

JACQUES DERRIDA ON UNCONDITIONAL AND CONDITIONAL HOSPITALITY

GERASIMOS KAKOLIRIS

School of Humanities, The Hellenic Open University, Patras, Greece

The aim of this paper is to offer a critical appraisal of Jacques Derrida's notion of hospitality. This critical appraisal begins by presenting the logic of this notion of hospitality, which is conditioned by the relationship between two terms in the form of an absolute antinomy or aporia. On the one hand, the law of "real" or "absolute" hospitality demands the unconditional reception of the foreigner. On the other hand, there are the conditional laws of hospitality which, while they translate the unconditional law into a reciprocal right to receive and a duty to offer hospitality, simultaneously impose conditions on it. The relationship between these two elements is then seen to determine the boundaries of a decision to offer hospitality. It is these boundaries, and the possibility of this decision, which are then seen to raise difficulties for a consistently responsible offer of hospitality.

For the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, the logic of the concept of hospitality^a is conditioned by an antinomy which is in the form of an aporia. This aporia contains two elements whose relationship is one of an irresolvable negativity. On the one hand, there is the law of unlimited hospitality that ordains the unconditional reception of other, whoever he or she is, that is, the provision of hospitality to the stranger without conditions, restrictions and returns. The law of absolute, unconditional, hyperbolic hospitality, asks us to say yes to the newcomer [*arrivant*], before any determination, before any prevention, before any identification, irrespective of being a stranger, an immigrant, a guest or an unexpected visitor. On the other hand, there are the conditional laws (in the

^a Derrida develops the question of hospitality mostly in the following texts: 1. J. Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. R. Bowlby (Stanford : Stanford University Press, 2000). 2. J. Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. P.-A. Brault & M. Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). 3. J. Derrida, "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida," in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, ed. R. Kearney, M. Dooley (London: Routledge, 1998). 4. J. Derrida, "Une hospitalité à l'infini" & "Responsabilité et hospitalité," in *Manifeste pour l'hospitalité*, ed. M. Seffahi (Paris : Paroles l'Aube, 1999). 5. J. Derrida, "Hostipitality", *Angelaki*, vol. 5, no. 3, December 2000, pp. 3-18.

plural) of hospitality, which relate to the unconditional law through the imposition of terms and conditions (political, juridical, moral) upon it. The imposition of these terms involves the reformulation of the unconditional law within the framework of a reciprocal right and duty. Within this framework, hospitality assumes the form of legality in which the unconditional law disappears into these discrete entities of right and duty. Its disappearance is marked by the restriction imposed upon these entities. The possession or recognition of a right becomes the preliminary condition for the offer of hospitality, which itself is now simply the fulfillment of the duty required by the assertion of the right. The right to hospitality subsumes the reception, the welcome, that is given to the foreigner under a strict and restrictive jurisdiction. Hospitality remains a debt to the guest, but it is conditioned by, and conditional upon, the existence of a right and a reciprocal duty. If, for example, he or she does not possess a right to hospitality or a right to asylum, each new arrival does not become a guest. Without this right, he or she can enter one's "home", the "house" of the host, only as a "parasite", an illegal, clandestine presence, subject to arrest or deportation. The possession of this right is not itself absolute as it is not accorded unconditionally. The foreigner does not only have a right in relation to the host, but a duty to behave correctly in regard to the host. It is the conformity with this duty which ensures the continued possession of this right.

For Derrida, absolute or unconditional hospitality presupposes a rupture with hospitality in the current sense, with conditional hospitality, with the right to or pact of hospitality. Absolute hospitality demands that I open my house, and that I give not only to the foreigner (the one who possesses a name, the social status of the foreigner, of the tourist, etc) but also to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, a place without asking for reciprocity (included the economic exchange that take place within the *oikos* and the *agora*) or even his name.

Even though these two regimes of hospitality, *the* unconditional law of hospitality, in its universal singularity, and the conditional laws of hospitality (in plural) are heterogeneous, irreducible to each other, they are, nonetheless, related to each other. This is because, on the one hand, the conditional laws of hospitality would cease to be laws of hospitality, if they were not guided by *the* law of unconditional hospitality, if they were not inspired by it, if they did not aspire to it, if, indeed, they did not demand it. Political and moral action needs to be related to a moment of unconditional or infinite responsibility in order not to be reduced to the demands of the moment, that is, it should be based on a moment of universality that exceeds the pragmatic demands of a certain context. Therefore, the laws of hospitality need the law of absolute hospitality in order to

place them and to keep them in an incessant progressive movement, to improve them.

On the other hand, without the conditional laws in the form of a right and a duty to hospitality, the law of unconditional hospitality would be in danger of remaining abstract, ineffective, wishful thinking, utopia. In order to be what it is, namely, an ought-to-be, *the* law should become existent, effective, concrete, determined, and consequently it needs the laws, which, nevertheless, through the determination of limits, powers, rights and duties, threaten to corrupt or pervert it.

For Derrida, the pervertibility of the law of hospitality arises from the complicity between traditional hospitality, hospitality in the current sense, and power. There is no hospitality, in the classical sense of the term, without the sovereignty of the person who offers hospitality on his or her house. Therefore, there is an essential “self-restraint” incorporated in the idea of hospitality that maintains the distance between what belongs to the host and the foreigner, between the power of the host to remain master of his house and the invitation of the other to it. As John Caputo observes in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*: “When the host says to the guest, ‘Make yourself at home,’ this is a self-limiting invitation. ‘Make yourself at home’ means: please feel at home, act as if you were at home, but, remember, that is not true, this is not your home but mine, and you are expected to respect my property.”^b Since there is no hospitality without the limits of time and number, the host, also, exercises his or her sovereignty, by selecting, filtering, choosing his or her guests or visitors, those to whom he or she decides to offer the right of hospitality, but also by fixing the period for which they can stay. Thus, there is always a certain hostility in every act of hospitality, that is, hospitality brings always within itself its opposite, so that it constitutes a certain “hostil/pitality”, something that is reflected, also, in its etymology: The word “hospitality” stems from the Latin *hospes*, which is formed from *hostis*, that initially meant a “stranger” and, afterwards, received the meaning of the enemy or “hostile” stranger (*hostilis*), + *pets* (*potis, potes, potentia*), to have power.^c Therefore, exclusion, unfairness, a certain violence, or even a certain “perjury” towards the absolute law of hospitality, begins immediately, from the threshold of the right to hospitality. Nevertheless, Derrida recognizes that without the possession of a place, a home, which, indeed, limits hospitality, there is, in reality, no opening, or passage to hospitality, that is, there is no right

^b J. D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (N.Y.: Fordham University Press, 2002), p. 111.

^c Derrida is following the etymology of Emil Benveniste, in *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes I* (Paris: Minuit, 1969), chap. 7, “L’hospitalité.”

and debt to hospitality. The exercise of possession over one's "home" is not, in essence, negative since it is a condition of possibility of hospitality, but also of its impossibility in its absolute, unconditional form. In other words, the possibility of hospitality depends on its impossibility. What it is required is a continuous, remorseless "negotiation" or "compromise", which is, however, something that one has always to invent, between, on the one hand, the wish to have and retain a house, and, on the other hand, the renunciation of one's mastery over it in order to be able to welcome the other inside it unconditionally.

This asymmetry between unconditional and conditional hospitality maintains hospitality as an endless demand, since every particular event of welcome of the other can only fall sort of the requirements of the unconditional law of unlimited hospitality. Whatever decision we make in relation to the arriving of a stranger, the infinite obligation to welcome the other, whoever he or she is, will always exist, and will be exceed the apparently justified restrictions and conditions that we place on the other in his or her arrival and stay. Responsible action and decision consists in the necessity of an incessant negotiation between the law of unconditional hospitality, which disregards right, duty or even politics and demands the welcome of the newcomer beyond any terms and conditions, and the laws of hospitality, which through the determination of limits, powers, rights and duties, defy and violate the law of unconditional hospitality.

The decision of hospitality, according to Derrida, asks me each time to invent my own rule. If I want to appear hospitable to a guest or an unexpected visitor, my action, and this is a condition of any moral responsibility, should not be the result of the mechanical application of a rule. The decision should arise from *nothing*. It should not be dictated, programmed or pre-arranged. Otherwise, it has only the *appearance* of hospitality, for it does not result from the experience of a decision. According to Derrida's anti-normative ethics, only insofar as somebody starts from *nothing*, that is, from no previous rule or norm, the "inventive" or "poetic" event of hospitality has some possibility to occur.

The accession to this "hyperbolic" ethics of hospitality places us in a permanent situation of "bad conscience," or "guilt". The "absolute" or "hyperbolic" law of hospitality precludes someone from ever being hospitable enough. Therefore, one is always guilty and he or she must always ask for forgiveness for never welcoming the other enough. Moreover, one should feel also guilty and, therefore, ask forgiveness for the fact that the hospitality he or she offers can be transformed into a weapon, a confirmation of his or her sovereignty, or even omnipotence, or an appeal for recognition since "one always takes by giving." One must, therefore, a priori, ask forgiveness for the

gift of hospitality itself, for the sovereignty or the desire of sovereignty of the gift of hospitality.^d As Derrida declares: “So you cannot prevent me from having a bad conscience, and that is the main motivation of my ethics and my politics.”^e It seems that, since such an ethics is “hyperbolic”, it prohibits any decision from being absolutely ethical.

This prohibition is, in a certain sense, the dissolution of the possibility of ethical decision. For, how one can reconcile the fact that while, for Derrida, hospitality is given to the irreducible, singular entity, simultaneously, unconditional hospitality, as universal law, obliges hospitality to be given to anyone indiscriminately. Because, as Derrida himself recognizes, “as soon as I relate to an irreducible singular one, I am betraying another one, or I introduce a third one who disturbs or corrupts the singular relation to the other.”^f

Hence, the more “absolute” or “hyperbolic” the ethics of hospitality becomes the more unethical it becomes. By demanding the unconditional welcome of the stranger, beyond the possibility of any discrimination, pure or absolute hospitality can lead not only to the destruction of one’s home, but also to the suffering or even the death of the host, since the person who enters can be a murderer.

Consequently, if hospitality ought to be given, according to the law of unconditional hospitality, to anyone indiscriminately, then it seems legitimate for someone to think, when he or she engages in the experience of decision-making, that “no one has more weight than anybody else.” As Derrida poses it in *The Gift of Death*,^g why should I look after this particular cat and not the other cats? Yet, do we not usually experience the sense that – even if we can agree that there are lots of situations where we can never be absolutely sure of this – somebody has some sort of prior claim? Hence, to place at the centre of the experience of decision-making the idea that hospitality is an absolutely general obligation to everybody is to render any notion of special obligation towards persons who are in urgent need of it rather problematic. For, the unconditional law excludes the possibility of any kind of discrimination between individuals.^h

^d J. Derrida, “The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible”, in *Questioning God*, ed. J. Caputo, M. Dooley, M. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) p. 16.

^e J. Derrida, “On Forgiveness: A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida,” in J. Caputo, M. Dooley, M. Scanlon (ed.), *Questioning God*, ..., p. 48.

^f *Ibid.*, p. 47.

^g Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 71.

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damianos p sakas

university of peloponnese, greece

nikolaos konstantopoulos

university of aegean, greece

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