



Essay

‘A Few Words of Welcome’

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Abstract

This paper examines the contemporary absence of hospitality. Is today's absent hospitality to be understood as a moral disaster, and a failure of responsibility? Or should we think of the silence in place of yesterday (or tomorrow's) 'welcome' as the exemplary mode of hospitality? Through a polemical reading of Jacques Derrida's texts on hospitality, it is possible to argue that – far from representing a dereliction of the word 'welcome', the contemporary silence on the question of hospitality can be interpreted as the zenith of hospitality itself. Whether this silence stands for the final word on hospitality is, however, a question which remains unresolved.

Keywords: Hospitality; Derrida; Technology; Welcome; Host

Аннотация

В этой статье исследуется современное отсутствие гостеприимства. Следует ли понимать сегодняшнее отсутствие гостеприимства как моральную катастрофу и отказ от ответственности? Или нам следует рассматривать тишину вместо вчерашнего (или завтрашнего) “добро пожаловать” как образец гостеприимства. Путем полемического прочтения текстов Жака Дерриды о гостеприимстве можно утверждать, что игнорирование слова “добро пожаловать”, молчание по вопросу гостеприимства означает зенит самого гостеприимства. Однако вопрос, является ли это молчание последним словом о гостеприимстве, остается нерешенным.



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I.

We are living in a time of inhospitality. Whether it's the refusal to welcome refugees – be they Eastern European, North African, Mexican or South Asian – the depersonalisation or anonymisation of traditional places of hospitality – in the form of the roadside hotel or the self check-in motel, or the illegalisation of hospitality during the Covid crisis: it's possible to say, today, that, in a number of places, hospitality is not taking place.

It would be possible, now, to raise the question of the time of hospitality, as a useful or dangerous fiction. Turning to the past, we may hear others say, or tell ourselves, that ‘We have a great history of hospitality’; turning to the future, we might say ‘We'll get around to hospitality in a just a moment, but I just need to get my house in order before I...’. Or perhaps, we remember that ‘We used to be so good at hospitality, whatever went so wrong?’; or ‘We'll do better in the future, starting now’. The time of hospitality, like all time, is filled with potential for good and bad.

But for the moment, here, I'm interested in the place of hospitality, or those sites at which hospitality takes place, or fails to take place. My text is provoked by the late work of Jacques Derrida, who – among other things – asks the reader to think about the dynamic, dangerous interplay of technology and hospitality (Derrida 1998, p. 61).

Responses to Derrida's request – to think about the technology of welcoming, and of hospitality – are not common. His thinking on hospitality has commonly been interpreted as a dialogue with Immanuel Kant on the possibility of retaining a place for particularist ethics within universal political theory (Bankovsky, 2005; Still, 2012); indeed, in a number of places, Derrida articulates his own position as a reformulation of Kant's (1795/1983), as it appears in ‘On Perpetual Peace’. In similar terms, scholars have identified a confrontation with capitalism in the form of the ‘gift economy’ (Ahn, 2010; Norton, 2015; Heard, 2010): the question concerns the possibility of ‘giving’ hospitality without expecting – or demanding – that hospitality be given in return, thus instantiating a circulation of commodified ‘gifts’ of hospitality. But the question of hospitality today – of the modes, places and times of hospitality produced by contemporary technology – has remained comparatively marginal.

When I first imagined this text, I had the idea to follow the redefinition of technology, according to its Greek etymology – ‘techne’ and ‘logos’, meaning ‘study of skills’ – to a study of the skills of hospitality: skills which require practise, and cultivation. Hospitality is not something that can be achieved as a one-off, or a once and for all – it takes time. I know that these are skills that we are sorely, sorely lacking today.

But rather than follow the etymological route, through Greece and back to the present day, I'm interested in the meaning of ‘technology’ as we commonly use it: ‘tech’, computers, screens, Ipads, TVs etc. In particular, I'm interested to ask, in Derrida's words, when thinking about hospitality, “what it is that comes our way by e-mail or the Internet?” (Derrida, 1998, p. 47) What is the character of the reshaping of the place of hospitality which has occurred following the technological revolution of the last 20 or so



years? I aim to show that we have arrived, today, at a space of hospitality which is at the same time exemplary and empty. There is an exemplarily absent hospitality taking place today, when nobody is saying 'welcome'.

II.

In order to understand what is happening today, at the philosophical level, it will be necessary to think again about hospitality: how to give hospitality; to whom to give hospitality; where to give hospitality; what is given in hospitality, and so on. If the exemplary non-occurrence of hospitality is to be comprehensible, the exemplary occurrence will need to be clear.

Derrida's identifies three key qualities, or necessary conditions, in the act of hospitality: the generous welcome, the statement, and the reversal. These moments could be understood as unfolding one after the other, or perhaps in reverse order, or all at once.

First, a word, or a few words of welcome. When I say 'welcome' to you, I appear to be giving you something: water, bread, fish, wine, coffee, a meal, or even a place to sleep. At the abstract level, I give you the gift of hospitality; at the practical level, this gift entails giving you something of my own. There is a suggestion of generosity: it is generous to give something which used to belong to me – my own things, things which belong to me, which matter to me, which are precious or treasured, which are personal, which carry personal significance or memories – away to somebody else. We are familiar with the virtue of generous hospitality: the guest is told, 'make yourself at home', 'what's mine is yours', 'be my guest'. This is a kind of unconditional or radical hospitality, in which I say, to you, welcome, whoever you are (Derrida, 1998, p. 27).

Following, or prior to, or at the same time, there is a statement. When the host says 'welcome' to the guest, they say 'this is mine to give to you'. In order to be able to give something, from me to you, it must be mine in the first place. Thus, 'this is my bread, my wine, my house, my spare bed', even 'this is my own bed, and I give it to you'. In order for the exchange to occur, it must be begun with a statement from the host to the effect that 'all this – this place I call 'home' – is mine': Derrida (1999) writes, "to say welcome is perhaps to insinuate that one is at home here, that one knows what it means to be at home, and that at home one receives, invites, or offers hospitality, thus appropriating for oneself a place to welcome the other, or worse, welcoming in order to appropriate for oneself a place" (p. 15-16). In order to say 'welcome', in order to give hospitality, it is necessary to state that I belong here, that this is my place, that I know how to give hospitality, and that I know how to make you feel at home.

Already, then, the dynamic power of hospitality is laid out: when I welcome you, I commit myself – my time and my place – to you, and yet, in doing so, I lay claim to everything. In this way, it is possible for Derrida (1999) to claim that "hospitality thus precedes property" (p. 45). Hospitality, as the statement 'this is mine', is constructive, insofar as it empowers the host to lay claim to something, or somewhere. The hospitable host builds their own home in the act of hospitality. Being hospitable, thus makes property possible, and creates the home space.

Finally, or first of all, there is a reversal. I have claimed that the act of welcoming simultaneously gives and takes: in order to give hospitality, I must have hospitality to give. Derrida argues, on the basis of this, that it is really the guest who gives hospitality, not the host. The very possibility of saying 'this is mine and I give it to you, welcome',



the “capacity to receive (‘to be in the position to receive’)” (Derrida, 1999, p. 27) depends on having someone – a guest, a friend, a stranger, a migrant – to give to. Thus, it is the guest who ‘gives’ that possibility to the host. Hospitality cannot be achieved alone: it depends on the guest.

These moments can be confusing. Which comes first? Who gives last? Where does hospitality begin and end? Are they stages in time, or can they all be bundled up together? Do they unfold in different spaces? I suggest that all of these questions, and many more beside, are different ways of asking the most fundamental question: what is the best form of hospitality?

Derrida’s (1998) answer is ‘unconditional’ or ‘absolute hospitality’ (p. 25). What is called for, in unconditional hospitality, is hospitality with quotas, without time limit, without points systems, without VISA, or sans-papiers. If any limit is placed on hospitality, “if I welcome only what I welcome, what I am ready to welcome ... there is no hospitality” (Derrida, 2001, p. 362). Hospitality must not be given selectively, or based on any preconditions. As soon as the host says ‘you are welcomed, just as long as you don’t...’ or ‘you are completely welcome, on the condition that...’, this is not really hospitality.

Hospitality, according to Derrida, consists in welcoming unconditionally: extending the welcome to whoever passes your door, whoever they may be, wherever they may be from, wherever they may be going, whatever their name or nation (Derrida 1998, p. 25). This welcome, this hospitable gesture, is not something which can be controlled, located, determined, measured, or planned for. It happens all at once, and over and over again. It’s out of control: it can’t be controlled. Hospitality doesn’t obey any category or law, except its own Law: the Law of absolutely unconditional hospitality.

It is clear, of course, that unconditional hospitality is not taking place today. I suggest that this ‘non-occurrence’ is can be understood most clearly in the figure of the ‘absent host’ – a host who, surprisingly, can be said to figure exemplary hospitality. That is to say, unconditional hospitality entails giving everything: one’s food, drink, one’s time and space, even one’s own bed. How can this be done? I suggest: by not being there.

III.

There are a number of places, today, in which you – the guest – can stay which do not require ever meeting the host. You can arrive, and check in, at your fixed time: this can be achieved with a code sent to your phone, or via inputting your details into a machine at the ‘arrival desk’. You may be given a key, or a keycard, which gains access to the room, in which you may find a bed, sheets, perhaps even a towel. You are informed of the check out time, by which point you must vacate the premises, in order that the cleaner – perhaps the only person you may during your stay, if only by accident, having not checked out at the proper time – can do their job.

All of the traditional signs and objects of hospitality are present: you have full and unlimited access to the contents and space of your allocated room. The room will be exactly as you expected it to be: clean and fully equipped with all the necessary implements.

And yet. Where is the host? Who is the host? Who says ‘welcome’? You may communicate with the host online, via email or virtual message. They may even have left you a ‘welcome package’ in which the rules are laid out, the insurance policy, and your



rights in the case of emergency are described. In some cases, it may not even be that the host is 'absent': they may never have lived there. They may have bought the property with the sole intention of putting it up to rent. In their absence, then, stands their employee: the cleaner. The cleaner who may themselves not be 'in-house', but from an outsourced company which employs a predominantly female, immigrant population. There is an absent host, and no permanent replacement.

And yet. Isn't this ideal? All of the tensions, complications, awkwardnesses and trade-offs described above – Who gives to who? How much to give? When to give, and for how long? – all of these disappear. The host provides exemplary hospitality by simply being out of the picture. They give everything, even their own place. They are not there. Nothing is held back, retained, or off-limits: there is nobody, nothing, nowhere which says 'this is the host: not for you'. Those words of welcome – so difficult to enunciate – are no longer required. Nobody, and nothing, says 'welcome, make yourself at home', and thus there is no anxiety about the right way to respond to those words. At no point, are the guests commanded or obligated to 'be' somebody's guest. There is no question of asking for more food, or where the toilet is, because there is nobody to hear those words. There is no word of welcome, because there is no 'welcomer'. The host does not take their place: they do not take place. Exemplary hospitality is, then, achieved in the absent host.

And perhaps this is the situation. Perhaps, today, what is occurring is an absent, yet exemplary hospitality. Perhaps the absent host of these new modes of hospitality is not the sign of the apocalypse, or abyss of inhospitality; perhaps, rather, this is exemplary of the current situation. Hospitality is not being performed badly; it is not being performed at all. Those who might otherwise be in the position to give hospitality are simply not there. The posts of hospitality are unmanned, absent, out of place. The word 'welcome' is no longer spoken.

Thus, all of the difficult questions about how to give and receive hospitality disappear. The space of hospitality – the rented apartment – is completely open for the guest to inhabit. There is no awkward greeting, no uncertain exchange of gifts, no moment of measured generosity. The host does not impinge upon the guest's space, or right to space. All of the trappings of traditional hospitality are not there, and thus the guest is able to fully make themselves at home.

This, therefore, is the high point of hospitality. The hospitality of the absent host should not be considered a failure, or a wrong turn in the history of cultures. Rather, this cultivated absence has produced an exceptional mode of hospitality.

But, of course, something has gone awry. Surely, it doesn't make sense to say that exemplary hospitality is achieved when there is no host? Is it really possible that hospitality is best done by abdication? Does it even make sense to say this non-occurrence, the non-gift of the absent host, is what should be considered 'exemplary hospitality'? To say such a thing would mean to say that, today, when hospitality is not occurring, what is occurring is exemplary hospitality.

Today, what is occurring is the end – the most, the ideal, the best – of hospitality. Today, we can answer the question and close the door, close the book on hospitality: hospitality has been an open and shut case. The last word on the question of hospitality has been spoken. We have no more need for words of welcome. We can move on now.



IV.

But, there are attempts. There are attempts, although they are failing. Small attempts at kindness, minor moments of goodness and little gestures remain; glancing eye contact in the one-off encounter. Nothing systematic, or planned; no calculated activity, or deliberation. Nothing which can be incorporated into a plan, a policy, or a quota, or a script which can be learnt and recited. Almost nothing.

In whichever spaces – yours or mine or theirs – at whatever time, it remains possible to meet the glance of another, or to give someone else a bit of space, or to pass a moment's conversation. Whether it is my space or time which I give to someone, or I give someone some time and space to themselves, fractional occasions of hospitality occur. This hospitality is not something which can be foreseen or curated: it may be barely perceptible – barely recognisable as such. The terms, the words, the gestures are not calculable; the moment of their exchange unforeseeable, and their nature undefinable. Perhaps it could even be accidental, a slip of the tongue, or done with more skill than intended. These little moments remain possible, and perhaps more necessary than ever.

We are, presently, falling short of the demands of hospitality. Where and when hospitality is called for, we are not responding. We are providing and being given limited time, limited space, and limited hospitality. It can feel, sometimes, as if we are trying for nothing. This isn't an exclusively modern, unprecedented diagnosis, however – this case has a history, and perhaps a future, too. This is not the last word of hospitality. The door is not entirely closed, even if it is only ajar.

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