Georges Bataille
The Promise and Limits of the Impossible

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Georges Bataille and the Ruinous Role of Nonknowledge in Derrida's Unconditional Hospitality

Mukasa Mubirumusoke
Boston College

Abstract: At the beginning of the twenty-first century, when political debates concerning strangers and foreigners often gestured towards hostility, Jacques Derrida took the exact opposite position, demanding that the stranger and foreigner be welcomed with unconditional hospitality. As with the other themes that fall within Derrida’s political and ethical corpus, readers of his discussions on hospitality often find it difficult to reconcile his proposed position with any practical application. In particular, readers often take issue with the extreme vulnerability that he demands of the acting agent and the consistent questioning of his position’s possibility. This paper attempts to address the motivations behind his radical demands by exploring points of congruence with Georges Bataille’s project of inner experience, focusing particularly on a shared understanding of the role that nonknowledge plays in necessitating both extreme risk and impossibility. I contend that the central role of nonknowledge frames Derrida’s unconditional hospitality as a Bataillen project of self-ruination.

Keywords: Jacques Derrida, Georges Bataille, nonknowledge, unconditional hospitality, self-ruination, inner experience
From the sun I learned this: when he goes down, over-rich; he pours gold into the sea out of inexhaustible riches so that even the poorest fisherman still rows with golden oars. For this I once saw and I did not tire of my tears as I watched it.¹

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

As we confront our newly envisioned global community, the habits, creeds, and beliefs that should stabilize our sense of identity have become detached and float high above the foundation of selfhood that once anchored us securely. In this vulnerable state of suspense, we increasingly feel the need to question concepts that once slipped imperceptibly in and out of our daily activities. Take hospitality for instance: no longer does it fit neatly within the limited scope of behavior we associate with neighborly rituals, such as lighting a jack-o-lantern on Halloween or offering a glass of wine to a visiting neighbor. In our newly constituted foreign world, hospitality has much broader horizons, beginning first and foremost with the stranger who appears increasingly at the threshold of our door, our computer, our community, and our country.

Yet, amidst the imminent danger of the foreign other, Jacques Derrida contends we must embrace an unconditionally open hospitality. The issue of an unconditional hospitality retains a contentious space in Derrida’s deconstructive approach to politics and ethics. Derrida’s contention that unconditional hospitality provides the basis for approaching ethics inevitably raises a number of questions: Why would Derrida propose a hospitality that leaves the host at his or her utmost vulnerable? What are his intentions when he questions the very possibility of the ethical situation that he demands?

The answers to these questions are neither clear nor easily attainable, but I believe a consideration of Georges Bataille’s project of inner experience provides a means to approaching them constructively. If we think of hospitality as Derrida does, at the limits of possibility and vulnerability, then we are inevitably condemned to look beyond any traditional ethical framework. The Batallean project of inner experience shares with Derrida a position at the limit of nonknowledge and, when considered appropriately, serves as a guiding light to those disconcerting issues that rest at the core of Derrida’s ethical agency. I suggest that

unconditional hospitality is not a categorical imperative that simply demands the most approximate attempts of its realization. Instead, the central role of nonknowledge frames unconditional hospitality as a Bataillean project of self-ruination that entails an omnipresent risk and a goal that is necessarily impossible.

**Derrida’s Unconditional Hospitality**

Derrida’s account of hospitality begins at the threshold of an encounter: on one side resides the sovereign host and on the other side, the foreign other. This threshold is defined not in the mere opposition of these two agents, but rather at the moment of a decision. The host must decide how she will welcome, if at all, the foreigner as a guest into her home. Therefore, the foreign other’s arrival plays a constitutive role by allowing the host to recognize herself as a sovereign, as the deciding agent. With this recognition, the host can either allow the other access to herself, to her home, or ban the other to the outside. The decision rests solely with the host whether or not the other will be allowed into this relationship. What should appear as a familiar and politically potent scenario of host and guest inaugurates the paradigm of ethics for Derrida. The possibility of ethics takes place with the decision of the host, as sovereign, to allow the guest into a hospitable relation.²

Traditionally, the decision of the host finds refuge in the laws set for hospitality. In an interview entitled *Hospitality, Justice, and Responsibility*, Derrida explains that traditional hospitality belongs to the same logic as gift-giving. In other words, the laws of hospitality function within the economy of an exchange.³ The gift of traditional hospitality must be accompanied with a gift that recognizes the hospitality such as a greeting card, beer, or perhaps even the simple exchange of a name. The laws of hospitality, therefore, prescribe that the host’s decision follows from the logic of a reciprocal exchange. Within this exchange the host’s sovereignty is not only affirmed in the moment of decision at the threshold, but also confirmed with the gift. The gift reinscribes the host as master, as the one who demands, and commands, tangible recognition of her position as the self-identifiable opposite of the guest.

At this point we can see why Derrida would rearticulate this traditional schema of hospitality as conditional. Traditional hospitality defines itself at a threshold where the host’s decision is presumed to be conditioned by a predictable logic of reciprocation. It is as if the host, once brought face-to-face with the other, must find refuge from otherness—both the stranger’s and his own otherness—by affirming and employing laws that establish a recognizable and repeatable order. The homogeneity these laws seek both masks and wards off any un-

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expected contestation of the established order. Thus, the very foundation of hospitality, welcoming the other, requires that the host’s decision function as a cog within the hospitality machine. In this machine, the other is not welcomed as other, but rather as another already appropriable cog. The other’s foreignness is not enjoyed and celebrated as foreign, but is instead appropriated and muffled by the stranger’s ability to comply with the laws, i.e., the ability to provide a gift in return. For Derrida true hospitality cannot subsume the other and therefore cannot participate in this machine of homogenization. To redefine hospitality, a reinterpretation of the decision at the threshold is necessary.

To free hospitality from the conditions that reduce the other into an economy of knowledge and sameness, the decision of hospitality must be unconditional, without laws. Unconditionality would allow the hospitable gesture to emerge freely from the host. For Derrida, simply following through to a self-determined end undermines the very possibility of free decision. In fact, Derrida argues that a decision is not determined by the “self” per se, but rather that “for a decision to be made, it must be made by the other in myself.”

The conception of decision as arising out of “the other in me” highlights the inadequacy of any decision that anticipates and follows from the laws of conditional hospitality. I must appeal to the other in me—the other outside the realm of knowledge—because the self-present me, such as me as host before a threshold with a guest on the other side, is always already inscribed within a calculable economy of knowledge and exchange.

Derrida recognizes that even within the raw experience of an encounter with the other, the host is still subject to laws of identification and appropriation. Therefore, while these laws and the knowledge they provide are indispensable to my decision, they nevertheless will subject me to a logic that pre-determines the decision. Derrida explains, “If we knew what to do, if I knew in terms of knowledge what I have to do before the decision, then the decision would not be a decision. It would be the application of a rule, the consequence of a premise, and there would be no problem, there would be no decision.”

With conditional hospitality, no decision, in the Derridian sense, actually occurs; rather, the logic of exchange has already anticipated and determined the host’s response to the foreigner. And, as discussed above, this conditional relationship necessarily reduces the otherness of the guest into the logic of sameness and knowledge, even though “decision, an ethical or a political responsibility, is absolutely heterogeneous to knowledge.” To avoid the consequences of conditional hospitality, a decision should arise from the otherness within me that absconds from laws of conditional hospitality and calls forth the unconditional acceptance of the other as other. Decisions must there-

fore be difficult and even terrible, but only from difficulty and terror can the host emerge from the paralysis of undecidability and invoke the otherness that is shared with the guest as opposed to the sovereignty that is not.

With this account of the decision in mind, unconditional hospitality requires the absence of any traditional agency. The host as sovereign of the house withdraws from her self-identifiable place of mastery, freeing the otherness within and opening herself to the otherness without. Derrida envisions this hospitable gesture rhetorically as a split of the self. He explains, “There would be no responsibility or decision without some self-interruption, neither would there be any hospitality; as master and host, the self in welcoming the other, must interrupt or divide himself or herself. This division is the condition of hospitality.”

Unconditional hospitality exposes the division of the master and thus suspends her mastery over the home.

Accompanying the suspension of mastery, unconditional hospitality also requires the host to welcome any other, all others, the absolute other, no questions asked. The tether to conditions must be completely snapped. Thus, “if you exclude the possibility that the newcomer is coming to destroy your house—if you want to control this and exclude in advance this possibility—there is no hospitality. In this case, you control the borders, you have custom officers, you have a door.”

An absolute exposure of this sort should engender absolute fright and absolute emptiness. To be absolutely open to anyone would entail an exposure that leaves every bit of the host outside the host, as if she had poured herself out, like Zarathustra’s sun, to the other she does not know and refuses to know. This unconditionality is what Derrida demands. There must be no moment of exchange; there must be no check points; there must be utter and complete exposure: this is the only suitable gift.

To further explicate what unconditional hospitality entails, Derrida also problematizes the functioning of language at the threshold of hospitality. “Does hospitality consist in interrogating the new arrival?” asks Derrida, “Does it begin with the question addressed to the newcomer: what is your name .... Or else does hospitality begin with the unquestioning welcome, in a double effacement, the effacement of the question and the name.”

The host cannot even ask the other his or her name; this traditionally amicable offer involves a notion of exchange, of familiarity, of identity, of knowledge. Therefore, even this seemingly benign discursive practice must be excluded in the decision of unconditional hospitality.

However, while complete openness radically excludes logos, even to the extreme of forbidding language from hospitality, it also, in the same gesture, radically includes the other.

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“The awaited guest is not only someone to whom you say ‘come’” says Derrida, “but ‘enter,’...occupy me, take place in me.”\(^\text{10}\) Moreover, with this occupation, “the master of the house is at home, but nonetheless he comes to enter his home through the guest.”\(^\text{11}\) Derrida’s statement sounds counterintuitive, but in fact is not: the guest allows the master to “enter his home” because the guest calls forth the other within the host. An encounter with the foreign other, through the decision of unconditional hospitality, provides the host with a complete picture of her home, which must consist of both the self and the other within. The heterogeneous singularity of the guest opens the host to her own infinite singularity, thus exposing an impossible distance and yet, “this separation, this dissociation is not only a limit, but it is also the condition of the relation to the other, a non-relation as relation,” and this is the shared moment of hospitality.\(^\text{12}\)

Conversely, while in the same breath of demanding unconditional hospitality, Derrida consistently questions whether such a radical gesture can actually occur. These moments of reservation haunt Derrida’s reflections on hospitality. They taunt the reader and at times seem to be an insurance taken out by Derrida—as if to rid himself of responsibility in the event of unconditional hospitality’s inevitable failure. Time and time again he deploys expressions such as “if such hospitality exists” and “whether such hospitality is possible.”\(^\text{13}\) His disclaimers are an anxious rhythm that punctuates the text. Malek Moazzam-Doulat also questions this “absolute” or “unconditional” hospitality that accompanies Derrida’s radical interpretation of political decisionism. Moazzam-Doulat hesitates to embrace the full implications of Derrida’s position and asks the reader, “Can we never say no? Can we affirm an absolute openness to whatever is to come with so much danger, so much monstrosity behind us and on our horizons?”\(^\text{14}\)

Given the set parameters of unconditional hospitality, both authors’ reservations seem undoubtedly warranted. In our daily lives, how could an experience possibly occur in which absolutely no conditions accompany our encounter with the other? Won’t there always be a sign-in sheet, a door, a name in our way? Unconditional hospitality demands a transcendence of the limits of duty and necessity, and yet it appears to be an unfeasible goal. Derrida explains in *Of Hospitality*:

> It is as though hospitality were the impossible: as though the law of hospitality defined this very impossibility, as if it were only possible to transgress it, as

\(^{10}\) Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 123.

\(^{11}\) Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 125.


\(^{13}\) See for example, Derrida, “Hospitality, Justice, and Responsibility,” 70, 71.

though the law of absolute, unconditional hospitality...commanded that we
transgress all the laws (in the plural) of hospitality, namely, the conditions, the
norms, the rights and the duties that are imposed on host and hostess....

In light of this necessary transgression, a more pressing impediment remains. Structurally speaking, unconditional hospitality is inextricably tied, and thus limited, by the laws of conditional hospitality. The transgression that unconditionality demands remains bound to the laws it attempts to push aside. Unconditional hospitality unveils an aporia that accompanies all attempted applications of universal law. Just a few pages later Derrida states quite plainly:

...the law [of unconditional hospitality] is above the laws. It is thus illegal,
transgressive, outside the law.... But even while keeping itself above the laws of
hospitality, the unconditional law of hospitality needs the laws, it requires them.
This demand is constitutive. It wouldn’t be effectively unconditional, the law, if
it didn’t have to become effective, concrete, determined, if that were not its be-
ing as having-to-be.... In order to be what it is, the law thus needs the laws.

Which is to say, the unconditional law of hospitality, in its sweeping generality, must account for the particular in each situation and thus be conditioned by this particularity, i.e., condi-
tioned by the singularity of the foreign other’s arrival. The instant a foreigner arrives at the
threshold, his or her unique particularity usurps the attempted unconditional hospitable ges-
ture of the host. Intrinsic to the enforcement of universal law is the disruption by the singular
that necessarily accompanies it. Derrida nevertheless stresses the necessity to engage this apo-
ria of unconditional hospitality. What would it mean to will an unconditional hospitality under
these restrictions, or more interestingly how does the impossible become possible, or even
worthwhile? For these questions, Georges Bataille and his definition of community and inner
experience provide a framework for further examining unconditional hospitality.

Community, Inner Experience, and Hospitality

Community—as a union based on nonknowledge and inoperativity—occupies a pivotal
position in Bataille’s thought, and along its axis rotates three different conceptions and
articulations. Perhaps the most notable conception of community became manifest in the
two politically motivated groups Bataille founded in the late 1930s: the sacrificial group
Acéphale and the group of intellectuals known as the College of Sociology. A second
Batallean notion of community supports the economics of expenditure, explored at length in

15 Derrida, Of Hospitality, 75.
16 Derrida, Of Hospitality, 79.
the three-volume work, *The Accursed Share*. The last, and that which is relevant here, is the community that accompanies what Bataille designates “inner experience.” Inner experience attempts to account for an ecstatic subjectivity and a radical rethinking of intersubjectivity, by way of complicating traditional notions of community.

Inner experience refers to a realm of experience distinct from knowledge that conceives of the self not as enclosed but outside itself, exposed, excessive, and inappropriable. This excessive subject belongs to a community bound by the communication of his or her expenditure. Insofar as the self always already communicates its excessiveness, the community that binds it to the excess of the other does not come to formation, but always already exists. The primordial community of inner experience opens up a view beyond the self-enclosed subject of discursive practices. Bataille holds reservations about the subject who gains knowledge through discourse because, as Andrew Mitchell and Jason Winfree explain in their introduction to *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille*, “to know is to possess knowledge. But once the known is possessed and internalized, the relation to what lies beyond the self is severed and our contact with the outside regulated and neutralized.”

The communication that belongs to the community of inner experience cannot be possessed or internalized in any such fashion. Therefore, Bataille’s community suggests a space where we, as selves, can account for one another as truly sharing and not as severed by our determinate knowledge of one another. The community of inner experience clears a space for the ontological condition of the self ecstatically communing with others “which is opposed to the ‘turning in on oneself’” that characterizes the knowledgeable subject of discursive practices.

Bataille’s break from the self-enclosed subject in favor of the ecstatic self of inner experience parallels the issue of hospitality and the role of nonknowledge as framed by Derrida. Derrida’s aversion to conditional hospitality stems from its inscription within a discursive practice wherein the otherness of the guest and the authenticity of the gift are appropriated by the laws of exchange. Hospitality, in this register, becomes a duty that emerges from the external demand of law; however, “for it to be what it ‘must’ be, hospitality must not pay a debt or be governed by a duty: it is gracious...this unconditional law of hospitality, if such a thing is thinkable, would then be a law without imperative, without order and without duty. A law without law.”

Bataille shares this aversion to the homogenous nature of knowledge that allows for the execution of order, laws, and duties. Inner experience marks a subjectivity that ul-

20 The tension between discourse and communication is etymologically supported, with discourse stemming from the Latin *discurrere*, dis: “apart” + *currere* “to run,” while communication stems from *communicare* “to share, divide out; impart, inform; join, unite.”
timately contests the motions of conditional hospitality. As with Derrida’s unconditional hospitality, inner experience refuses to participate in an economy of quantifiable exchange and instead concerns the excess that breaches the limits of these laws. We can read the goal of conditional hospitality as an attempt to articulate and separate the host and guest through the identification of their subjectivity by way of their respective gifts—the gift of hospitality to the guest and the reciprocal gift of gratitude to the host.

Inner experience, as articulated thus far, may seem to imply that the self simply slides away completely into the other, into a primordial community of complete dissolution, but that is not case. The self of inner experience, in its excess, retains a sense of identification amongst the others. The collapse of distance that characterizes community dissolves the self as a knowledgeable subject, not as a singular being. Therefore, while Mitchell and Winfree may recognize that “communication is a giving, a giving oneself over to what is other,” they also still maintain that “communication comes to name the indigestibility of the other, the persistence of the foreign at the heart of the same.”  

These two characteristics of communication require that the Bataillean self does indeed retain a sense of itself precisely to the extent that the self hosts the other through the communication of this incommunicable excess.

For Derrida, the internal other plays a pivotal role within the framework of the decision. The hospitable decision must come from “the other within.” This other within does not belong to the realm of knowledge and the laws that bring one to the undecidability that precedes and allows for decision making—nor can the other within be reduced to this logic afterward. “When we make a decision,” Derrida explains, “we don’t know and we shouldn’t know. If we know there would be no decision.”  

To know of the decision is to inscribe the decision into the realm of knowledge. Instead, the decision must remain in the realm of nonknowledge, where the other of the subject—any subject, host or guest—resides.

Derrida and Bataille thus both appeal to an otherness that belongs to the self, within the self, all the while never subsuming the self. For Bataille’s inner experience, the inner otherness functions to bring together and distinguish the subject in the context of the primordial community of nonknowledge; for Derrida, the inner otherness of the subject must make the decision that occupies the space of nonknowledge. In both cases, more specifically in the case of Derrida, our acknowledgment of our otherness—insofar as it requires a withdrawal from knowledge—exposes us to the other in a way that entails extreme risk.

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22 Mitchell and Winfree 10-11.
Risk and Impossibility: The Limits of Nonknowledge for Bataille and Derrida

In inner experience, the self’s radical openness and outpouring naturally entails risk. The subject risks itself as it knows itself, literally. Inner experience requires exposure to a world beyond comprehension, and, moreover, to the other beyond comprehension. “‘Communication’ cannot proceed from one full and intact individual to another,” Bataille writes. “It requires individuals whose separate existence is risked.”\(^24\) The risk of self follows from the same logic as before: one risks the dissolution of one’s self-enclosed identity. And, as a moment of inner experience, it marks an ontological risk that occurs and persists as one exists and inhabits the realm of nonknowledge and is exposed to the otherness of community. Therefore, one is always already at risk of losing oneself in relation to the other insofar as one is always already exposed to the other that permeates, and thus challenges, the self-possessed Cartesian subject. The desired mastery of self and other that accompanies any attempt at acquiring knowledge is replaced by the helplessness and abandonment of inner experience.

For Derrida’s unconditional hospitality, the exposure to the risk of the other takes on a similar indispensable position. In contrast to the rules and regulations that govern conditional hospitality, Derrida suggests a lawless welcoming of the guest. When one decides, from the other within, to expose oneself to the guest beyond the restrictions of customs and knowledge, there is risk. On the one hand, there is the obtrusive fact of risking physical danger: “For unconditional hospitality to take place” explains Derrida, “you have to accept the risk of the other coming and destroying the place.”\(^25\) The other may be a robber, a murderer, a predator of any sort, and by opening oneself unconditionally to the guest, one runs the inevitable risk that this will be the last time you welcome anyone. Yet, on the other hand, there remains the risk that Bataille has in mind, a risk that belongs intrinsically to modalities of nonknowledge such as unconditional hospitality.

At its core, Derrida’s unconditional hospitality presents a challenge: a challenge to risk one’s sense of self. Derrida’s call to open one’s borders completely to the other is fundamentally an ontological call. Hospitality entails that one must not only risk one’s physical self, but also one’s own knowledgeable self and one’s knowledgeable world. Opening oneself in this manner would be the only means of acknowledging and respecting the other as completely and heterogeneously other. All knowledge-mediated gestures must be rejected at the threshold. While it may seem that asking a person his or her name or offering someone a drink would be an indispensable hospitable gesture, these offerings must, at the very least, be suspended. Bataille would agree with Derrida on this point: Language inscribes the other into the


logic of exchange and therefore cannot accompany a true acknowledgment of otherness. On this issue Derrida suggests, “We have come to wonder whether absolute, hyperbolic, unconditional hospitality doesn’t consist in suspending language,” while Bataille more aggressively asserts, “Profound communication demands silence.” Once you attach rules, such as those implied in language and discourse, to this encounter, the guest’s otherness retracts and becomes assimilated as something homogenous and precisely not other. Then there runs the greater risk of objectifying the other, viewing the other as something at one’s own disposal, and as the end of one’s mastery. Objectification should never serve as the grounds for ethics; although at times in history it has and with devastating costs.

However, before one can even deny objectification and come to terms with the wager of exposure, it must be clear that the other that arrives always already exposes the host, always already disrupts the other within the host. The ontological risk of hospitality occurs before the decision, with the arrival of the other and the summons of the host to the threshold. That is to say, the risk always already exists simply by virtue of the other’s existence. At the sound of a knock, your ontological self becomes exposed to otherness and otherness to you. At this point, before the threshold, the other is outside the host’s normal predication of knowledge: she does not know his name, why he is there, or who he is. The host is very much exposed to this other—and often times this other to the host. Therefore, the host is already ruptured at the threshold. For Derrida it thus becomes a matter of whether you are to embrace this primordial exposure to the other, this challenging of the self by the community of inner experience, or if you are to close it off by asking for a gift, asking for a name, or by making other knowledge-founded demands. These options situate the undecidability that precedes the decision of hospitality, but in order for hospitality to actually occur, the host must pick the former options and wager on vulnerability. Unconditional hospitality, and the possibility of ethics, demands full exposure—a Nietzschean *amor fati*. It asks of the host to affirm the exposure that the other has always already created and only with this complete affirmative embrace of the other do we have hospitality and the possibility of ethics. Only by trying to defer the knowledgeable relationship that the other summons with her knock can the discourse of ethics begin. With this choice, the host assumes an agency that acknowledges the guest as other and therefore as someone who can participate in an ethical discourse. The host approaches the other as an in-

individual who warrants ethical consideration.\textsuperscript{28} Derrida’s claim that hospitality demands radical openness reflects a challenge for the self to embrace its openness, and in doing so, willfully suspend the mastery allotted to him as a subject who can know and who employs rules. We must not forget, however, that along with this unprecedented demand, Derrida also contests its possibility. “If there is such a thing” says Derrida of true hospitality, “I’m not sure.”\textsuperscript{29}

Bataille broaches this issue of possibility and nonknowledge in terms of community in \textit{Inner Experience}. The book marks a project to access the primordial community and to communicate outside the confines of logical rules, i.e., outside of knowledge. Yet any attempt to accomplish a goal with these intentions, such as writing a book, nevertheless inherently participates in the logic of the restricted economy that Bataille wishes to avoid. The aporia is straightforward, compelling Bataille to proclaim, “Principle of inner experience: to emerge through project from the realm of project.”\textsuperscript{30} Such an emergence in fact is impossible. Despite Bataille’s great efforts—and the structure and polyphonic character of \textit{Inner Experience} are a testament to these efforts—his work falls short; it is insufficient. But perhaps this insufficiency, this failure, was what Bataille had envisioned. Jason Winfree explains Bataille’s position in response to the same remark from \textit{Inner Experience} quoted above:

> the principle of inner experience, in other words, concerns the use or deployment of project—that is, the restricted economic structure of ends-and-means utility, work, discourse, adequation—for the sake of an end that states utterly apart from project, an end without any means, an end that project could not conceivably effect, produce, or achieve. For this reason, Bataille understands experience as a revolt against project that nevertheless makes itself into a project that cannot be fulfilled, thereby ruining project and finding itself in one respect as that non-fulfillment and ruin. This ruin is neither a failure nor a celebration of failure, however, but the excessive character of finite and exposed existence articulated in merely economic or dialectical terms. And that is to say that Bataille’s project is impossible.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{28} What the rules or conditions of a particular ethics may entail is not of question at this juncture. The decision to challenge the self occurs before an actual ethics is proposed and only entails that the host recognize the other individual as an individual, thus opening the possibility of ethics. It is possible to not say yes, or at least gesture towards rejection, and this occurs—to varying degrees—with conditional hospitality. In such a situation, the host says no by deciding first and foremost to employ rules that subsume the other. The host subjects the guest to the possibility of becoming a disposable object—such as Heidegger’s “bestand”—without any consideration of his or her inappropriable singularity as an individual.

\textsuperscript{29} Derrida, “Hospitality, Justice, and Responsibility,” 71.

\textsuperscript{30} Bataille, \textit{Inner Experience}, 46.

Bataille’s project of inner experience thus is impossible insofar as its goal to purge the limits of nonknowledge stands completely at odds with the means it has for expression. Moreover, this very failure marks the trace of that nonknowledge that the failed project had intended to articulate and inaugurate. Impossibility, therefore, points to what always already exists indirectly, and does so through the trace that always ruins project. It is as if the primordial community of inner experience is breaking through the cracks of Bataille’s works, and yet the source of this destruction can never be apprehended. The impossibility and failure of unconditional hospitality, I suggest, marks an analogous trace of the realm of nonknowledge from which it emerges and also fails to articulate.

Following from Jason Winfree’s reading of Bataille, it appears that the impossibility of unconditional hospitality that Derrida persistently intimates marks the trace of the realm of nonknowledge that unconditional hospitalitybeckons the host to embrace. Unconditional hospitality requires the complete suspension of the restrictive economic exchange that necessarily accompanies any encounter with the singular individual. To be completely unconditional one would not only have to avoid speaking, but also any sort of conditional rule or expectation for the guest. Any attempts to follow the laws of hospitality undermine the very structure of the law in general, but, in the very same gesture, it exposes us to a “beyond-the-law,” where unconditional hospitality—and justice for that matter—dwell. Unconditional hospitality determines the possibility of hospitality, as the universal law that grounds hospitality. But, as a result of this very determining nature, unconditional hospitality stands outside the laws of hospitality. Derrida argues this aporia accompanies any conception of law; therefore, the issue is of the structure of hospitality, not of satisfying an ever elusive utopic desire. Derrida makes this distinction clear when he explains, “pure unconditionality appears inaccessible, and inaccessible not only as a regulatory idea, an Idea in the Kantian sense and infinitely removed, always inadequately approached, but inaccessible for the structural reasons, ‘barred’ by the internal contradictions we have analyzed.”\(^{32}\) Unconditional hospitality’s aporetic structure implies that, just as with inner experience, Derrida has proposed a ruinous project. Moreover, this ruin does not imply the impossibility of ethics, but rather its inauguration. And if this is the case, then a ruin could be something desirable, something great, something lovable—“what else is there to love anyway?” Derrida once asked.\(^{33}\)

In an essay on Derrida’s ethics, François Raffoul characterizes Derrida’s notion of impossibility quite succinctly:

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\(^{32}\) Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 149.

The impossible would no longer be the opposite of the possible but, on the contrary, would be what “haunts the possible,” what truly “enables” or possibilitizes the possible. The impossible, Derrida would claim, is possible, not in the sense that it would become possible, but in a more radical sense in which the impossible, as impossible, is possible.\footnote{Raffoul 273.}

Following from Raffoul’s argument, I suggest the impossible, as impossible, can be possible only through experiencing impossibility and not through trying to know impossibility. Derrida’s proposed unconditional hospitality thus inaugurates ethics through the experience of its aporetic structure, through the joy and pain of the impossible. Undeniably this experience occurs whenever someone allows another person into their home. Whether we fully realize it or not, we are continually questioning the possibility of ethics, and must ask ourselves, once more, whether we will allow the other in. How else could community come about?

In accordance with Bataille’s project of inner experience, unconditional hospitality’s heterogeneity peers through the cracks of its structure and gives life to itself as a beautiful ruin. Exposing oneself to this ruin comes with a decision, a just decision that acts “in the night of non-knowledge and non-rule.”\footnote{Derrida, “Force of Law,” 967.} The host of the house must decide to subject herself to this failure in order to believe in hospitality, which is also to believe in the possibility of ethics. And does this inevitable failure, this inadequacy of mastery, not mark the total incomprehensibility of the other? Does the failure to articulate the realm of nonknowledge not intimate the risk that always accompanies the host’s exposure to the guest since it is the guest who calls forth the realm of nonknowledge? Are risk and impossibility not two sides of the same nonknowledge coin?

If so, then the host’s risk of hospitality must be thought of in terms of the project that fails but that nevertheless leaves him or her exposed to the guest. As with justice, unconditional hospitality is not only always already to come, but is also always already felt, even if incompletely. The impossible guest is someone who you will never know and who constantly exposes you to the risk of your relationship, which is simply the risk and violence of being in relation. This risk is often naively overlooked within those relationships we hold dearest, but we must not forget that even our mother, husband, or best friend can never be fully known. That is, they are always in some sense a foreign guest and therefore always expose the violence and risk of relation. Which beckons the question, insofar as it is never fully possible to exclude any of those people closest to us from the possibility of inflicting harm or violence, should we subject those whom we love to the same rules and regulations that we often employ to police our interactions with strangers? Of course not. What is hard to accept, but
which Derrida’s rigorous logic reveals, is that to embrace one’s mother or child exposes one to
the same vulnerability as opening a door for a stranger. It is to accept the violence and risk of
being in relation with anyone. The incomprehensible otherness of those whom we love—that
which sets them apart from every other single thing and also that which they share even with
the stranger at the door—demands unmediated, unconditional hospitality, even though this
hospitality entails risk and impossibility.

Conclusion

Derrida’s endorsement of a hospitality that cannot be achieved recognizes the other’s
subjectivity as that which ultimately remains elusive. This unconditional hospitality is
Derrida’s response to a history of ethics and morality that never questioned the foundations of
their own possibility and therefore never considered a positive role for nonknowledge. Following
the logic of traditional ethics, with adequate knowledge, an agent could be in a free and
equal economical relationship with the other agents of its community. However, communica-
tion on this level is superficial and denies the depths that Bataille contemplated with his en-
gagement with community. The Bataillean community recognizes a primordial level where the
self-containment necessary for economic exchange and preservation simply dissolves. For
Derrida, hospitality and justice do not belong to such an economy either; there is everything
to lose, but no-thing to be gained by being hospitable. What we presume to know of the other
does not bring us together but rather keeps us apart. Derrida alludes to this phenomenon in
terms of immigration in “Hospitality, Justice, and Responsibility.” What we “know” of immi-
grants keeps them out of our home—and quite possibly out of any home and may even lead
them to Guantanamo Bay. Derrida thus suggests the impossible gift of unconditional hospital-
ity in which we ask for no knowledge of the other, ask them to abide by no rules, and grant
them entry to our house once more—if, of course, this were possible.36

However, following through with Derrida’s momentum, and in light of recent events
such as Hurricane Katrina and the Tsunami that hit Southeast Asia, does the hospitable re-
sponse at times not require us to leave our home, give up our mastery, and willfully expose
ourselves to the mastery of the foreigner, to become a foreigner ourselves? Hospitality can re-

36 In practice, I do not believe Derrida would expect a person to attempt to engage the type of openness that
unconditional hospitality demands. His explication of unconditional hospitality is a challenge to those who claim to
engage ethics but who take for granted what actually is at stake, i.e., the possibility of ethics. Derrida’s considera-
tion of hospitality exposes ethics in its frightening bareness and only from that terrifying exposure can a person make
an ethical decision, whatever it may be. Derrida does not set a formula to eradicate evil or to secure safety; rather,
he calls the agent to the space where perversion presents itself. Should we treat the stranger as we treat our family
and friends? No. However, to treat the stranger as he or she truly presents him or herself at the threshold requires
the host to assume a disposition that recognizes the stranger not as someone or something to be regulated but
rather as a person, which is the starting point of any relation.

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tain its foundation in the sovereignty of the host and still proceed from the other direction. Hospitality takes on a new significance when the dimension of the stranger becomes the issue of exploration. Not only does our new globalized lens force the other into strangeness and foreignness, but it should also envision the self with the agency of a foreign other that has hospitable obligations. Wouldn’t willfully exposing oneself to the other take on a new light if approached from the perspective of the misplaced foreigner with only the trace of the host? Continuing the logic that Derrida pursues to derive the obligations of the host, we can apply it to a possible analogous set of obligations of the self as a foreigner. This extension of unconditional hospitality would include not only not harming the gracious host, but also helping the host in need. The willful opening of the door for the stranger should also translate into offering the help to fix the door of the host in need.
References