Derrida and Hospitality
DERRIDA AND HOSPITALITY
THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Edinburgh University Press
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Acknowledgements

This book has been a long time in the writing and I have incurred many debts along the way. A wonderful treasure was the Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship – three years when it was almost like being a PhD student again, except a little richer and with more baggage. The generous, open-minded spirit of the Leverhulme Trust is a model for funders. It gives time to think and reflect, time to spend in libraries, and thus enabled not only this volume, but also a companion, *Enlightenment Hospitality*, to be published by the Voltaire Foundation in 2011. Over and around the time of the Leverhulme Fellowship, I spent a number of weeks in Paris libraries – which brings me to a dear friend, Elizabeth Fallaize, in whose flat I usually stayed, sometimes with other good friends or family. There are so many happy memories of fine meals and wine, good conversation, and outings to the local shops, in Paris above all, but also Oxford, London, Florida. . . wherever conferences or other work happened to take us. Elizabeth died on 6 December 2009, but her hospitality, in so many senses of the word, will not be forgotten.

Earlier versions of sections of chapters have appeared in *Contemporary French Civilisation*, *Paragraph*, *Third Text*, and *Rewriting Difference: Luce Irigaray and ‘the Greeks’* (SUNY Press). I should like to thank the editors for permission to reprint. I have also given many papers based on this work over the years and would like to thank those who invited me, who attended and discussed ideas – often going on over food and drink, making academic life a pleasure. My gratitude also to an anonymous reviewer who spent some time making careful and attentive comments that were much appreciated. Thanks finally to Claire Rutherford, who gave much patient and thoughtful assistance with the preparation of the manuscript.

This book is dedicated to the Fairless family: Keith, Michael, Lily and Ruby.
Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used throughout the book. All works are by Jacques Derrida unless otherwise indicated. Other works not listed below are referred to in the text by short titles which should, I hope, be easily recognisable, e.g. Adieu for Derrida’s Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas (Paris: Galilée, 1997), and for Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas, translated by Pascal-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). All translations from the French are my own where no English edition is specified.


EOO Luce Irigaray, Entre Orient et Occident: De la singularité à la communauté (Paris: Grasset, 1999)


MA Le monolinguisme de l’autre (Paris: Galilée, 1996)


PA Politiques de l’amitié (Paris: Galilée, 1994)


Introduction to the question of hospitality: ethics and politics

Once again, here as elsewhere, wherever deconstruction is at stake, it would be a matter of linking an affirmation (in particular a political one), if there is any, to the experience of the impossible, which can only be a radical experience of the perhaps.

We all think that we know something about hospitality – it’s an everyday experience. Yet it has also been a burning topic of philosophical and political debate over the last couple of decades, and my epigraph indicates the complexity of the hinge or brisure between politics and philosophy here. Why has hospitality recently enjoyed a renaissance? This could be related to at least three factors. The first would be recent movements of population towards, and within, an expanded Europe: what is conceived as economic immigration and also, notably, the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees. The political reaction in the nation states of the pre-expansion European community to these newcomers is often phrased in the language of (the limits of) hospitality. In France in particular there has subsequently been a significant response, not only by political scientists or sociologists, but also from the arts and philosophy, in the face of the increasing inhospitality of the French state. The second factor is the existence of a growing body of powerful philosophical writing, some of which pre-dates the current wave of post-colonial xenophobia, and most of which draws on the experiences of colonialism and of the Second World War as well as the stimulus of more recent events. The third factor, which is perhaps more powerful in the US and the UK than in France, but is important throughout the world, is commercial globalisation, tourism and travel – the ‘hospitality business’,
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often perceived as destroying traditional hospitality in its last known habitats.

At first glance then, hospitality may seem to be a matter of inviting friends or relatives into your home, but it is critical also to consider the traditional question of the stranger-guest, and then, beyond moral and social relations between individuals, to recognise that hospitality can be, and is, evoked with respect to relations between different nations or between nations and individuals of a different nationality. In this book I shall also draw attention to a textual or linguistic dimension of hospitality, a question of reading and writing, speaking and listening, calling by name and sometimes remaining silent.

The current interest in theoretical writing on hospitality relates particularly to the work of the philosopher Jacques Derrida, the main focus of this book, and beyond and through him, to another philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas. Less attention has been paid to women’s work in this area. This book will, however, repeatedly refer to Hélène Cixous, in explicit amicable dialogue with Derrida on hospitality (and much more besides). It will also draw on the work of Luce Irigaray – perhaps a less cosy choice in this context – but an important one if the question of sexual difference is critical to hospitality, as I believe it to be. Sexual difference features less often in discussions around hospitality than do questions of race and nationality. It is more obvious in the political debates at the turn of this century that the complex question of belonging, or being a foreigner, relates importantly to hospitality in a number of ways.

Both Cixous (born in Algeria) and Irigaray (born in Belgium) have been named French feminists by the Anglophone world, just as Derrida (born in Algeria) and Levinas (born in Lithuania) have been branded French theorists. (It is true that all enjoy, or enjoyed, French nationality.) Cixous, Derrida and Levinas are also Jewish, and all, to a greater or lesser degree, explore what that might mean in their works. What would the word ‘French’ signify (leaving aside the designations ‘feminist’ and ‘theorist’ for the present)? From a British or American point of view, of course, it signifies foreign, and probably strange. From a Jewish or Algerian point of view it might also suggest foreign and strange, but in a different sense. Nationality and what it means, citizenship and what it entails, national identity and what it implies – all are woven together in a complex and contested question for a Jewish thinker, such as Derrida, born in Algeria, living there throughout the Second World War (and thus temporarily deprived of French nationality), and then moving to
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France to be deemed irredeemably French – at least in the Anglo-Saxon world where his work receives so much attention. Cixous, like the French and Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun, writes of the hospitality of the French language (and thus brings in the complex question of ‘Francophonie’), as well as of the privilege of ‘passporosity’, not offered to everyone. Ben Jelloun speculates that Derrida is thinking of (South) ‘Mediterranean’ hospitality when he writes about giving more than you know you have, since his own experience of Moroccan (Arab, Berber, Muslim, Jewish) hospitality is that the poorest peasant would borrow heavily, if need be, in order to offer a feast to his guests. I should note that it is possible to be French and Moroccan or Tunisian (i.e. to have dual nationality), but not to be French and Algerian. The colonial histories with respect to Morocco or Tunisia (formerly Protectorates) are less embittered than the history of French relations with Algeria, a colony (or group of French ‘departments’) to which many French citizens emigrated. In this book the crossings between France and the Maghreb, but especially Algeria, will be a particular focus. This is one history of (in)hospitality (although already a multiple one as I have implied), but there are other French histories intertwined with other parts of Africa, with the Caribbean, the Pacific, Canada . . . And all of these could be sharply differentiated from the colonial histories of England or Spain, never mind the United States. Levinas loved the hospitality of France (‘this hospitable France’ ['cette France hospitalière'], as Derrida puts it in Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas), from a different angle. However, my decision to emphasise this one (plural) element of Algeria more than others is of course because it informs so much of Derrida’s and Cixous’s work – and because it is one of the most significant stories (some would say the most significant) of (in)hospitality for France and for French writing.

I shall be using the terms ‘colonial’ and ‘post-colonial’, without scare quotes, in a conventional way to designate different historical periods in respect of particular nations. This is in spite of the many problems with this vocabulary that have been raised by critics, such as the more or less recognised continuation of colonisation and colonial practices in the so-called post-colonial era. I shall also sometimes use ‘Francophone’ as a synonym for French-speaking, or ‘Anglophone’ as a synonym for English-speaking, in spite of the ideological uses and misuses of these terms. My use of ‘post-colonial’ is not intended to suggest that an absolute break with colonialism has occurred, but rather the opposite. It is hard to find a lexis that is not imbued with
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history, and which has not been abused; I shall attempt to indicate intermittently some of the issues at stake in the words I deploy, and hope that my reader will fill in some of the gaps. Derrida points out that ‘all culture is originarily colonial’, and ‘institutes itself through the unilateral imposition of some “politics” of language’ – (French) revolutionary culture at least as much as monarchical culture (MO, 39) (‘toute culture est originairement colonial [. . .et] s’institue par l’imposition unilateral de quelque “politiq” de la langue’ (MA, 68)). Nevertheless he does not wish that recognition to efface our sense of specific historical brutalities, particular military conquests, such as that of Algeria from 1830, and nor do I.

Hospitality is my subject for personal reasons, subjective, but also objective, and peculiarly appropriate to Derrida. This is the case not only because he wrote on, and spoke about, hospitality, but because his writing on hospitality is symptomatic of his work.7 Anne Dufourmantelle’s contribution to Of Hospitality returns repeatedly to the theme of Derrida’s own ‘poetic hospitality’, and he himself remarks in a seminar: ‘Hospitality – this is a name or an example of deconstruction’.8 Hospitality in theory and practice relates to crossing boundaries (‘Come in, come in’) or thresholds (even seuils de tolérance9 sometimes), including those between self and other, private and public, inside and outside, individual and collective, personal and political, emotional and rational, generous and economic – these couples that overlap each other’s territory without any one exactly mapping another. For those who attack a cartoon deconstruction on the grounds that it denies material reality or promotes some kind of endless free-play, perhaps I should say again that this question of hospitality does entail paying serious attention to the question of political frontiers where admittance or refusal may even be a matter of life or death.10 It also inevitably touches on that fundamental ethical question (since it is itself an ethical foundation) of the boundaries of the human, and how we set these up.

What is hospitality? Some definitions

Hospitality . . . The reception or entertainment of guests or strangers with liberality and goodwill. (Oxford English Dictionary)

I shall keep returning throughout this book to different definitions of hospitality, host, guest, stranger, or friend; in Chapter 5, for example, I shall turn to French and bilingual dictionaries. There
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are two fault lines which will run throughout the discussion: (1) the fundamental nature of hospitality – whether this be the weaker claim that it is widely found or very important, or the strong claim that hospitality is foundational (of ethics, humanity, language); (2) the crucial issue of (sexual) difference and of the violence attendant upon hospitality – whether this be the weak claim that hospitality in the many source texts is constantly beset by violence, or the stronger claim that this is structural to hospitality. Hospitality, for Derrida, will be both (or neither, in a strict philosophical sense) the absolute Law of hospitality – which has caught his readers’ imagination, and which I shall gloss a little in the next section – and the laws of hospitality. It is the absolute or infinite Law of hospitality which owes most to Derrida’s readings of Levinas and of Levinas’s tendency to make what can seem like gnomic utterances, such as: ‘Le sujet est un hôte’ (translated decisively, as indicated by the context, as ‘The subject is a host’, although the phrase could equally mean ‘The subject is a guest’) or ‘The subject is hostage’ (‘Le sujet est otage’).11

I shall be paying more attention than most readers of Derrida to the laws of hospitality, and will briefly explain here that this sense of ‘laws’ denotes both the political domain of laws and rights, and also a socially situated moral code. Even in his book on Levinas, largely focused on philosophical (quasi-)absolutes, Derrida writes of the relevance of hospitality to the plight of refugees today, and, for instance, to the situation in the ‘Israel’ of biblical times and at the time of writing (Egypt being relevant to both). Alongside, and interrupting as well as being interrupted by, these politics of hospitality, there is the moral social code which covers a physical (embodied) practice made up of a series of gestures, and of the labour these entail. These will vary in details and in stringency between cultures and times though with many common elements (bed, board, entertainment, bathing). The code will also explicitly or implicitly refer to an affective structure – if the gestures are made without the heart then there is a transgression of the code of hospitality. Finally, the code regulates the economy of hospitality – any requirement for giving without any return, or for reciprocity, or for rights and duties. It has been argued that close attention to the (unwritten) code governing the social practice between individuals can, and should, inform the formulation of laws and practices at national or international level. For Ben Jelloun, the laws of hospitality imply both rights and duties (French Hospitality, 37; Hospitalité française, 57); the problem is that immigrants are often treated as if they are guests
who have only duties (43; 65) – to work hard, be polite and so on. He urges that the spirit of welcome should be enshrined in a legal framework for the reception of immigrants, in particular those from the former colonies.

The level and focus of analysis

The term ‘hospitality’ will be used flexibly in this book, as in Derrida’s writing, to cover a wide range of relations, both macro and micro. The same will be true of associated terms such as host, guest, stranger, friend or foreigner. Criticism is sometimes directed (sometimes from a materialist standpoint, sometimes with a self-righteous or politically outraged tone) at the use of any term to cover a range of positions or situations: Marxism’s use of class and feminism’s use of gender have surely been sufficiently (rightly) chastised for their blindesses, such that we can now respect their areas of illumination. In this instance, ‘stranger’ is obviously a very general expression which could refer to wealthy American tourists in the Caribbean, to impoverished stateless refugees in New York, to a Parisian arriving in a small village in Brittany, to Roma travellers in rural Ireland, and so on. All are in very different positions, and yet all have something in common by virtue of being strangers. All could call the host community into question in some way (linguistically, economically, culturally, sexually, for instance) which might be perceived as positive or as threatening by their hosts. The host community may be welcoming or may respond violently to the interlopers, neither response excluding the other; the host (or guest) need neither be considered as homogeneous nor as free from contradiction. Thus at one macro-level of analysis it might be valid to consider all strangers together even though the differences between them (race, class, sex or nationality) might ultimately be more significant than the similarities. The same applies to the use of the term ‘women’ and its cognates (or ‘men’ in the sense of males). Although this term bundles together half the population of the world with vast differences cutting across it, I shall consider it an acceptable level and focus of analysis where appropriate. At a different level of analysis it might be more appropriate to consider only ‘British working mothers’ or to slice populations differently, for example considering specifically ‘British workers of Afro-Caribbean origin’.

Becoming a stranger can unsettle many of our class certainties or privileges and reduce us to the visible signs of sex or race; a woman or a black man who has a secure economic, social and political status
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‘at home’ may be stripped of this when removed from their familiar context into one which is (potentially) hostile – even just trying to hail a taxi in the wrong part of town. A visibly (white) or audibly (upper-class) privileged person may also become a stranger – even King Odysseus might look like just another beggar when he most needs hospitality. In my view, no one level of analysis or one focus (sex, race, class or citizenship, for example), from the most global to the most specific, will ever be adequate on its own. Ultimately each needs to inform the other and there needs to be a degree of oscillation between levels and foci. I shall therefore assume a degree of patience on the part of my reader, so that, for example, where the terms ‘stranger’ or ‘woman’ are used I shall hope that the reader does not have an allergic reaction to the effect that: ‘but not all strangers/women are the same’ (even though that is self-evidently true).

The ethics and politics of hospitality

In so far as we conventionally divide up experience between, amongst other categories, the psychic, the social and the political, the question arises as to which is the domain of hospitality. The obvious first answer is the social: the area of inter-individual relations governed by ethical or moral concerns. However, the psychic field – intra-individual or the play of the Unconscious – is also relevant to hospitality, as is the political field of relations with the State (or between States). As well as spelling out the question of hospitality within each different domain, we also need to ask what the relations are between the domains. How does the ethics of hospitality relate to the politics of hospitality for instance? Hospitality is always about crossing thresholds – perhaps between the public and private. Hospitality can begin to seem a catch-all word, and indeed the way in which it is currently evoked does give it enormous purchase: Derrida suggests that hospitality is ethics, is the condition of humanity – for *ethos* is place:

Hospitality is culture itself and not simply one ethic amongst others. Insofar as it has to do with the *ethos*, that is, the residence, one’s home, the familiar place of dwelling, inasmuch as it is a manner of being there, the manner in which we relate to ourselves and to others, to others as our own or as foreigners, *ethics is hospitality*; ethics is so thoroughly coextensive with the experience of hospitality.

(L’hospitalité, c’est la culture même et ce n’est pas une éthique parmi d’autres. En tant qu’elle touche à l’*éthos*, à savoir à la demeure, au chez
soi, au lieu du séjour familier autant qu’à la manière de se rapporter à soi et aux autres, aux autres comme aux siens ou comme à des étrangers, l’éthique est hospitalité, elle est de part en part co-extensive à l’expérience de l’hospitalité, de quelque façon qu’on l’ouvre ou la limite.)\textsuperscript{14}

‘The ethics of hospitality’ is, therefore, an odd turn of phrase, albeit a necessary one, since Levinas (\textit{par excellence} the thinker of hospitality as ethics) argues precisely that hospitality \textit{is} ethics. As Derrida summarises it in \textit{Adieu}: ‘For hospitality is not simply some region of ethics, let alone . . . the name of a problem in law or politics: it is ethicity itself, the whole and the principle of ethics’ (50) (‘Car l’hospitalité n’est pas davantage une région de l’éthique, voire . . . le nom d’un problème de droit ou de politique, elle est l’éthicité même, le tout et le principe de l’éthique’ (94)). Derrida’s work on Levinas (who has a tendency to define one noun by another) and hospitality suggests the \textit{complicated} force of that copula ‘is’.

Derrida is concerned that the question of the \textit{relationship} between ‘an ethics as hospitality’ (\textit{Adieu}, 19) (‘une éthique comme hospitalité’ (45)) and a politics of hospitality or a right to hospitality (as in Kant’s cosmopolitical law) is already canonical. To avoid jumping to conclusions and making the easy assumption that the one will found the other (ethics will ground politics), Derrida wants a suspension, a pause for analysis in any given situation (and he mentions in \textit{Adieu} the very different situations of Israel, the former Yugoslavia, Zaire, Rwanda, and the siege of those who took refuge in St Bernard’s church in Paris). The distinction between ethics and politics (or law or rights) can be made in at least two ways: first, ethics is the domain of relations between individuals while politics is the domain of relations between States or between the individual and the State. More dramatically, ethics can be seen as the realm of metaphysical absolutes (transcendentals, or, in the case of Derrida and perhaps Levinas, ‘quasi-transcendentals’) while politics is the realm of pragmatic compromise and of negotiated rules (see \textit{OH}, 135, 137; \textit{DH}, 121), both a necessity and a perversion. Hospitality \textit{as} ethics is unconditional and unconditioned hospitality, so immediate that nothing of the guest can be known and no invitation can be made. Instead the guest arrives, a visitation, and the host is totally open. The host, in any case, being a guest of the house, of the land. This Law of absolute welcoming, in which the other is received beyond the capacity of the self (\textit{Adieu}, 25; 55), evoked in numerous texts...
by Levinas, is impossible for any nation state or any individual subject. Derrida suggests that it is perverted by (and perverts) the laws of hospitality which make hospitality possible – even as it is necessary for them, even as they are necessary for it. In my view, one of the problems with the reception of Levinas’s work on hospitality is that it can encourage a self-flattering (since we readers perceive ourselves as hosts), even if guilty, focus on the host. Yet hospitality could be argued to be constructed between hôtes (host and guest) – you cannot have a host alone. Ben Jelloun suggests that we consider the cultural formulation that the guest fills the house; it is empty when the guest leaves. The guest satisfies the host’s hunger as well as the inverse – even when the host gives unconditionally (French Hospitality, 2–4; Hospitalité française, 10–13). This need not be seen as an ethical failing on the part of the host even if it means that absolute hospitality, like any gift, as Derrida argues in Given Time (Donner le temps), is impossible on a philosophical level.15 Equally, I shall suggest in Chapter 3 that it is hard to escape the double binds either of Aristotelian magnanimity or of the fusion implied by Montaigne’s ideal of friendship.

While Levinas was deeply concerned by the political realities of life, his thinking of hospitality remains silent about the way in which the ethical promise it makes can be translated into politics. It can seem as if, for him, hospitality is infinite and unconditional or does not exist at all (Adieu, 48; 91). Close to the end of his moving and patient analysis of Levinas’s work, written soon after Levinas’s death, Derrida suggests that finally that silence or hiatus gives us the responsibility for a response. He writes:

This relation is necessary, it must exist, it is necessary to deduce a politics and law from ethics. This deduction is necessary in order to determine the ‘better’ or the ‘less bad,’ with all the requisite quotation marks: democracy is ‘better’ than tyranny. Even in its ‘hypocritical’ nature, ‘political civilization’ remains ‘better’ than barbarism. (Adieu, 115)

(Il faut ce rapport, il doit exister, il faut déduire une politique et un droit de l’éthique. Il faut cette déduction pour déterminer le ‘meilleur’ ou le ‘moins mauvais’, avec tous les guillemets qui s’imposent: la démocratie est ‘meilleure’ que la tyrannie. Jusque dans sa nature ‘hypocrite’, la ‘civilisation politique’ reste ‘meilleure’ que la barbarie. (198))

We cannot, should not, ascribe an answer to Levinas, but we ourselves should take responsibility for analysing any particular situation and deciding what the political ‘better’ would be:
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Ethics enjoins a politics and a law: this dependence and the direction of this conditional derivation are as irreversible as they are unconditional. But the political or juridical content that is thus assigned remains undetermined, still to be determined beyond knowledge, beyond all presentation, all concepts, all possible intuition, in a singular way, in the speech and the responsibility taken by each person, in each situation, and on the basis of an analysis that is each time unique – unique and infinite, unique but a priori exposed to substitution, unique and yet general, interminable in spite of the urgency of the decision. For the analysis of a context and of political motivations can have no end as soon as it includes in its calculations a limitless past and future. As always, the decision remains heterogeneous to the calculations, knowledge, science, and consciousness that nonetheless condition it. (Adieu, 115–16)

Unfortunately, many of those who cite Derrida on hospitality focus largely on the Law of hospitality – even if they begin with a brief summary of his ‘opposition’ between the Law and the laws. This can lead to two problems. Some critics attempt to ‘apply’ the Law to a specific pragmatic situation whether in fiction or real life – since the Law is an impossible structure this is rarely successful, and to show its failure tends simply to return us to its definition since it is defined as impossible. Other critics, with or without an attempt at practical application, criticise Derrida’s work for its inadequacy when faced with the political problems of today, and yet if they consider the complex interpenetration of the Law with the laws it may seem less inadequate. For instance Sara Ahmed argues that Derridean hospitality is a ‘forgetting of names’ and yet we need to remember. Richard Kearney uses selective quotation to suggest that Derrida ‘seems to preclude our need to differentiate between good and evil aliens, between benign and malign strangers, between saints and psychopaths . . . If
hospitality is to remain absolutely just, all incoming others must, it seems, remain unidentifiable and undecidable. In this article undecidability is a problem, and Kearney seems to suggest that it would entail paralysis in decision making. However, Derrida has replied to his critics specifically on this question on a number of occasions; one example is the interview ‘Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility’ in Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy. He says:

Far from opposing undecidability to decision, I would argue that there would be no decision, in the strong sense of the word, in ethics, in politics, no decision, and thus no responsibility, without the experience of some undecidability. If you don’t experience some undecidability, then the decision would simply be the application of a programme, the consequence of a premiss or of a matrix.

A decision in this strong sense is indeed a form of hospitality since Derrida does not propose that it can simply emanate from a sovereign subject, any more than from a programme, rather it is the other within the self which interrupts the self. He says of the self welcoming the other, and thus interrupting itself: ‘This division is the condition of hospitality’ (HJR, 81). But any of these criticisms of the impossible Law should also return us to the laws of hospitality.

The structure of hospitality

Hospitality is by definition a structure that regulates relations between inside and outside, and, in that sense, between private and public. Someone or ones, categorised as ‘outside’, as not necessarily, by right or legal contract, part of the ‘inside’, is temporarily brought within. Thus, for example, my starting point would be to say that it does not make sense to suggest that a spouse offers hospitality to his/her spouse in the home they share, or that they offer hospitality to their dependent children, or to an employee paid to live in. Again, as a starting point, it does not make sense to say that the State offers hospitality to its citizens, that the collectivity offers hospitality to itself. It is importantly recognised as a structure with no fixed content – this recognition did not require structuralist analysis, it is intuitively understood by practitioners. Thus, offering someone a glass of water, or a bed for the night, is or is not hospitality depending entirely on the relation between the one offering and the other accepting or refusing.

There are many ‘grey areas’, vestigial forms of hospitality.