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Theorists of hospitality

Jacques Derrida's philosophy of hospitality

In the latest of our occasional series on theorists of hospitality, **Kevin O'Gorman** explores how the controversial philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) contributes to our understanding of hospitality. Derrida's meditation on the contradictions within the language of hospitality are identified, along with his attempts to illuminate a variety of contemporary hospitality scenarios.

The Office of the President of France announced the death of Jacques Derrida in 2004, saying 'in him France gave the world one of the major figures of the intellectual life of our times.'¹ Internationally, Derrida was widely considered the most important French philosopher of the late twentieth century; he was also the subject of three films² and a number of media controversies.³ Derrida was credited as the inventor of 'deconstruction,' the practice of dismantling texts by revealing their assumptions and contradictions. Normally life is lived at the level where things are presumed, people are accustomed to think in narrow ways. Deconstruction attempts to highlight just how much is taken for granted in contemporary conceptual thought and language.

Derrida grew up as a Jew in Algeria in the 1940s, during and after the anti-Semitic French colonial regime.⁴ He had been excluded in his youth from his school after it had reduced the quotas for Jews. Confronted with violent racism, he avoided school during the period when he was obliged to attend a school for Jewish students and teachers. He eventually managed to gain entry to study philosophy in Paris at the École Normale Supérieure.⁵ However

*his subsequent experiences as a young student in Paris were isolated and unhappy, consisting of intermittent depression, nervous anxiety and a see-saw between sleeping tablets and amphetamines resulted in exam failures in the early 1950s.*⁶

He then studied at the University of Louvain in Belgium,⁷ later taught at the Sorbonne, and then returned to the École Normale Supérieure as a lecturer.

In 1983 Derrida became the founding director of the Collège International de Philosophie, where open lecture courses were given by a volunteer body of philosophers.⁸ In 1967 Derrida's international reputation had been secured by the publication of three books,⁹ and he went on to publish 40 different works. Various philosophers have tried to attach different labels to him—a pragmatist,¹⁰ a post-Kantian transcendentalist,¹¹ and a linguistic philosopher¹²—showing the difficulty in locating deconstructionism within philosophy, let

alone an academic discipline. As well as being one of the most cited modern scholars in the humanities, he was undoubtedly one of the most controversial. In 1992 a proposal to award him an honorary doctorate at Cambridge University caused such uproar that, for the first time in 30 years, the university was forced to



Chicago UP

put the matter to a ballot, with the degree only being awarded by a majority vote.¹³

Derrida and hospitality

Derrida's writings have had an impact on a wide range of disciplines and areas of study, including education, gender, law, literature, mathematics, politics, psychology, race and theology.¹⁴ This paper explores Derrida's contribution to the philosophy of hospitality, picking up on some other writers in philosophy and post-colonial theory who are either writing in the field or have developed his writing.

Drawing on the work of Lévinas,¹⁵ Derrida offered an encompassing philosophy of hospitality, clearly differentiating between the 'law of hospitality' and 'laws of hospitality':

*The law of unlimited hospitality (to give the new arrival all of one's home and oneself, to give him or her one's own, our own, without asking a name, or compensation, or the fulfilment of even the smallest condition), and on the other hand, the laws (in the plural), 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.*¹⁶

Derrida also made a distinction between unconditional hospitality, which he considered impossible, and hospitality which in his view was always conditional. Derrida defined hospitality as inviting and welcoming the 'stranger'.¹⁷ This takes place on different levels: the personal level where the 'stranger' is welcomed into the home; and the level of individual countries. His interest was heightened by the etymology of 'hospitality',¹⁸ being from a Latin root, but derived from two proto-Indo-European words which have the meanings of 'stranger', 'guest' and 'power'.¹⁹ Thus, in the 'destruction' of the word, there can be seen

*an essential 'self limitation' built right into the idea of hospitality, which preserves the distance between one's own and the 'stranger', between owning one's own property and inviting the 'other' into one's home.*²⁰

So, as Derrida observed, there is always a little hostil-

ity in all hosting and hospitality, constituting what he called a certain 'hostipitality'.²¹

*If I say 'Welcome', I am not renouncing my mastery, something that becomes transparent in people whose hospitality is a way of showing off how much they own or who make their guests uncomfortable and afraid to touch a thing.*²²

To Derrida then, the notion of having and retaining the mastery of the house underlies hospitality:

*'Make yourself at home', this is a self-limiting invitation... it 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.*²³

Telfer also explores this further when discussing the motivation behind hospitality.²⁴ There is a limitation to the amount of hospitality that 'hosts' can and wish to offer. Just as important are the intentions that lie

Various philosophers have tried to attach different labels to him... showing the difficulty in locating deconstructionism within philosophy, let alone an academic discipline

behind any hospitable act: there surely is a distinction to be made between hospitality for pleasure and hospitality that is born out of a sense of duty. She considers hospitality to be a moral virtue, and articulates hospitable motives to be:

*those in which concern for the guests' pleasure and welfare, for its own sake, is predominant. These can include entertaining for pleasure where that pleasure largely depends on knowing that one is pleasing the guests, and sense of duty where there is also concern for the guests themselves. And hospitable people, those who possess the trait of hospitableness, are those who often entertain from one or more of these motives, or from mixed motives in which one of these motives is predominant.*²⁵

People choose to pursue the virtue of hospitableness because they are attracted by an ideal of hospitality:

*The ideal of hospitality, like all ideals, presents itself as joyful rather than onerous, and provides the inspiration for the pursuit of the virtue or virtues of hospitableness.*²⁶

Conditional hospitality

The phenomenon of hospitality necessarily contains the concept of the 'other' or 'foreigner' within it since hospitality requires, *a priori*, a concept of the 'outsider' or 'guest'. In trying to imagine the extremes of a hospitality to which no conditions are set, there is a realisation that unconditional hospitality could never be accomplished. It is not so much an ideal: it is an impossible ideal. Derrida argued that hospitality is conditional in the sense that the outsider or foreigner has to meet the criteria of the *a priori* 'other', implying that hospitality is not given to a guest who is absolutely unknown or anonymous because the host has no idea of how they will respond:

Absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a

'Make yourself at home', this is a self-limiting invitation... it means: please feel at home... but, remember, that is not true, this is not your home but mine, and you are expected to respect my property

foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names. The law of absolute hospitality commands a break with hospitality by right, with law or justice as rights.²⁷

Derrida also distinguished between a guest and a parasite:

In principle, the difference is straightforward, but for that you need a law; hospitality, reception, the welcome offered have to be submitted to a basic and limiting jurisdiction. Not all new arrivals are received as guests if they don't have the benefit of the right to hospitality or the right of asylum, etc. Without this right, a new arrival can only be introduced 'in my home,' in the host's 'at home,' as a parasite, a guest who is wrong, illegitimate, clandestine, liable to expulsion or arrest.²⁸

The concept of absolute hospitality dictated by a law that exceeds the social contract of hospitality is

central to the thinking of Lévinas. Lévinas considered Heidegger's statement in that 'language is the house of Being'; the sheltering or housing of Being, a sheltering that Lévinas and Derrida took up from the perspective of hospitality to the 'other'.²⁹ Derrida takes the imposition of language as an example of the first type of violence that is inflicted on the guest by the host. There is a law of the social relation that distinguishes between sameness and difference, which is itself monolingual and that, therefore, extends its hospitality on its own terms and not those of the foreigner.

In the British press refugees and asylum seekers are often portrayed as parasites upon the nation's hospitality. This is a potential manifestation of what Rosello identified as:

the guest is always the guest, if the host is always the host, something has probably gone wrong: hospitality has somehow been replaced by parasitism or charity.³⁰

It has reached the stage where *guests who are forced into the systematic position of the guest are often accused of parasitism, the host refusing to take responsibility for the historical position that deprives others of the pleasure and pride of taking their place.³¹*

Derrida endorsed Lévinas' view that absolute hospitality requires the 'host' to allow 'guests' to behave as they wish; there must be no pressure or obligation to behave in any particular manner.³² Absolute hospitality does not make a demand of the 'guest' that would force them to reciprocate by way of imposing an obligation. The language used by Derrida could be held to imply that making a 'guest' conform to any rules or norms is a bad thing. Derrida went on to question in particular the restricted nature of national hospitality to legal and illegal immigrants.

We know that there are numerous what we call 'displaced persons' who are applying for the right to asylum without being citizens, without being identified as citizens. It is not for speculative or ethical reasons that I am interested in unconditional hospitality, but in order to understand and to transform what is going on today in our world.³³

A modern hospitality enigma exists where countries want their emigrants treated as sacred guests, but pay scant attention to their own laws of hospitality regarding immigrants. Countries admit a certain number of

immigrants—conditionally.³⁴ Derrida noted that to the best of his knowledge there was no country in the world that allowed unconditional immigration.³⁵ People may consider themselves to be practically hospitable, but they will not leave their doors open to all who might come, to take or do anything, without condition or limit. Derrida argued the same can be said about countries: conditional hospitality takes place only in the shadow of the impossibility of the ideal version.

The admission by a country, of a certain number of immigrants in a given year, occurs because of the impossibility of an absolute hospitality, a limitless opening of national borders in which all property would be available to those who enter, and all doors would be open. Derrida however did not consider that this impossibility is meaningless. The official who determines the admission quota can only do so by considering whether it should be larger, or judging that it should not. Derrida referred to statements made by former French minister of immigration Michel Rocard who in 1993 observed, with respect to immigration quotas, that France could not offer a home to everybody in the world who suffered.³⁶ Paradoxically, in that moment when Rocard closes the door on unconditional hospitality, he opened up the conceptual possibility that it could exist. Derrida argued that the alternative absolute of an unconditional hospitality can therefore be glimpsed, momentarily, just before it is suffocated by conditional hospitality:

*Unconditional hospitality implies that you don't ask the other, the newcomer, the guest to give anything back, or even to identify himself or herself. Even if the other deprives you of your mastery or your home, you have to accept this. It is terrible to accept this, but that is the condition of unconditional hospitality: that you give up the mastery of your space, your home, your nation. It is unbearable. If, however, there is pure hospitality, it should be pushed to this extreme.*³⁷

Derrida, hospitality and religion

When considering hospitality, for Derrida the 'otherness' referred to 'the other, the newcomer, the guest'; interrogating humanity's ethical relation-

ship with itself, receptiveness and in relationship with others: strangers, foreigners, immigrants and friends—guests.

For pure hospitality or a pure gift to occur, however, there must be an absolute surprise. The other, like the Messiah, must arrive whenever he or she wants. She [sic] may even not arrive. I would oppose, therefore, the traditional and religious concept of 'visitation' to 'invitation': visitation implies the arrival of someone who is not expected, who can show up at any time. If I am unconditionally hospitable I should welcome the visitation, not the invited guest, but the visitor. I must be unprepared, or prepared to be unprepared, for the unexpected arrival of any other. Is this possible? I don't know. If, however, there is pure hospital-

conditional hospitality takes place only in the shadow of the impossibility of the ideal version

*ity, or a pure gift, it should consist in this opening without horizon, without horizon of expectation, an opening to the newcomer whoever that may be. It may be terrible because the newcomer may be a good person, or may be the devil.*³⁸

This quote demonstrates Derrida's distinction between messianicity and messianism, another way of reading his 'impossibility' and related notion of 'otherness'.³⁹ A messianism was considered by Derrida as a kind of dogmatism, subjecting the divine other to 'metaphysico-religious determination';⁴⁰ forcing the ultimate guest, the Messiah, to conform or at least converge to the 'host's' preconceptions of them as 'guest'. When imagining the coming of the Messiah the host attributes a new kind of origin and centrism to a divine other and assumes the latter suits their imaginative picture. Faith for Derrida was undeconstructible, while religion, like law, is deconstructible; faith, is:

*something that is presupposed by the most radical deconstructive gesture. You cannot address the 'other', speak to the 'other', without an act of faith, without testimony.*⁴¹

To speak to another is to ask them to trust you:

As soon as you address the other, as soon as you are open to the future, as soon as you have a temporal experience of waiting for the future, of waiting for someone to come; that is the opening of experience.

*Someone is to come, is now to come.*⁴²

The faith in the 'someone to come,' according to Derrida, was absolutely universal, and therefore the universal structure of faith is an undeconstructible. In contrast, Derrida suggested invoking messianicity as: *the unexpected surprise... If I could anticipate, if I had a horizon of anticipation, if I could see what is coming or who is coming, there would be no coming.*⁴³ Derrida's view of messianicity was not limited to a religious context, but extended to his depiction of 'otherness' more generally. His comments about the other apply to a friend, someone culturally different, a parent, a child; where the issue arises of whether we are capable of recognizing them, of respecting their difference, and of how we may be surprised by them.

Dealing with the impossibility of unconditional hospitality

For Derrida the way in which impossibility is treated offers a solution to the problem; impossibility is an experience or an event. It is a relationship that means that people could never be self-enclosed identities. Impossibility is not a possibility that cannot be accessed; rather, people are differentiated by impossi-

hospitality may require that... both host and guest accept... the uncomfortable and sometimes painful possibility of being changed by the other

bility, and this is one of the many ways in which they are a being in relationship with 'otherness.'

When a country's borders, or the domestic domain, are open to guests or immigrants, conditional hospitality places us in relation to impossibility; failure to provide a greater generosity, and that impossible greater generosity inhabits our act of conditional hospitality. When, with the best intentions, people nonetheless inevitably fail in their attempt to be open to the difference of the 'other,' that impossibility resides in their attempt, and places them in a different kind of relationship with the other in question.

Impossibility mediates and contributes to the complexity of people's identity, relationships and hospitality. Transformation through hospitality is connected with the negotiation of the impossibility. While

reflecting on the government statements that reasonable limits and reasonable conditions must be set on immigration, Derrida was interested in the interconnection between overt institutional generosity and its implicit failure; for example,

*when those hosts who are apparently, and present themselves as being, the most generous, constitute themselves as the most limited.*⁴⁴

President Mitterrand of France used the expression of a 'threshold of tolerance' in his discussion on immigration policy, considered as the point beyond which French voters would revolt against the presence of immigrants in France.⁴⁵ France was willing to admit a certain number of immigrants. Even if this was an act of national generosity it is incapable of accomplishing this generosity without invoking rhetorically a spectre of impossibility; that which is beyond its threshold.

Mireille Rosello, a postcolonial theorist, addresses similar issues to Derrida, especially when examining France's traditional role as the *terre d'asile* (land of sanctuary) for political refugees. She shows how this image of a welcoming France is now contrasted with France as part of the Fortress Europe (a land that seeks to close its borders to unwelcome immigrants).⁴⁶ Rosello also examines the French government's efforts to hinder illegal immigration throughout the 1990s.⁴⁷ The French state defined hospitality as part of an attempt to make private citizens responsible for the residency status of their guests. Different hospitality scenarios between groups and between individuals, especially the notion of 'hosts' and 'guests' and their respective responsibilities:

*The very precondition of hospitality may require that, in some ways, both the host and the guest accept, in different ways, the uncomfortable and sometimes painful possibility of being changed by the other.*⁴⁸

Within Western Europe refugees are no longer perceived as honoured guests deserving of consideration: they fall into the category of parasite; they have overstayed their welcome and must be ushered out.

Many of Derrida's views are reflected in the writings of Tahar Ben Jalloun, another post-colonial theorist, a Moroccan who immigrated to France in 1971. Drawing upon his personal encounters with racism, he uses the metaphor of hospitality to elucidate the racial divisions that plague contemporary France. Ben

Jalloun states that laws of hospitality are a fundamental mark of civilisation, observing that he comes from a poor and relatively unsophisticated country, where the stranger's right to protection and shelter has been honoured since time immemorial.⁴⁹ On moving to France, Ben Jalloun felt that hospitality was not reciprocal, despite the benefits that France had clearly gained from her former colonies. France had enjoyed one side of the reciprocal arrangement but hospitality was not reciprocated to those who wished to come as 'guests' to France; the former 'hosts' were not welcomed as guests. Hospitality was conditional; a right to visit was not a right to stay. Former colonials feel abandoned by the authorities of their own countries, and in France live in fear of being returned to them:

*in France he dreams of the country he left behind. In his own country, he dreams of France... he thumps back and forth a bag full of small possessions and of grand illusion.*⁵⁰

Despite having lived for about 30 years in France the author himself states:

*yet sometimes I feel I am a stranger here. That happens whenever racism occurs, whether it is virulent or latent, and whenever someone lays down limits that mustn't be transgressed.*⁵¹

For current post-colonial philosophical theory, hospitality is a multifaceted concept. What are commonly referred to as 'laws of hospitality' are largely unwritten and thereby subject to flux and interpretation. Rosello shows how this image of a welcoming France is now contrasted with France as part of the Fortress Europe. For Rosello, what makes the phenomenon of hospitality relevant for philosophical investigation is the potential for redefinition of the traditional roles and duties of the 'guest' and the 'host'.⁵² Alternating between notions of duty and voluntary charity, hospitality between individuals and states of different racial, ethnic or religious backgrounds entails its own ramifications; Ben Jalloun argues that racism is caused by the breakdown of hospitality thresholds and boundaries.

Potential for bias

Discontentment and bias are two of the issues that arise from these authors. It comes across clearly for

example, in the writings of Ben Jelloun, in his homesickness and general discontent with his host country. Derrida too was an immigrant to France and his background could also have had a strong influence on his thinking and writing. This does not prove that either Derrida or Ben Jelloun have any political bias or underlying propagandist tendency; however, the fact that neither of them seems to explicitly discuss their potential bias does leave room for doubt.

In investigating the hospitality of the classical Greco-Roman world Derrida was drawing conclusions and writing for the modern age. When undertaking this type of work, care must be taken to avoid what is characterized as 'the teleological fallacy': the tendency to use ancient documents as 'a springboard for a modern polemic'.⁵³ Telfer, through her treatment of domestic hospitality, and Derrida, Rosello and Ben Jelloun with their investigation of the state and the relationship to the individual, all to a greater or lesser

the true gift of hospitality is an act of generosity experienced by the 'guest', which turns a stranger into a friend for a limited period of time

extent seem to expect that the hospitality relationship should be the same. There is limited consideration given to the motivations of either the guest or the 'host', and even less recognition given to the fact that the hospitality relationship exists in dissimilar contexts: domestic, civic or commercial, each with their own different sets of laws.⁵⁴ This lack of contextual consideration potentially creates the foundations for a hospitality fallacy.

Reflection

For Derrida the hospitality given to the 'other' is an ethical marker, both for an individual and a country. Everyday engagement with the 'other' is fraught with difficulties; sometimes the 'other' is devalued or in extreme cases rejected. In the case of hospitality, the 'other' is often forced to take on the perceptions of the 'host'. The 'guests' are unable to be themselves; they must transform their 'otherness'. For Derrida, being open and accepting the 'other' on their terms opens the host to new experiences—the possibility of 'crossing thresholds of hope'.⁵⁵ Even when they have

the best of intentions people fail in their attempts to behave hospitably and this adds to the complexity of the hospitality relationship.

We do not know what hospitality is.

Not yet.

*Not yet, but will we ever know?*⁵⁶

From Derrida's writings it seems that true hospitality is somewhat of an enigma. This is not due to any philosophical conundrum, but perhaps because hospitality is not a matter of objective knowledge. Hospitality exists within lived experience; it is a gift given by the 'host' to the 'guest', and then shared between them. Hospitality cannot be resolved on the pages of an academic journal; the true gift of hospitality is an act of generosity experienced by the 'guest', which turns a stranger into a friend for a limited period of time.

From various biographies and obituaries, it is clear that Derrida was undoubtedly a controversial character; his dramatic early failures were contrasted by the outstanding successes in later life. His work advanced the deconstruction of 'the very concepts of knowledge and truth,' and provoked strong feelings within his readers who, just like the Senate of Cambridge University, are often divided over his writings, considering them to be either on the one hand absurd, vapid and pernicious or on the other hand logical, momentous and lively.⁵⁷

For further reading on Derrida I would recommend J Derrida *Of Hospitality, Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to respond* (Stanford University Press, Stanford 2000)

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- 38 *ibid.* p 70
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- Indeed, Derrida confesses that 'there is no society without faith, without trust in the other.' (*ibid* p 128) Messianisms are identification in time and history of the messianic structure; messianisms say that the Messiah has appeared in time, tradition, and history.
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