

The Poetics and Politics of Hospitality and Hostility

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Abstract

The conceptual pair of hospitality and hostility can be analyzed by means of the two classical ethical paradigms that we owe to Aristotle and Kant. Strangely enough, although ethics is considered normative, neither of the two tendencies is normative: instead, one is descriptive, the other rational, insofar as it is based on the fundamental features of rationality. Most contemporary ethical trends can be classified under one of the original paradigms or interpreted as a combination of them. Where does Derrida's ethics fit in, or does it represent a new way of thinking? I will attempt to put forward some considerations that might help us to understand Derrida's ethics as a third ethical paradigm.

Keywords

hospitality, hostility, ethics, Jacques Derrida, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant

Hospitality and enmity (hostility) are ethical concepts, or at least they can be interpreted and analysed in terms of ethics. One of the basic concepts of ethics is justice, as Aristotle points out:

Justice then in this sense is perfect Virtue, though with a qualification, namely that it is displayed towards others. This is why Justice is often thought to be the chief of the virtues, and more sublime 'or than the evening or the morning star'; and we have the proverb – In Justice is all Virtue found in sum. And Justice is perfect virtue because it is the practice of perfect virtue; and perfect in a special degree, because its possessor can practise his virtue towards others and not merely by himself.²

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² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1129b. <https://anastrophe.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/perseus/citequery3.pl?dbname=GreekNov21&getid=1&query=Arist.%20Eth.%20Nic.%201129b>

Kant's famous saying rhymes with Aristotle:

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.*³

He who “possesses” the virtue of righteousness looks with constant wonder not only at the starry heavens, but at himself. The human being discovers, lives and experiences in himself the moral law written in his own mind, which is the only possibility of all good in the world and through which he understands his own dignity. According to Kant, the confrontation with a pure moral moving force “teaches man to feel his own dignity”⁴. But Kant also reminds us that we can never possess virtue perfectly. Virtue is self-evident, but to be virtuous is not. Justice is a very simple thing, everyone understands it, but its personal or communal realisation is far from being a given without more. Virtue, according to Kant, is written in our hearts, or rather in our minds. The possibility and condition of virtue is reason itself, the structure or practical rationality of reason (reason can only be rational). One of the main theses of the second critique is that we know what is good from and by reason. The task and the possibility is then to articulate and express the good, to apply it to individual cases, i.e. to make individual cases and actions good. And this requires much more than discovering what is in our hearts: it also requires knowing the world, from the individual, from our own psychology, to the functioning and structure of the community, to the laws of physics. That is, to fully realize justice, we would need to know everything about ourselves and the world. This is why Kant can claim that the realisation of justice or the just virtue is an infinite process for every human being.

The concept of “justice”, writes Alasdair MacIntyre, is that which “requires that we treat others according to their merit or demerit, according to uniform and impersonal standards.”⁵ This is another formulation of the categorical imperative, or John Rawls’s “veil of ignorance” principle that “Principles of justice are selected behind a veil of ignorance. This ensures that no one is advantaged or disadvantaged

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, transl. Mary Gregor, Cambridge University Press, 2015, 129, 5:161. “Zwei Dinge erfüllen das Gemüt mit immer neuer und zunehmender Bewunderung und Ehrfrucht, je öfter und anhaltender sich das Nachdenken damit beschäftigt: *Der bestirnte Himmel über mir, und das moralische Gesetz in mir.*”

⁴ Immanuel Kant, op. cit. 122. 5: 152. “the pure moral motive must be brought to bear on the soul ... because it teaches the human being to feel his own dignity” – “so muss durchaus der reine moralische Bewegungsgrund an die Seele gebracht werden ... weil er den Menschen seine eigene Würde fühlen lehrt”.

⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, 192. “Justice requires that we treat others in respect of merit or desert according to uniform and impersonal standards”.

in the approval of principles as a result of natural chance and the contingencies of social circumstances”⁶. The concept of justice is understood by all, even young children feel it is unfair if one of their peers regularly gets a bigger loaf of bread than the other children at nursery school. Aristotle introduces the concept by describing the just man and virtue, while Kant reveals its rational origin and structure. The categorical imperative is the rational formula and procedure of justice.

Aristotle explains the greatness of virtue by the fact that it is practised towards others. For Kant, the virtuous act is the resultant of the subject, but it is always directed towards the other person, although for him the “other” in this sense can be ourselves. Justice always takes place in the community of men; for Aristotle, justice is only possible in the polis.

We may ask what the relation is between justice and hospitality, which Derrida claims is ethics itself. Moreover, he writes that ethics and legislation have a promise structure. We have three basic ethical concepts to start with: justice, hospitality and promise. Derrida adds to these other basic concepts, such as maternal care. It is not possible to examine their relationship here, but we can examine Derrida’s ethical language or procedure.

If the concepts are treated with sufficient generality, it is easy to see that they are twin concepts, as one cannot be without the other. We are always acting in the direction of another person, and by “other” we also mean ourselves. Then we make room for the other, we let him or her in, that is to say, we welcome him or her, we are hospitable. In the first step of letting in, I think about the other person’s place, about myself, and about the moral action that our relationship requires of me. When I let the other person into my thinking, we are already usually in some shared (physical or otherwise) space and time. These are partly my constructs, and I am letting another person into them. I am already hospitable. If there is a guest, there must also be a host, which I am – while the other party is also a host and I am a guest. If I structure my action according to the categorical imperative, or determine its correctness by means of the categorical imperative procedure, then in the course of the action I want to give the other party what is due to him from the goods to be distributed. Provided that I am in possession of these goods, and that in his situation he can expect me to endow him with them. In fact, the categorical imperative can be understood as hospitality.

The promise can similarly be shown to be a basic concept of ethics, if not identical with ethics. Like the plan of action, the promise is an action-commitment statement for a future time. The condition of human life and, within it, of moral existence, is communal existence, and this cannot exist without promises and the

⁶ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1971, 12. “The principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance. This ensures that no one is advantaged or disadvantaged in the choice of principles by the outcome of natural chance or the contingency of social circumstances.”

keeping of promises. When I choose to be moral or to examine my actions before I act by the process of the categorical imperative, I am assuring myself and the members of my community what, if it depends on me, will happen in the future. They can align themselves to this and formulate their action plans accordingly. Without this, there can be no community life, no morality. Promise is the basis of all law, of all ethics, of all coexistence.

1. Hospitality and hostility

Hospitality and hostility can be analysed using the tools of the two classical ethical paradigms of Aristotle and Kant. Strangely, although ethics is considered normative, neither of the two basic schools of thought is normative, Aristotle's being descriptive and Kant's rational in so far as it builds on the fundamental features of reason.

The first method is to describe ethics, to explore the reasons and motives for our actions, and the characteristics of moral characters. Aristotle's descriptive ethics does not prescribe rules or norms, it merely explores the types of actions and characters. Not infrequently, it constricts virtues between two extremes, the consciously bad and the overworked, over-indulged good. The good loses its goodness like over-salted or over-sweetened food. In Aristotle, we need as much good as we need seasonings. Good is the taste of life. A tasty life is a good life.

And Kant's method would be normative only insofar as the laws of logic are normative. He does not define in advance what good actions are, nor does he list their types, but calls for the practical use of reason. It reveals the laws of rationality which it regards as universal, and the practical application of these laws results in the ability to determine which particular actions are good and which are bad. He gives a simple formula by which each action can be examined. The formula is the principle of a machine, into which, by feeding the structure of an action, it can be determined whether the action is good or bad.

We already know that hospitality is good and hostility is bad, and the procedure of Aristotle and Kant for examining these is well known.

Can Derrida's ethics be classified under one of these modes of analysis, or does it represent a new way of thinking? The result of this analysis will either be that Derrida's ethics is a basic case of one of the two great ethics, or a combination of the two, or that it is a completely new way of speaking about ethics. Is Derrida's ethics a third ethical paradigm?

In Derrida, the term hospitality (*hospitalité*) is immediately followed by the term hostility. The concepts appear in pairs or groups: either as opposites or as conditions or complements of each other. Each interpretation or definition refers to other interpretations or definitions. "Hospitality is a Latin word of uneasy

and restless origin, a word that carries within itself its own contradiction, a Latin word that allows its opposite, hostility, to prey on it, an undesirable dimension that it carries within itself as its own contradiction”⁷. If we define hospitality, we also define its opposite. Derrida’s definitions are never univocal. There is no one word that states one reality. Behind the word, the definition, the utterance, there are “worlds”: linguistic ambiguities, history, psychology, individual life paths. Derrida’s extraordinary achievement is perhaps precisely this: the recognition of ambiguities, the elaboration of irreducibility to a single meaning. While, for example, his position on ethical concepts is very clear. Hospitality is good, hostility is bad. But how do we get there? Through a year-long seminar, which of course I cannot go into in detail here.⁸

Of course, in the history of ethics, there have been many movements in the modern era, such as subjectivism, supernaturalism, intuitionism, emotivism, prescriptivism, duty ethics, consequentialism, narrative ethics, contract theory, virtue ethics. There is also talk of deconstructive ethics. The ethics listed can be understood as variants, applications, or often a combination of Aristotle’s or Kant’s ethics.

To answer our original question, we need to look at Derrida’s outline of ethical thought.

2. Hospitality

Hospitality is another name for ethics: ethics is really fraternal love, Derrida claims. A guest is hosted by someone who is not a guest, who lives locally. The non-guest receives the guest, this is an action towards the guest, and it is called hospitality. The host welcomes the guest who is not him, who comes from somewhere far off, or at least is not in the place where the host is, who does something towards him (the guest) that is good for him.

He who practices hospitality has power over the place and over those who enter it, the place of his house or farm. He welcomes whoever enters its realm, its homeland, its estate, its economy, its *oikonomia*. The one who has power possesses space, time and action, but to do this he must first of all possess himself, must be himself, which is why Derrida analyses the concept of selfhood, *ipséité*, which is the basis for being a subject of power and action, and a host, a hostess, hospitable.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Hospitalité*, Volume I. Séminaire (1995–1996), Paris, Seuil, 2021. 21. “mot d’origine latine, d’une origine troublante et troublée, mot qui porte comme sa propre contradiction incorporée en lui-même, mot latin qui se laisse parasiter par son contraire, l’hostilité, hôte indésirable qu’il héberge comme la contradiction de soi dans son corps propre”.

⁸ J. Derrida op. cit. Volume I-II.

Power is being oneself, being oneself in fact: one who exists, dares to exist, has power, place and agency.

In his transcendental philosophy, Derrida fully follows in Kant's footsteps. The philosopher from Königsberg based his philosophy, epistemology, metaphysics, ethics and theory of law on the transcendental subject. His elementary assumption and starting point is that the subject is himself, that he has access to everything, to cognition, to action only through himself, through his own structures and capacities. When the subject comes into contact with another in relation to him, this contact manifests itself in and through his structures. When the subject seeks the law of ethics, he finds it in himself, in his own rationality, in his own original structure which constitutes him. This structure must exist, must stand as an edifice, must occupy its own place and time, must possess itself, in order to be ethical at all. It must have an original possession. Possession of itself. At the same time, he can possess the phenomenal self, but he cannot, of course, possess the transcendental subject. For it (transcendental subject) cannot be possessed by anything, while it accompanies all possessions of its own. According to Kant, the condition of morality is phenomenal possession. "It is therefore an a priori presupposition of practical reason to regard and treat any object of my choice of something that could objectively be of mine or yours."⁹ In other words, the condition of ethics is property, possession.

Derrida agrees with Kant, or rather follows him when he writes, though without referring to him.

Hospitality, necessary, it's a right, a duty, an obligation, a law, it's the welcoming of the other stranger as a friend, but on condition that the host, the *Wirt*, the one who receives, shelters or gives asylum remains the boss, the master of the house, on condition that he retains the authority of the self in his own home, that he guards and looks after what concerns him, and thus affirms the law of hospitality as the law of the house, *oikonomia*, the law of his house, the law of the place (house, hotel, hospital, hospice, family, city, nation, language, etc.), the law of the identity which is the basis of his identity.), a law of identity that delimits the very place of the hospitality offered and guards the authority over it, guards the truth of the authority, remains the place of the guard, i.e. of the

⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, transl. Mary Gregor, Cambridge University Press, 1991, 69. – *Metaphysik der Sitten*, Akademieausgabe 6:246. § 2. Rechtliches Postulat der praktischen Vernunft. "Also ist es eine Voraussetzung *a priori* der praktischen Vernunft, einen jeden Gegenstand meiner Willkür als objektiv-mögliches Mein oder Dein anzusehen und zu behandeln."

truth: therefore limits the gift offered and makes this limitation, namely being oneself at home, the condition of the gift and of hospitality.¹⁰

It would be hard to find more poetic and political, as well as philosophical, words in the history of poetry or thought on the condition of hospitality as defined by Kant and outlined by Derrida. Universal humanity makes hospitality an obligation, a duty, but with conditions. The hospitable host is the one who is at home, the one who receives at home. The home had to be built, the home had to be maintained, so that the possibility of life as a space of staying and receiving could function. If one does not have a home that one has built, created, established and maintained, one cannot practice hospitality. Only when we have that are we capable of morality, of welcome, of hospitality. And here Derrida makes a statement that is often overlooked by interpreters. He invokes the law of identity, that is, he invokes Aristotle and the foundations and beginnings of logic without even saying so, and also refers to Kant, who says that ethics is the culmination of logic and the rationality that derives from it. In addition to ethics, he associates the supremacy of the understanding of the world, or metaphysics, with hospitality. The host has truth, and determines his own truth. If he is offering hospitality, he is in truth: the one who receives, who accepts the reception, must accept the truth of the hospitable place, because this is identical with hospitality itself, with the reception and acceptance of this.

This is the principle both of the constitution and of the implosion of the concept of hospitality, and my hypothesis is that we shall never cease to verify its effects. As this implosion, or if you prefer self-deconstruction, has already taken place, we could, as I said, stop the seminar here. Hospitality is an inherently contradictory concept and experience, which can only be self-destructing or self-protecting against itself, self-immunising in a way, that is, deconstructing itself -- justly -- by exercising itself justly.¹¹

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, op.cit. 24–25. “L’hospitalité, c’est bien, il en faut, c’est un droit, un devoir, un obligation, une loi, c’est l’accueil de l’autre étranger en ami mais à la condition que l’hôte, le *host*, le *Wirt*, celui qui reçoit au héberge ou donne asile reste le patron, le maître de maison, à la condition qu’il garde l’autorité du soi chez soi, qu’il se garde et garde et regarde ce qui le regarde, et donc affirme la loi de l’hospitalité comme loi de la maison, *oikonomia*, loi de sa maison, loi du lieu (maison, hôtel, hôpital, hospice, famille, cité, nation, langue, etc.), loi de l’identité qui délimite le lieu *même* de l’hospitalité offerte et garde l’autorité sur elle, garde la vérité de l’autorité, reste le lieu de la garde, c’est-à-dire de la vérité: donc limite le don offert et fait de cette limitation à savoir l’être-soi chez soi la condition du don et de l’hospitalité.”

¹¹ J. Derrida, *ibid.* “C’est là le principe à la fois de la constitution et de l’implosion du concept d’hospitalité dont mon hypothèse est que nous ne cesserons d’en vérifier les effets. Cette implosion ou si vous préférez cette autodéconstruction ayant déjà eu lieu, nous pourrions, je le disais, arrêter ici le séminaire. L’hospitalité est un concept et une expérience contradictoires en soi, qui ne peut que s’autodétruire ou se protéger elle-même d’elle-même, s’auto-immuniser en quelque sorte, c’est-à-dire se déconstruire d’elle-même -- justement -- en s’exerçant, justement.”

It is not by chance that the term deconstruction appears in this quote. Derrida's procedure is the carrying or carrying out of these contradictions, the refraining from definitions, the giving of space to the free play of concepts, and waiting for them. Hospitality, that is, ethics, must be constantly present, active, Derrida says countless times. It is constantly destroying itself, not only through the incredible force and authorship of its inherent self-establishment, authority and power, but also by the groundless basis that is also commonly described as the pre-ethical occurrence of the choice of ethicality. We know what hospitality is, we know what ethics and justice are, it is written in our minds, Kant would say. But all attempts at logic, etymology, and justification come to a dead end, so there is nothing left but the practice of ethics, the practice of hospitality, the practice of self. "Justly", Derrida insists, using a term, *justement*, which also means "exactly" or "precisely". This is also an activity of deconstruction: while recognizing the inherent conceptual contradiction, the inward explosion, of precision and justice, when theory is of no help, we turn to practice: to strive precisely, justly, to "practice oneself", as Derrida calls it. As Aristotle and Kant have already called for: the condition of ethics, of just thinking and acting, is precision: exact thinking and acting.

The self, the subject, the authority capable of moral action, does not therefore float in the ether, but lives in the world; to possess oneself is also to possess a piece of the world. This is what he explains in the first part of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, in the *Philosophy of Right*, where property becomes the fourth postulate of reason, alongside the first three formulated earlier, namely God, freedom and immortality. The necessity of property is not provable, it is a requirement of reason: if it does not possess itself and its own conditions of existence, it cannot act, it cannot moralise. The condition of property is the recognition of this postulate as a right, for all men, which is possible only in civil society.

This "how power, then, is nothing other than ipseity (*ipséité*) itself; the itself of the self, to say nothing of the subject, which is a stabilising, despotic overkill of ipseity, the being-itself or the *Selbst* as subjectivity"¹²

The indecipherable zero point of ethics, which also puzzled Immanuel Kant, is the place that is capable of acting, which, breaking the automatism of causal chains, is capable of bringing new laws, new actions according to new laws, into the world. The ipseity is freedom itself, not dominated by anything external. It maintains itself, it appears as the subject of action in the world, which it can dominate, of which it can become the despot.

According to the formula, this self interacts with the other, and can be its host or its enemy. When Aristotle describes the types of human relations and actions, and Kant analyses the rationality of action, both use language and the rules of logic.

¹²J. Derrida, op. cit. Volume I. 56. "comment le pouvoir, donc, n'est autre que l'*ipséité* elle-même; le *même* du soi-même, pour ne rien dire du *sujet* qui est une surenchère stabilisante, et despotique de l'*ipséité*, l'être-soi out le *Selbst* comme subjectivité".

And what does Derrida do? For him, the workings of language and logic are only the surface. Like a geologist or an architect building the foundations of a house, he digs deep, beneath language and logic, trying to grasp and reveal the processes that generate them. He reveals linguistic and etymological connections, not infrequently in Latin or French.

Ethicists agree that human life is the highest or greatest value. Man, the living man, is the object of all actions and the result of all good deeds. It is life in all its aspects that is to be respected, protected and understood to the best of our ability.

Derrida considers the greatest value, the creation of life, the care of the mother, to be the original, total ethic, the total hospitality. He goes back to life, to the origin of life, where he finds the original form and birth of ethics.

This solicitude, the mother's solicitude, is undoubtedly an absolute figure of hospitality, and if we define it from its irreplaceability; for the duty of hospitality enjoins me to welcome into my place anyone who arrives, but first of all the arrival to whom no one else in my place will give his place: we must offer our place (I must offer my place) where no one else can offer a place in my place.¹³

And he immediately does exactly the opposite, as Kant does. He does not seek the universal, but draws attention to the unique, unrepeatable situation in which each agent finds himself at all times. Hospitality is the basis of ethics:

all ethics is undoubtedly the ethics of hospitality ... the laws of ethics are always laws of hospitality, hospitality is not just another ethical question¹⁴.

I give up my comfort, the security of the space, the time, the safety of the place I occupy, and the security of being locked into it. By turning towards another, by acting towards or for him, I give him my space, my time. But more than that: my full reality, my selfhood, because I am not preoccupied with taking care of myself, but with taking care of the other. Every situation is unique, irreplaceable, and every situation demands and calls out for the doer, the one who is in the place. In this conception, Derrida is completely Aristotelian. He must let the other into his own place and time. The mother's care is the most powerful ethical act: it welcomes another, a new, hitherto unknown person, a stranger who would not exist without the mother, would not even be a stranger without the mother, whom the mother herself

¹³ J. Derrida, op. cit. 60., "cette sollicitude, la mère, la sollicitude maternelle, est sans doute une figure absolue de l'hospitalité et si on la définit depuis son irremplaçabilité; car le devoir d'hospitalité m'enjoint d'accueillir dans ma place quiconque comme arrivant, mais d'abord l'arrivant à qui personne d'autre à ma place ne donnera sa place : il faut offrir sa place (il me faut offrir ma place) là où personne ne peut offrir une place à ma place."

¹⁴ J. Derrida, op. cit. 60-61. "toute éthique est sans doute éthique de l'hospitalité ... les lois de l'éthique sont toujours des lois de l'hospitalité, l'hospitalité n'est pas une question éthique parmi d'autres".

invites into existence. The coming is the coming into being, the calling into being in the case of the mother. According to Derrida, the example and origin of all hospitality is maternal care.

Undoubtedly, this is the extreme of ethics: we not only do good to someone, we also originally enable the coming into being, the coming to be, of the someone for whom we can do good. We then not only create the condition of our own good action, not only provide the possibility of a new coming of good in the world, but express that we consider human existence itself to be good as a condition of the possibility of good. The condition of good action, according to Kant, is the individual human being, who carries within himself the condition of morality. The mother, the individual, realised, concrete mother, herself as a subject, is the condition of the good, like every other human being. But beyond this, she contributes to the coming into being of the future individual who also carries the possibility of good in the world. This is the logic of redemption, which is also the logic of ethics. When I step out of my own time and space towards the other, towards the one who comes, I share my space and time with him: I redeem, I redeem him from his confinement in his own time and space. There is a price for this redemption on my side: my time and my space. At first sight, this is beyond all business logic, it calls into question the strict law of give and take which is the basis of the economy. At the same time, it also allows it, insofar as the economic contracting parties make promises to each other, in effect declaring that they will act in such and such a way in the future. All parties have an interest in the contract, which implies that, in serving each other's interests, business ethics is ultimately hospitality.

Derrida elsewhere analyses the promise, the making of a promise and the giving of a promise, which is also an elementary component of ethics, as is all politics and legislation. When I decide to do something, I promise myself that I will do it. When I act on my promise, all those affected by my action can rely on it.

But the situation seems paradoxical. By being the subject, the actor, the ipseity, the subject, maintains and secures for himself his own space and time. Only by existing, by having space, by having a home, can one give something to someone, one's own, one's time, one's space. Power and hospitality, and therefore ethics, are closely related, they presuppose each other. Power as possession and power as agency:

Power in itself cannot be thought of without something like the exercise and possibility of hospitality. To be powerful, to have power, to be master or mistress of one's own home, to be at home, to be oneself in one's own identity, to be or have one's own possibility, is to be capable of hospitality.¹⁵

¹⁵ J. Derrida, op. cit. 64. "le pouvoir en soi ne soit pas pensable sans quelque chose comme l'exercice et la possibilité de l'hospitalité. Être puissant, avoir le pouvoir, être maître our maîtresse chez soi, être chez soi, être soi dans son ipséité, être ou avoir son propre possible, c'est être capable de l'hospitalité".

Derrida recognises that excessive and dominant domination, possession, dominance over possession, seems to be precisely the opposite of ethics. At the same time, ethics as sharing and hospitality is only possible if there is something to share, if there is somewhere to invite or let the guest in. On the other hand, where there is property, where there is power, there is exclusion, since these are precisely the conditions of one's having property, whether or not someone else has it. It may be that one has power or property precisely because someone else does not or cannot have it. Power is always twofold: power over oneself and power over others. Power over oneself is what the Greeks discovered as the condition for a full human life. The condition of all ethics is self-control, which in Kant's sense is both freedom from the power of causality and obligation, a commitment to the laws of mind or reason. This commitment, which is the sole moment and condition of the actual fullness of human being and existence.

In giving, in hospitality, we pass on that which is the condition of passing on. Ethics seems to devour itself. But even Plato, Aristotle and Kant recognised that we have duties to ourselves. That is, we must not only give to others, but also to ourselves in equal measure. Since ethics also obliges us towards ourselves, it is impossible for ethics to devour itself or its subject. Moreover, there is something that we cannot give: ourselves, our own place and time. What Derrida calls ipseity, which is the condition of all giving and receiving.

The other, power over others, economic and political power, power over one's own household, is a condition of coexistence that is constantly questionable, renewable but inescapable. The laws of ethics must be formulated with this in mind, alongside it, and not infrequently in opposition to it.

Derrida, following Benveniste, analyses the etymological community of the concepts of lordship, domination and the notion of selfhood, ipseity, which appears in Lithuanian, Iranian and Hittite. He uses examples from the history of philosophy to illustrate the close relationship between these concepts. He does not mention it in this context, but Kant argues that the very condition of ethicality, of the capacity to act well, is self-ownership, which makes freedom, free thought and action possible.

Derrida, accepting Kant's view, writes of the contradictory nature of the situation:

The *ethos* of ethics would seem to condemn the very thing that makes it possible, namely the possibility of saying oneself, and then becoming a 'host', the possibility of being responsible, as power, as mastery, and above all the possibility of deriving responsibility, the power to be oneself, from power itself, from mastery.¹⁶

¹⁶ J. Derrida, op. cit. 72. "L'*ethos* de l'éthique semblerait condamner cela même qui le rend possible, à savoir la possibilité de dire soi-même, et ensuite de devenir « hôte », la possibilité d'être responsable, comme pouvoir, comme maîtrise, et surtout la possibilité de dériver la responsabilité, le pouvoir-être-soi-même du pouvoir tout court, de la maîtrise."

Derrida, interpreting Benveniste's etymological analysis, points to the sociological, linguistic and semantic connections between domination, dominance, power and selfhood, and between being oneself.

"The ethos of ethics" is precisely the choice of ethics before ethics. Ethics determines whether human actions are good or bad. Only our conscious actions can be considered morally good. Likewise, only our own conscious action can be imputed as bad, or indeed be bad. The decision to act, the preliminary determination of whether the intended action is good or bad, is preceded by deliberation. There are rules for deliberation, and it has a basic condition. Does the weigher want his action to be good? Even if we have the principles of a rational procedure for determining the goodness of actions, what can we say about our decision to apply this procedure? To decide that we will seek the principle of good action by the power of our reason. To this decision we cannot apply the rational procedure that prepares the ethical decision. The ethical ethos of ethics means precisely that we decide that we want to do the right thing, that we will do everything possible to do it. It is the ability to anticipate reason that chooses reason. However, there is nothing in the subject above reason that can make a conscious decision. Even Immanuel Kant cannot explain the choice of reason over reason. It is the metaethical choice prior to ethics, the ethos of ethics.

Hence the paradox that we need a decision-maker who is master of the house, but cannot step outside his house, his own skin, his own rationality, and make a decision from outside. Ethics must accept its own impossible and unintelligible beginning.

If hospitality is the basis of all ethics, then hospitality is the manifestation of an impossible, unthinkable ethical decision. The host, the master, the moral agent, has a where and from whence to make his ethically good decision. He has the resources to do so, since decision and action require energy as well as time and space.

The decision for the good is general hospitality. Its opposite is obviously hostility. Derrida is the philosopher of this impossible beginning.

3. A new beginning

As Richard Rorty put it, we have gone through the latest conceptual revolution in political philosophy: we know what is good, and we know what a good society is. Now we must work to make them a reality. Admittedly, developments today seem to contradict this notion, but we can defend Rorty by saying that we know what is good, but we do not do it. Kant called this evil.

Aristotle and Kant, by different procedures, consider the same actions to be good or evil. Moreover, their assessment is broadly in line with the ethical teaching of the Ten Commandments and the Gospels.

The same can be said of Derrida's ethics. But what we can add is that Derrida brings a new method, a new approach to ethics.

Aristotle outlined an ethics, but he did not give a system. Instead, he described good actions and good characters. He sought the good life in the good society. He was convinced that the good life was only possible if society was good. He understood man in his immediate family and political community, in close connection with it. However, he did not have at his disposal the modern human and natural sciences, especially ethnography, linguistics, literature, history and sociology, whose aspects cannot be ignored in an ethical construction of the type Aristotle had in mind.

Immanuel Kant derived the principle of good action from reasoning, from the necessary rational structures of reason. He gave a universal rule for deciding for each action, or more precisely for each principle of action, whether the action is good or not. A priori, rational ethics, normativity belongs exclusively to rationality.

Jacques Derrida finds a new way of thinking about philosophy and ethics. He recognises that philosophy has no method, that to assume one is merely arbitrary. Philosophy is left with endless questioning. The human mind is always working, always asking questions. Philosophy has no end, no definitive system, because the mind goes on with everything it has created. With the new day, with the new generation, new ideas, new questions, new texts are given.

The chain of questions does not end where rationality ends. This was Kant's claim, stating that, because of the limitations of our cognitive faculties, we cannot go further. Derrida assumes that behind, below, above and beyond the conscious and linear thought processes lie worlds not thought through, perhaps not even conceived. His first ethical act is to venture boldly forward, to move on into the unknown behind, below or above the text and the thinking. A single text, a single statement, a single system cannot be the final, the last word. Just as the Greeks recognized that the world before us had depths in space and time, so Derrida came to realize that this was true of thinking about the world itself, and of all the thinking we call philosophical. That is why, he says, we must read texts in such a way that we also read the texts behind them, whether the underlying texts are psychological, linguistic, sociological, historical, specific.

This is what deconstructive reading and writing does: drilling deep into the written language to reveal new historical, psychological, linguistic dimensions. In this sense, deconstructive ethics or Derrida's ethics is a new ethics, which can be placed alongside those of Aristotle and Kant as the third great and new pillar or mode of ethical thought.