which were the basis of hospitality as guest, were transformed into a suspicion of the host 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. 

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 hospita contain the root word pet, protect—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 whenever 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 wage of hospitality then becomes a wager of hospitality (a cognate of Dendella). 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 chore.

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 Britons. 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 guest—from guest or gospital, to guest—was to conscript a ‘nation’ around the city 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 (wooden palisade surrounding the city of Dublin) and those outside the pale. To marry outside of the pale, outside of your class, and eventually outside of your religion, was to become a degenerate. Those outside were the gentiles, the ‘penitent’ who obeyed the laws of gentile. Those ‘beyond the pale’ were the uncivilized 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 (natum legitimatum) of the legitimate State. This political strategy of inclusion/exclusion finds more egregious expression in contemporary forms of exclusion/divisions between Aryan or non-Aryan, Serb or Bosnian, Jew or Palestinian and so on.

With the emergence of the notions 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, emergent, 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 Jews, Cypriot and other non-Aryan communities did not belong and so lost their right to ‘civitas’.

This is the danger of others being demonized as ‘aliens’, of strangers becoming ‘scapegoats’. But against such binary exclusions, 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-hostility 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 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 falls 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, bow to the ground and invites them to a meal. He asks Sarah to knead three measures of the best flour for loaves while he cooks 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 Philemon 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 Sukkot 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 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 ‘alien’ 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 wondrously dramatized by Soren Kierkegaard (1983). The choice between hostility and hospitality is always one taken in fear and trembling because ‘every angel is terrifying’ (Isa 6:1); and we don’t know if the terror that we recall from is in a shock which may destroy us or transfigurate us. There is always that difficult and inescapable wager at the cuap 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 recollect his son in love [Yahweh], suggesting a narrative mutation in the biblical understanding of the divine Other.)

VI.

The divine 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’ (emeth) right through the night, struggling with what he perceives to be a threatening presence, 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, utterly 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 a mark of transcendent divinity is also a portal to humanity in its flesh and blood immerseness. 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’.

My hospitable relationship with the stranger, in sum, gives meaning to my relations with all others, prostitute or distant, human or divin. In this server it is an option for justice over murder, recalled in the famous prayer 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’. In support of this finding 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” as her 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 epiphany/leitourgy. 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 10: 18; Deuteronomy 27: 19; Deuteronomy 24: 17; Leviticus 19: 10; Leviticus 19: 10) and only two to “love your neighbour”.

Deuteronomy is one of the richest books in references to the strangers. 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 “stranger” here is rendered as os (os) in Greek and ergaisthe in Latin’. ‘Curse is he who distorts the justice due a stranger, orphan and widow’ (Deuteronomy 27: 19). ‘Here go is rendered as aser 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 to allusions to orphans and widows – vulnerable and defenseless ones without family or guardian. 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 acknowledgment 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 strangers beyond the tribe (viz., the numerous exhortations to remit the enemy in the holy war, the mildminded mitzvah). Finally, the Latin translations of the Hebrew Gev as asereth and ergaisthe are particularly suggestive in that they connotate one who comes from outside, from afar, from the future (advent), and one who migrates across borders of nation, tribe or home (peregrinus) as in the English peregrination (Koerner 2010, footnotes 30-31).

The stranger, in short, is the uninvited one with nowhere to lay his 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
VI.

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 diachronic encounter between the human and the divine into a radical hermeneutic wager between communion and 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 irreconcilable 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 ‘anthropically’ (as 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 debate 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 Bolak 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.

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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 sovereignty division 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.

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

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