
HOSPITALITY AS A KEY TO THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE OTHER IN LEVINAS AND DERRIDA¹

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the theme of hospitality with a focus on the work of two twentieth-century French philosophers, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. It begins with a presentation of some of Levinas' Jewish writings relevant to the theme. These writings display Levinas' understanding of the nature of freedom in regard to the other, who holds me hostage. Yet, the article argues, this leaves Levinas still to some extent bound by the I, even the I as hostage. The dilemma is further investigated with reference to Jacques Derrida, starting with his own reflections on Levinas. The article then outlines Derrida's own ideas on hospitality, asking how to reconcile the impossible demands of pure hospitality with the conditional forms it takes in our societies. The conclusion asks what the two writers have to say to European societies in their current encounters with refugees and migrants.

Key words

Emmanuel Levinas; Jacques Derrida; hospitality; Louis Massignon; refugees

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We live in the time of a new moving of the nations. In recent years we have been confronted with this reality through the large numbers of refugees coming to Europe from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere. We have experienced the complicated reactions to the other, the stranger, those who lived in such conditions that they

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considered leaving their homes and embracing uncertainty a better option than remaining. Emmanuel Levinas reminds us that always when confronted with the other, especially the other who is in need, our own identity is placed in question. The other gives us our identity and our life is lived in response to the other.² In this article we will look at a notion central to this relationship, that of hospitality and see how it was developed by Levinas himself and by Jacques Derrida, as he commented upon and further critically developed the Levinasian themes.

Levinas on hospitality

From his earliest writings Emmanuel Levinas addressed the danger of the totalising force of the I.³ However, it was only with the publication in 1961 of his doctoral thesis *Totality and Infinity* that the topic of the other started to become more clearly defined. Levinas begins with a rejection of the primacy of ontology in favour of the primacy of ethics, which he defines elsewhere as “the fact of encounter, of the relation of an I with an other”.⁴ The relation with the other is always primarily a relation with a stranger, with one radically unknown. The relation of kinship, he says,⁵ ultimately leads to totality, because my kin is like me. In encountering the stranger, in coming, to use one of Levinas’s favourite terms, face to face with the other, demands are made of me. The

² This is done most completely in his two major philosophical books, *Totalité et Infini: essai sur l'extériorité*. La Haye: M. Nijhoff, 1961 and *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. La Haye: M. Nijhoff, 1974. In this text we work with the English translations, *Totality and Infinity* (trans. Alphonso Lingis). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987 and *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (trans. Alphonso Lingis). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998.

³ In one of his first published works, “Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hittérisme”. *Esprit* 26 (1954), 199–208, Levinas asks “How can universality be compatible with racism? There will have to be – and this is the logic of the primary inspiration of racism – a fundamental modification of the very idea of universality.” It is the recognition of this modification and the attempt to overcome it, and to replace it with a non-totalising universality that can be seen to be at the heart of all that Levinas will subsequently write.

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas. *Autrement que Savoir*. Paris: Osiris, 1988, 28, as cited in Nilo Ribeiro Junior. *Sabedoria da Paz: Ética e teo-lógica em Emmanuel Levinas*. São Paulo: Loyola, 2008, 271. We translate here from the Portuguese.

⁵ See Emmanuel Levinas. “The Proximity of the Other”, in: Id. *Alterity and Transcendence*. New York: Colombia University Press, 1999, 97.

most fundamental of these is “Thou shalt not commit murder”.⁶ The encounter with the other demands response – and thus responsibility.⁷

In *Totality and Infinity* this response is still related to the needs of the I, inasmuch as it is seen as a way in which the I can break out of the imprisonment of totality, and through the encounter with the other escape from the fatal insatiability of the demands of the I (for food, shelter, love, and so on). Because the other is what I can never be, this other allows me to leave behind these desires and thus sets me free. In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas turns his attention even more to this other, who opens the way up to transcendence and who commands me in a way that I cannot refuse.

Allowing oneself to be the hostage of the other, as Levinas puts it,⁸ is to accept that this other can be monster or Messiah.⁹ Although it is always important to remember Levinas’s insistence on the importance of the Third (I am not beholden to the command of the other to harm another other – the Third),¹⁰ this implies and necessitates a radical openness, come what may, to the encounter with the other. The other migrant may be in genuine need, or an opportunist, or a terrorist, but as human being their demand on me is exactly the same.

There are two problems which remain within the Levinasian universe. The first of these is the question of heteronomy, the radical dislocation of notions of selfhood that lead to both the human and divine other taking away human freedom, and leaving the subject in a state of (at least potential) deep self-alienation. Levinas would reject this claim of self-alienation, and see it as self-fulfilment, but the fact remains that the I is a hostage to the other and responsible for the other, in ways which will inevitably lead to a sense of guilt.¹¹ The second is that,

⁶ See Levinas. *Totality and Infinity*, 199.

⁷ On different understandings of hospitality, drawing on Levinas and Derrida, see Richard Kearney. “Hospitality: Possible or Impossible?”. *Hospitality & Society* 5: 2–3 (2015), 173–84. We work with the following version, <https://www.academia.edu/10942403/Hospitality_Possible_or_Impossible>. Page numbers refer to this typescript.

⁸ This is Levinas’s famous description of the subject as hostage: see Levinas. *Otherwise than Being*, 112.

⁹ Kearney. “Hospitality: Possible or Impossible?”, 1.

¹⁰ See more on this in Tim Noble. *The Poor in Liberation Theology: Pathway to God or Ideological Construct?* Sheffield: Equinox, 2013, 78–80.

¹¹ If we wanted to give a positive interpretation of the radical and illogical hate of the other migrant, especially as manifest amongst sections of the population of the Czech Republic (unfortunately led by the President), we could say that it manifests this sense of hopelessness faced by demands that are felt to be impossible to meet.

despite the advancements of *Otherwise than Being*, and perhaps ultimately necessarily, the emphasis on identity as coming from the other cannot disguise the fact that the attention is still on the self. The other exists as the giver of my identity.

Although there is force in this criticism, it does rather ignore that for Levinas there is no absolute division between the I and the other, in that it is precisely the encounter that is important. Identity is constructed in and through this face to face meeting. I cannot force the other to accept me as other, and yet at one level, if Levinas is right, that must be going on, and identity is a mutual, not an individual construct. In other words, and in relation to our theme in this article, hospitality can never be an optional extra, for us as individuals or as a nation, since it is in the encounter with the other migrant and our welcome / rejection of her or him that we (inclusive of the migrant) discover ourselves.

It is therefore not surprising that we find treatment of themes of hospitality not so much in Levinas's strictly philosophical work,¹² but in his religious writings, notably his Talmudic lectures. It is to these we now turn before moving on to Derrida's engagement with Levinasian ideas of hospitality. These lectures (or readings, as the English translation puts it), were first presented at the annual meetings of the "Colloque des intellectuels juifs de la langue française".¹³ Levinas is at pains to point out that he is not a professional exegete of Talmudic texts, and yet his readings are a fascinating example of how the raw material¹⁴ of the Talmud is used philosophically.

¹² There is a complex relationship between Levinas' philosophical writings and his Jewish writings. Although at times Levinas would distinguish the two, they are clearly intimately connected. Ribeiro Junior. *Sabedoria da Paz*, 15, writes: "It is worth emphasising that the *writings on Judaism* act as a sort of *biblical-talmudic horizon* for the *personal philosophical writings*" (italics in original). Ribeiro Junior's book consists of a very close reading especially of the Jewish writings to investigate the heart of Levinas' "theo-logic" approach to ethical thinking. See also on this Michael Purcell. *Levinas and Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 34–36.

¹³ See Annette Aronowicz. "Translator's Introduction", in: Emmanuel Levinas. *Nine Talmudic Readings*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994, xxxiii. The nine readings included here were originally published in two small volumes in French: Emmanuel Levinas. *Quatre lectures talmudiques*. Paris: Le Minuit, 1968, and *Du sacré au saint: cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques*. Paris: Le Minuit, 1977. A further three readings have appeared in French: Emmanuel Levinas. *Nouvelles lectures talmudiques*. Paris: Le Minuit, 2005.

¹⁴ The French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser argued that theoretical practice – the construction of a model that touches on the real world – requires three stages (Generalities). The first of these is this "raw material", the already existing theoretical construct which is worked on by the second Generality (another theory) to produce

The two readings we focus on here return in different ways to what is arguably the central question of twentieth-century European philosophy, that of freedom. They also demonstrate how the reading of the Talmud is one way in which Levinas seeks to ground his philosophy in concrete examples of life – it is for this reason that his commentaries are for the most part on the Aggadah, the more narrative sections of the Talmud.¹⁵

The first of the readings was delivered in 1964, and is entitled “The Temptation of Temptation”. It refers to the Tractate *Shabbath*,¹⁶ and deals with the episode in Exodus 19:7 when the people of Israel stop at the foot of Mount Horeb as Moses prepares to go up to receive the law. The temptation of temptation is the desire to be engaged and yet disengaged, committed and free. What is at stake here for Levinas is the question of what it means to be free. Is the acceptance of the freedom of the law itself free? His response is that “the freedom taught by the Jewish text [the one he is considering here] starts in a non-freedom which, far from being slavery or childhood, is a beyond-freedom”.¹⁷ This is because the acceptance of the law is in the doing, so that action precedes understanding, doing comes before hearing.¹⁸ The law makes sense because it is the codification or articulation of what we do.¹⁹ It is not through hearing about freedom that we are enabled to practice it, but that by acting we come to understand that we do so in freedom. It is not through being intellectually convinced of the moral and legal rights of the other that we freely welcome them, but by welcoming them that we find ourselves truly free. Here is the primacy of ethics, not as the content of what we do, but as the giving oneself over fully in response (as responsible to) the other who comes.

Anticipating *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas admits that the “[t]his condition (or uncondition) of hostage is an essential modality of freedom – its primary modality – and not an empirical accident of a freedom

a final result (the third Generality). For more on this see Clodovis Boff. *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*. Trans. Robert Barr. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987, 70–73 and comments in Tim Noble. *The Poor in Liberation Theology*, 108–109.

¹⁵ See Levinas. *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 4.

¹⁶ Although Levinas supplied his own translations of the texts, the English translation also refers to *The Babylonian Talmud* (ed. I. Epstein). London: Soncino Press, 1935–1948. The text under consideration here is from the Tractate *Shabbath*, 88a and 88b.

¹⁷ Levinas. *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 40.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 42 ff.

¹⁹ In this sense it is analogous to a Christian understanding of dogma as articulation of belief; one might sum it up as *lex agendi lex credendi*.

remaining above it all”.²⁰ This paradox of unfree freedom is at the heart of Levinas’s writings, and it is vital for understanding what he has to say about hospitality. The other is not welcomed because I am free to welcome her or him, but by welcoming them my freedom is realised (and theirs too, though Levinas attends less to this aspect).

Levinas gives more content to what this response to the other means in the reading he gave to a Colloquium on Youth and Revolution in Jewish Consciousness that took place in March 1969 (and thus partly in response to the student revolts of May 1968). The reading is entitled “Judaism and Revolution”, and chooses as its text the Tractate *Baba Metsia*, 83a and 83b, which is a commentary on the rights of workers and how they should be treated, with a discourse on the nature of justice (again in the narrative aggadic form).

The reading that Levinas gives is a fascinating contribution to the development of his political thought, but that is not our specific theme here. So for the purposes of our article, we draw on one of the crucial points of this essay:

To be responsible for everything and everyone is to be responsible despite oneself. To be responsible despite oneself is to be persecuted. Only the persecuted must answer for everyone, even his persecutor. Ultimate responsibility can only be the fact of an absolutely persecuted man, having no right to a speech that would disengage him from his responsibility.²¹

This is the impossible hospitality²² of which Derrida would speak. We are not to respond to the other because it will make us feel good, or as a result of a belief in a Kantian *summum bonum* that would ultimately reward us for it. We respond to this other – monster or Messiah – as hostages, as persecuted people with no right to say “no”.

We can go with Levinas this far, and as he himself might say, it is to go to the end. And yet the question about freedom remains as does the question about the ultimate focus on me, even the persecuted me, the hostage me. Levinas is in an inescapable bind, since to write of the

²⁰ Levinas. *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 50.

²¹ Emmanuel Levinas. “Judaism and Revolution”, in: *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 94–119, here 114–115.

²² On this, see also Thomas Claviez (ed.). *The Conditions of Hospitality: Ethics, Politics, and Aesthetics on the Threshold of the Possible*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013.

other in the way he does is always to deny the possibility of writing anything about the other, except the rights of the other over the I. If my freedom is contingent on the other, the problem that Levinas faces is the dilemma of three polite drivers on a roundabout, each waiting to give way to the other so that no one moves. One of the “I’s” has to act, before understanding, before hearing, so that the other can also be free. I have to go out to the other even before he commands me and yet I can go out to him only as he commands me to. To see if there are any ways beyond these dilemmas in Levinas, we now turn to Jacques Derrida.

Derrida on Levinas’s notion of hospitality²⁵

Emmanuel Levinas died on 25th December 1995, and his funeral took place two days later at the Pantin-Bobigny cemetery in Paris. On that cold December day, Jacques Derrida gave a short address at the graveside,²⁴ in which he recalled a conversation with Levinas, who remarked: “You know, one often speaks of ethics to describe what I do, but what really interests me in the end is not ethics, not ethics alone, but the holy, the holiness of the holy.”²⁵

Derrida appreciates that Levinas changed the course of contemporary philosophy by turning attention to the absolute otherness of the face of the other, but he also points out that goodness, friendliness or, indeed, hospitality towards the other cannot happen without a real conversion of the self. Such conversion, which Levinas finds in the great fathers of the faith in his *Talmudic Readings*, involves an antinomy. On the one hand, there is a responsibility for the other that makes the self a hostage of the other and that requires substitution or sacrifice.²⁶ On the other hand not even the other, who in Levinas, according to Derrida, is “holier than the Holy Land”,²⁷ can be sacralised in such a way

²⁵ For more on the relationship of Derrida and Levinas in terms of philosophies of hospitality, see Andrew Shepherd. *The Gift of the Other: Levinas, Derrida and a Theology of Hospitality*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014.

²⁴ See Jacques Derrida. “Adieu”, in: Jacques Derrida. *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas*, Paris: Galilée, 1997, 9–36. For an English translation, see “Adieu”, in: Jacques Derrida. *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999, 1–13, endnotes on 127–34. The pages below are given according to the French original.

²⁵ Derrida. “Adieu”, 15.

²⁶ See Derrida “Adieu”, 19; he refers to Emmanuel Levinas. *Dieu, la mort et le temps*. Paris: Gasset, 1993, 21, 199.

²⁷ Derrida, “Adieu”, 15. Derrida is aware that Levinas’s position on the visible Jewish state in history is complex and that he was not critical of the Zionist project in the

that they would become an end in themselves. Levinas's metaphysics of the other, according to Derrida, leads to radical heteronomy,²⁸ but we can also say that Levinas's emphasis on transcendence, which Derrida works with further, deconstructs such heteronomy. But, in Levinas it is one and the same movement, which leads both to heteronomy and its deconstruction.

This antinomy is expressed in the very title of Derrida's funeral speech, later published as "Adieu". The title was an allusion to Levinas's own play with the language: *adieu – l' à Dieu*,²⁹ an emptiness with regard to the conditions of our being and to the possibility of the fullness that is revealed in this emptiness, at the boundary where we encounter neither being nor nothingness,³⁰ where "L' à Dieu greets the other".³¹

Derrida finished his address at Levinas's funeral with what he called "a question – prayer",³² in which he turned from talking about Levinas to talking to him, saying that as the greeting from *l' à Dieu* does not mean an end, a finitude, he can

say to him *adieu*, call him by his name, call his name, his first name,³³ that he is called by at this moment, when he does not respond anymore, but also when he responds to us at the depth of our hearts, in us but before us, in us after us – in calling us, in calling us back to: "à – Dieu". Adieu, Emmanuel.³⁴

Holy Land, nor of the state of Israel, but of how the other nations are treated in this project. See Jacques Derrida. "Le mot d'accueil", in: Derrida. *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas*, 37–211, here 195–196, notes. He refers to Emmanuel Levinas. "Séparation des biens", in: *Cahiers de l'Herne*. Paris: Editions de l'Herne, 1991, 465.

²⁸ See Derrida, "Adieu", 25. For this he refers to Levinas. *Totalité et infini*. La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980, 59–60.

²⁹ Derrida deals with Levinas's *L' à Dieu* in more detail in "Le mot d'accueil", 110–111, notes. He refers there to Levinas. *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, 158.

³⁰ See Emmanuel Levinas. "La mauvaise conscience et l'inexorable", in: *Exercices de la patience* 2 (Winter 1981), 109–113, here 112–113, in: Derrida. "Adieu", 26–27, n. 50, p. 36.

³¹ Levinas, "La mauvaise conscience et l'inexorable", 113, in: Derrida. "Adieu", n. 51, p. 36.

³² Derrida. "Adieu", 26.

³³ Although Levinas and Derrida were friends, Levinas was significantly older than Derrida, and in Derrida's recollections of conversations with Levinas, they always use "vous" rather than "tu", and family names rather than first names.

³⁴ Derrida. "Adieu", 27.

In a lecture entitled “A Word of Welcome”,⁵⁵ delivered at a conference at the Sorbonne to mark the first anniversary of Levinas’s death, Derrida returned to the theme of hospitality. Taking on board Levinas’ concern with justice,⁵⁶ he explores the notion of substitution and its relation to hospitality, and refers to the French Orientalist (and at the end of his life a Melkite Catholic priest) Louis Massignon (1885–1962),⁵⁷ who would re-emerge in his later works.

In “A Word of Welcome” Derrida says that the substitution is inseparable from election, while it always seems to contest it.⁵⁸ Massignon, Derrida claims, had taken up the strand in French mysticism (Bloy, Foucauld, Claudel), in which the notion of substitution was related to hospitality in its holy and radical forms. Going back to the hospitality of Abraham/Ibrahim, he interprets through such lenses the institution in 1934 of *Badaliya*, an association of Christians in the Middle East who took their persecution as an act of substitution for their Islamic persecutors.⁵⁹ In Derrida’s view the inclusion of Christian as well as Islamic notions of hospitality is necessary in order to complement and contest the Jewish concept we saw in Levinas’s Talmudic readings.⁴⁰

In Levinas, according to Derrida, there is both an ethics and a politics of hospitality, but they are not governed by the same principles. With regard to the politics of hospitality, Derrida shows that the ethical primacy of the other is absent when Levinas speaks about a “religious greatness” in the Zionist project, and when he distinguishes the Jewish and Palestinian claims to the Holy Land. Derrida complements

⁵⁵ Derrida. “Le mot d’accueil”, in: *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas*, 57–211. For the English translation, see “A Word of Welcome”, in: *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 15–123, end-notes 135–52. References below are given according to the French original.

⁵⁶ Derrida finds the origins of the concept of the third already in *Totality and Infinity*. See Derrida. “Le mot d’accueil”, 112, where in a note he references Levinas. *Totalité et Infini*, 188, *De Dieu qui vient à l’idée*, (Paris: Vrin, 1982), 132–133.

⁵⁷ See Jacques Derrida. “Hostipitality”, in: Id. *Acts of Religion*, London: Routledge, 2002, 368–80. He cites Louis Massignon. *L’hospitalité sacré*. Paris: Nouvelle Cité, 1987. The neologism in the title is explained below.

⁵⁸ See Derrida, “Le mot d’accueil”, 128. He speaks of substitution as an “indisputable necessity, irresistible force, the force that is however vulnerable to a certain weakness” and says that it leads to “a logic that is hardly thinkable, nearly inexpressible” that brings up the impossible possibility of “replicability of the unique in the heart of the experience of the uniqueness”. Ibid.

⁵⁹ See Derrida, “Le mot d’accueil”, 128. Derrida refers here to Massignon, *L’hospitalité sacré*, 373–74; but also to his “Le linceul de feu d’Abraham”, in: *Parole donnée*. Paris: Seuil, 1985.

⁴⁰ See Derrida. “Le mot d’accueil”, 195–96.

Levinas's point that "one does not carry a Bible in one's luggage without consequences", by adding: "But we must not forget that the same Bible travels also in the luggage of Palestinians, be they Muslim or Christian?" He concludes: "Justice and thirdness."⁴¹ Nevertheless, despite Derrida's criticisms, Levinas remains for him a philosopher of hospitality *par excellence*, and his own notion of hospitality develops in response to Levinas.

Derrida's own notion of hospitality⁴²

In a lecture at a congress on refugee cities⁴³ in 1996, published a year later under the title "Cosmopolitans of all Countries, Keep Going!",⁴⁴ Derrida insists that ethics *is* hospitality, that it is coextensive with the experience of hospitality.⁴⁵ The tautology of the ethics and politics of hospitality is not innocent; it has a political role, to offer a false consolation that we are ethical as we are doing something for the needy. But in the particular case Derrida speaks about, what is happening is the opposite of an experience of hospitality. The very concept of city (*polis*) that is used to speak about "cities of refugees" is very problematic. These are rather contradictions to the notion of the city (*polis*), which presupposes some level of participation, freedom and self-government. Instead, they are places where society segregates people who come to it as strangers seeking to be accepted and helped, places where the newcomers lose their status, and their rights are seriously reduced. Due to the threat of terrorism, strict censorship is used, but also methods which in the broader society would be seen as persecution.

Derrida notes that the problems with the numerous newcomers have religious, political, economical, cultural and social dimensions,

⁴¹ See Derrida. "Le mot d'accueil", 196, notes. He refers to Levinas. "Séparation des biens", 465.

⁴² Bob Plant says that "Derrida's recent work on 'hospitality' (and related themes) takes its lead from Levinas's brief sketch of a phenomenology of 'home' in *Totality and Infinity*. Nevertheless, Derrida teases out the internal aporias of the Levinasian account, arguing that the distinction between hostility and hospitality is necessarily blurred insofar as each 'contaminates' the other." Bob Plant. *Wittgenstein and Levinas: Ethical and Religious Thought*. London: Routledge, 2005, 200.

⁴³ The congress was organised by the International Parliament of Writers to criticize the practices of segregation of refugees into what were termed euphemistically "cities of refugees".

⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida. *Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort!* Paris: Galilée, 1997.

⁴⁵ Derrida. *Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort!*, 41–42.

but they also pose to us, members of the vast majority in these societies, new questions that touch upon who we are. Have we gradually excluded the right to asylum from human rights? Has the massive arrival of refugees made us feel obliged to renounce classical approaches to them (repatriation or naturalisation)? Do we not use concepts like “the city of refugees” as euphemisms to make us feel hospitable, when very different principles govern the actual practice?⁴⁶

Derrida recalls the Hebraic tradition of hospitality as well as the medieval tradition in which the cities opened their gates for newcomers in danger and need.⁴⁷ Today, a society’s commitment to hospitality is not seen in terms of making the stranger a citizen. This Pauline cosmopolitan vision (Eph 2:19–20)⁴⁸ has been secularised and replaced by a Kantian assumption that a state is given sovereignty over awarding the right of residence, and this is accepted as the universal law, conditioning peace among all people. An unconditioned hospitality is lost in our holding to this modern innovation.⁴⁹ The romanticised notion of the absolute right to unconditional hospitality for anyone who comes would not help. Derrida says that there is a difference between

*an unconditional law of hospitality which is a priori offered to all others, to all who come, whoever they are, and the conditional laws of the right of hospitality without which the unconditional law of hospitality would risk being reduced to a pious desire, without responsibility, without any form of effectiveness, and even would pervert itself in each instance.*⁵⁰

Derrida returned to the question of hospitality in two other works, an article “Hostipitality”,⁵¹ and a conversation with Anne Dufourmantelle, published under the title *Of Hospitality*.⁵² “Hostipitality” (*hostipitalité*) is Derrida’s neologism, combining the two subjects of hospital-

⁴⁶ See Derrida. *Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort!*, 16–17, 19–20, 22, 24.

⁴⁷ He refers to Emmanuel Levinas. “Les villes-refuges”, in: *L’au-delà du verset*. Paris: Minuit, 1982, 51 ff. and to Daniel Payot. *Des villes-refuges. Témoignage et espacement*, Paris: De l’Aube, 1992, 65ff. In Derrida. *Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort!*, 45–49.

⁴⁸ The text reads: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.”

⁴⁹ See Derrida. *Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort!*, 49–58.

⁵⁰ Derrida. *Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort!*, 57. Emphasis in original.

⁵¹ See Derrida. “Hostipitality”, 358–420.

⁵² Jacques Derrida. *Of Hospitality*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000.

ity, the host and the guest.⁵⁵ He points out that the law of hospitality is born out of its impossibility. The law of hospitality comes first from an unconditional welcome, from saying yes

*to who or what turns up, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited 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.*⁵⁴

The law of unlimited hospitality requires us “to give the new arrival all of one’s home, all of oneself, to give him or her one’s own, our own, without asking a name, or compensation, or the fulfilment or even the smallest condition”.⁵⁵ This law is singular. Out of it the plural laws are derived, “those rights and duties that are always conditioned and conditional, as they are defined by the Greco-Roman tradition and even the Judaeo-Christian one, by all of law and all philosophy of law up to Kant and Hegel in particular, across the family, civil society, and the State”.⁵⁶ There is a “collision between the two laws”.⁵⁷ The law of unconditional hospitality, is, according to Derrida, in fact a “law without law”, “a law without imperative”. If it is reduced to an “economy” of hospitality, it is “no longer graciously offered beyond debt”.⁵⁸ Derrida speaks about the “two regimes of a law of hospitality: the unconditional or hyperbolic on the one hand, and the conditional and juridico-political, on the other: ethics in fact straddling the two”.⁵⁹

Here Derrida is grappling with the problem that we saw above with regard to Levinas. How can one allow the other to be other without starting out from the I and without harming the Third? These, of course, are the questions that are at stake when responsible political decisions are to be made in today’s Europe. How does the right of the migrant interact with the right of the inhabitant of a particular place, how does the duty to respond to the call of the other relate to the duty

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 83.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 135–137.

to respond to the call of another other (in this case, for example, my fellow-citizen who reacts with hate to the migrant)?

Most of the examples Derrida chooses are to illustrate “the same *predominance* in the structure of the right to hospitality and of the relationship with the foreigner, be he or she guest or enemy”.⁶⁰ But then he also points out that in the act of hospitality, unconditional hospitality, there is also the possibility of another violence. For Derrida, “to be hospitable is to let oneself be overtaken [...] in a fashion almost violent, violated and raped, stolen [...] precisely where one is not ready to receive – and not only *not yet ready* but *not ready, unprepared* in a mode that is not even that of the ‘not yet’”.⁶¹

To illustrate this problem, Derrida does not choose a text where the welcome guest turns out to be a criminal, but rather one where the very act of hospitality is in conflict with other acts of love and responsibility for those close to us. He turns to the well-known Biblical story of Lot and his daughters.⁶²

Lot seems to put the laws of hospitality above all, in particular the ethical obligation that link him to his relatives and family, first of all his daughters. [...] In order to protect the guests he is putting up *at any price*, as family head and all-powerful father, he offers the men of Sodom his two daughters. They have not yet been “penetrated” by men. This scene follows straight after the appearance of God and his three messengers to Abraham, who offers them hospitality, at the oaks of Mamre.⁶⁵

A similar horrendous story is told about a certain Levite, residing in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, in the book of Judges.⁶⁴ The man travels to reclaim his concubine, and on the way back is welcomed by an old man, who asks him to spend the night with him. When the townspeople ask for the man to be delivered to them so that they can sexually abuse him, the old man offers his daughter, and eventually they give them the concubine, who is raped repeatedly. On returning home, the man cuts up his concubine and sends a piece of her to each of the twelve tribes of Israel. The story ends: “Never has

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Derrida. “Hostipitality”, 361.

⁶² See Gen 19:1–9.

⁶⁵ Derrida. *Of Hospitality*, 151–155.

⁶⁴ See Judges 19:1–30.

such a thing been done or seen since the Israelites came out of the land of Egypt” (v. 31). Derrida ends his reflection as follows: “Are we the heirs to this tradition of hospitality? Up to what point? Where should we place the invariant, if it is one, across this logic and these narratives? They testify without end in our memory.”⁶⁵ Derrida argues that “hospitality seems linked to invitation, an invitation offered, extended, presented, sent; [...] the radical hospitality consists, *would have to consist, in receiving without invitation, beyond or before the invitation*”.⁶⁶

Derrida distinguishes between conditioned hospitality (towards a family member, a friend, a countryman ...) and “pure” hospitality.⁶⁷ He notes

the difference, therefore, between hospitality extended to one’s other (to everybody their own, their chosen and selected *hôtes*, their integratable immigrants, their assimilable visitors with whom cohabitation would be liveable) and hospitality extended to an other who no longer is, who never was “its other” of dialectics. [...] to an other that is not mine.⁶⁸

Pure hospitality requires openness towards the unknown, the “wholly other, the absolutely unforeseeable [...], the stranger, the uninvited visitor, the unexpected visitation beyond welcoming apparatuses”.⁶⁹ Such pure hospitality grounds the very possibility of hospitality. Conditional hospitality is not an alternative with a different foundation. It stems from pure hospitality and dries out if separated from its roots. Conditional hospitality is necessary, as law and order cannot work without it, but it is not a beginning or an end in itself. As Derrida puts it, there is no hospitality if I welcome only who and what I foresee or invite. Hospitality, if there is any, according to Derrida, cannot be

⁶⁵ Derrida. *Of Hospitality*, 155.

⁶⁶ Derrida. “Hostipitality”, 360.

⁶⁷ From a Christian perspective we can recall the words of the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:32–35, “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.”

⁶⁸ Derrida. “Hostipitality”, 363.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 361–362.

reduced to the graspable, categorisable, rational. He puts it even more strongly as he points out the messianic madness of hospitality:

To wait without waiting, awaiting absolute surprise, the unexpected visitor, awaited without a horizon of expectation: this is indeed about the Messiah as *hôte*, about the messianic as hospitality, the messianic that introduces deconstructive disruption or madness in the concept of hospitality, the madness of hospitality, even the madness of the concept of hospitality.⁷⁰

Derrida's understanding of hospitality, of the impossibility of hospitality and of the possibility of the impossibility of hospitality takes us back to the theme he picked up on in his funeral oration for Levinas, that of holiness. To address this theme he turns to the figure of St Julian in Gustave Flaubert's *The Legend of St Julian Hospitator*, who after killing his father and mother becomes devoted to the duty of hospitality in its radical sense, "to the point of receiving the visit, the visitation of a leper Christ who tells him 'I am hungry', 'I am thirsty', 'I am cold', 'take me in your bed and in your arms, embrace me'".⁷¹ Reflecting on St Julian, Derrida later says that "the exercise of impossible hospitality, of hospitality as the possibility of impossibility, [...] is the exemplary experience of deconstruction itself. [...] Hospitality is the deconstruction of the at-home."⁷² Derrida returns here to an early theme in his philosophy, that of deconstruction. Instead of the need of the deconstruction of logocentrism responsible for the loss of creativity, and metaphysics of presence making us forget the role absence plays in our reflection,⁷³ like Levinas, he turns here to ethics, or we could say to the boundary between ethics and spirituality. He points out that radical hospitality is a gift that transforms human nature and deconstructs self-interest. He states: "After peace, after the peaceable and peaceful experience of welcoming, there follows [...] an experience of the Good that elects me before I welcome it, in other words, of a Goodness, a good violence of

⁷⁰ Ibid., 362.

⁷¹ Derrida. "Hostipitality", 363–364; he cites Gustave Flaubert. "The Legend of St Julian Hospitator", in: Gustave Flaubert. *Three Tales*. New York: Penguin, 1961, 67.

⁷² Derrida. "Hostipitality", 364.

⁷³ See John D. Caputo. "On Being Inside/Outside Truth", in: *Modernity and Its Discontents*, ed. J. L. Marsh, J. D. Caputo, M. Westphal. New York: Fordham University Press, 1992, 51–52; Jonathan Culler. *On Deconstruction – Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983, 95.

the Other that precedes welcoming.”⁷⁴ In that sense, “prior to being the hôte”, one is, as Levinas has it, “the hostage of the other”.⁷⁵

In Derrida, there is another related theme to that of the messianic madness and holiness, namely that of substitution. It is present in Derrida’s texts in two ways. One resembles the Irenaean exchange formula – “he became what we are so that we could become what he is” – and is related to the Messiah and the messianic; the other, stemming from that, is related to the mystical substitution of one’s person suffering for others.

Derrida uses, as alluded to above, those Arab Christians in 1940s, who turned to the Muslims who marginalised them and decided that they would offer themselves as a pledge, “substitute” themselves, for the Muslims, “by paying their ransom in their place and at our expense” so that they would be in the future incorporated into Christ and his Church.⁷⁶ Derrida regards this desire for the conversion of the Muslims, without exercising external pressure on them, as something to be fought against, but he is touched by the lack of hatred or indifference, by the love for the other.⁷⁷

He draws here especially on Louis Massignon, according to whom, in Abraham, the Father of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, we can see how hospitality can “fracture” one’s identity to the degree of losing one’s old name and receiving a new one.⁷⁸ He refers to a note written by Massignon in February 1962, shortly before his death, referring to the Holy Trinity as the Christian type of hospitality, where “God is at once Guest, Host, and Home”.⁷⁹

Massignon accepted the Catholic teaching of his time of the “mystical substitution”, related not only to Christ’s taking our place so that we could take his, as in Irenaeus or Athanasius, but also to “the

⁷⁴ Derrida. “Hostipitality”, 364.

⁷⁵ Levinas. *Otherwise than Being*, 112.

⁷⁶ Derrida cites Massignon. *L’hospitalité sacré*, 373–376; see Derrida. “Hostipitality”, 377–379.

⁷⁷ Derrida cites a letter of May 20th, 1938: “(*Badaliya*) The ‘conversion’ of these souls, yes, it is the goal, but it is for them to find it themselves, without their suffering our insistence as an external pressure. It must be the secret birth of a love, shared Love.” Massignon. *L’hospitalité sacré*, 208, in: Derrida. “Hostipitality”, 376.

⁷⁸ See Derrida. “Hostipitality”, 374–375; he cites Louis Massignon. *Visitation de l’étranger: Réponse à une enquête sur Dieu*. In *Parole donnée*. Paris: Seuil, 1983, 281–282; in English in *Testimonies and Reflections: Essays of Louis Massignon*, ed. Herbert Mason. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989, 34–40.

⁷⁹ Derrida. “Hostipitality”, 375.

redemptive role of suffering”. Derrida compares this to “Levinas’s logic of the hostage ‘responsible for all’”.⁸⁰ By accepting the need to make himself a voluntary hostage, Massignon demonstrated, for Derrida, the willingness to assume the risks of hospitality. Although Massignon’s Catholic tradition is not Derrida’s, he is sensitive to it, as he is to his own Jewish traditions and the Muslim traditions of the Algerian society in which he grew up. In this respect, he draws on the shared Abrahamic story.⁸¹

But such unconditional hospitality also has its dangers. Is there a radical openness that is not messianic? Derrida insists that “a politics that does not retain a reference to this principle of unconditional hospitality is a politics that loses its reference to justice”.⁸² The emphasis on justice is also, as we noted above, important for Levinas. So, Derrida says, “justice, responsibility, hospitality, the gift (and so on) demand that we ‘endure’ the ‘experience of the impossible’⁸³ – or the ‘experience of the desire for the impossible’”.⁸⁴

Conclusion

In neither Levinas nor Derrida is hospitality an easy theme. It is not an attitude that could count on the security of the predictable. Hence its radical challenge for any politics that attempts to translate hospitality into the rules of a society. This translation needs to be done, the laws of hospitality are necessary, but they have real value only if they do not stop wrestling with this difficult aspect of hospitality, and with the ethical dilemmas it uncovers. This was an emphasis we could see both in Levinas and Derrida.

⁸⁰ See Derrida. “Hostipitality”, 376.

⁸¹ See Derrida. “Hostipitality”, 369–370. There are of course also significant differences in this story between the Bible (and even within the Bible) and the Qur’an.

⁸² Jacques Derrida. *Without Alibi*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002.

⁸³ Jacques Derrida. *Points ... Interviews, 1974–1994*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995, 359; See also *On the Name*, ed. T. Dutirot. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995, 43, 81; *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998, 9.

⁸⁴ Jacques Derrida. “Various Remarks”, in: J. D. Caputo and M. J. Scanlon (eds.). *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999, 72; see also “On Responsibility: An Interview with J. Dronsfeld and Others”, in: J. Dronsfeld and N. Midgley (eds.). “Responsibilities of Deconstruction”. *Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 6 (1997), 19–35.

There are also differences. For Levinas hospitality is a *must* which contains risks because of and on behalf of the other without whose well-being the I/we loses their humanity. In Derrida pure hospitality is necessary but uncommendable. It is like forgiveness, “which gives without return or else is nothing”.⁸⁵ Thus both philosophers arrive at the need for the deconstruction of pure self-interest as the dehumanizing driving force, and for negotiating between the laws on which societies can function, and the still deeper “laws” of love which give rise to the other laws but also challenge and suspend them in the time of need.

Neither Levinas nor Derrida present a naïve approach to the theme of hospitality. They do not offer ready-made recipes. Yet their insights are of use when confronted by the very problematic responses to the current refugee situation, which, when they use the rhetoric of protecting a “Christian Europe” as an excuse for refusing help,⁸⁶ take us to the very problem discussed in this article.

Levinas and Derrida can help us to see that no good solutions will be found without understanding that any satisfactory politics of hospitality has to wrestle with the possibility of the deconstruction of the I/we, the call to unconditional hospitality to those in need, and to seek through the conditional laws precisely that which cannot be fully delivered, that which at the same time needs to be the guide for what can be done well.

The critique of a Christendom that has nothing of the Christian spirit or Christian lifestyle, but “merely shelters behind the name of Christianity”,⁸⁷ is fitting for such cases. Christianity cannot be preserved by being hostile to people in need, turning our back on those of other cultures and/or other faiths that come to us. As the others, Levinas and Derrida, remind us, there is no Christianity without the challenge of the very difficult discernment process which touches upon our comfort

⁸⁵ Derrida. “Hospitality”, 386.

⁸⁶ See e.g. Jan Bartošek, the vice president of the Czech Christian Democratic Party, <<http://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/monitor/Lide-mate-na-vyber-Bud-krestanstvi-nebo-islam-Bez-krestanstvi-se-Evropa-stane-islamska-rika-mistopredseda-lidovcu-Bartossek-359497>>. Similar positions can be found in Hungary or in Poland; see an interview with the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán from Sept. 2015, <<http://blisty.cz/art/78856.html>> or the inauguration speech of the Polish Prime Minister, Beata Szydło, <<http://niezalezna.pl/73038-stenogram-expose-premier-beaty-szydlo-calosc-przemowienia>>. This rhetoric has been rejected: see interview with Václav Malý, <http://ceskapozice.lidovky.cz/uprchliky-mate-zapadni-relativizace-dva-tema.aspx?c=A150917_180841_pozice-tema_lube>.

⁸⁷ Thomas of Celano. *The First life of St Francis* I.i.1. London: Triangle, 2000, 8.

zones, the borders of our safety, and that asks of us to wrestle with the possible/impossible hospitality.

The hospitality of the saint and of the responsible politician both belong to our European heritage. They remind us of the gift and they present themselves as a task through which, at any time, including the time of the new moving of the nations and the uncertainties it raises, we can discover more deeply who the others are for us and who we are meant to be for them. Responsible politicians need to be able to work well with the laws of conditional hospitality, but they cannot do so if they divorce them completely from the requirement of pure hospitality and ignore the ethical dilemmas the tension between the two creates. When holiness is more than a cliché, it uncovers how the call to unconditional hospitality is heard in different human situations. It shows how the graceful responses to strangers in need make not only the faces of those others but also those who respond visibly human. And if Christian values are to mean anything in our societies and churches, they should point towards this life-giving transformation.

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