

From Hosting Words to Hosting Civilizations: Towards a Theory of ‘Guardianship’ and ‘Deep Hospitality’¹

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Abstract

In this paper, I cover some ideas first developed during a research year that took me, among other countries, to Bulgaria, where I enjoyed a Fulbright scholarship in 2018–2019. At a conference in Plovdiv (ancient Philippopolis), I gave a talk entitled ‘Neither Clash Nor Dialogue: We Are Each Other’s Guardians’.² A journalist in the audience became irritated and asked me, ‘What do you mean by “neither/nor”? What else is there?’ I answered that the explanation was in the subtitle ‘We Are Each Other’s Guardians’. It proposes a third course, one resting on the notion of ‘guardianship’ – as a moral obligation. In what follows, I elaborate further on this concept by relating it to the notion of hospitality, not the Derridian variant, but one that is conceptualized as a transformative event for both the host and the guest, which is why I call it ‘deep hospitality’.

1. Going Beyond Intercultural Dialogue

The notion of guardianship is not present in Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996)³ – how could it be? – and also not among the well-intentioned promoters of civilizational dialogue who approached UN organizations or gave addresses at the UN. There is the example of Austrian philosopher Hans Köchler (b. 1948) who in a Letter to UNESCO

¹ I thank Dr Julian Baggini for his gracious invitation. It was truly an honour to be invited to the Royal Institute of Philosophy where Bertrand Russell and many more brilliant philosophers once lectured. I may not have been at the Institute in person, but contemporary technology made it possible for my voice and image to be ‘hosted’. The lecture is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97ZpPfZDI-E>.

² Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NELwHzQJKKs>.

³ *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* was preceded by an article entitled *The Clash of Civilizations?* (1993), which was replied to by Edward W. Said in his famous lecture at the University of Massachusetts in 1996, entitled *The Myth of the ‘Clash of Civilizations’*, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPS-pONiEG8>.

spoke of the ‘dialogue entre différentes civilizations’ (1972) and eventually received the UN’s support in organizing a conference on intercultural dialogue.⁴ A famous UN address on the subject was delivered in 1998 by then Iranian president Muhammad Khatami and entitled ‘The Dialogue Among Civilizations’. The idea was not without precedents in Iran. We may mention the organization by the same name inspired by French Muslim philosopher Roger Garaudy, of which a branch was founded in Iran under the auspices of the Shahbanou, Iran’s last Empress.⁵ And there is the even earlier Safa Khaneh Community established by Ḥājj Āqā Nur-Allāh (d. 1927) in Isfahan in 1902. It served as an interfaith centre at a time when no such institutions existed in the West. These were all morally worthy and scholarly commendable initiatives. What I have in mind, however, is not a mere matter of intercultural or interreligious crossings; it goes beyond engaging in dialogue and creating cultural or political alliances. The guardian assumes the *moral responsibility* not only for the continuing existence of other civilizations but also for their thriving and flourishing. Essentially, guardians provide a ‘shared home’, whether a physical dwelling or a space in the cultural, spiritual, or intellectual life; they make themselves available as ‘hosts’.

2. ‘Guardian Civilizations’: The Different Demands of Verticality and Horizontality

Before looking into the notion of guardianship as an ethical concept, I will introduce two historical examples of what I call guardian civilizations. One is the Islamic civilization in its classical period (predating the destruction of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258), and the other is the civilization that the Italian-born Renaissance had aspired to create. In different ways, they both go back to the Platonic Academy, not to its glorious beginning with the larger-than-life founder but, oddly, to the Academy’s end. If asked, most people in academia would reply that the school was founded in Athens in or around 387 BC. However, it is unlikely that they know that Plato’s Academy lasted continuously till about the time

⁴ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialogue_Among_Civilizations.

⁵ See *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, edited by Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier, and Lucian W. Stone Jr. (2001, p. 34) and Farah Diba-Pahlavi’s *Erinnerungen* (2004, p. 248). For more details, see *Dialogue among Civilizations: A Historical Perspective* (2017) by Mohamad Zaidin Mohamad, Sofyuddin Yusof, Ahmad Zahid Salleh, and Abdillah Hisham.

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of Cicero. It reinvented itself later but eventually was closed down in the 6th century AD. This historical detail was also pointed out by Bertrand Russell, who remarked judiciously: ‘At last, in AD 529, it was closed by Justinian because of his religious bigotry, and the Dark Ages descended upon Europe’ (Russell, 1967, p. 61). In other words, the ‘inhospitable’ Byzantine emperor Justinian could not tolerate an institution that he viewed as a remnant of Paganism. But what happened to the last teachers and students of the Academy?

2.1 *The Exodus of Athens’s Last Academicians*

Some of the Academy’s last members escaped to Ḥarrān (today in Turkey), and others to Ctesiphon, the winter capital of the Sassanian Empire. Barely a century later, both Ḥarrān and Ctesiphon were incorporated into the newly formed Islamic Empire. Ḥarrān became *the* centre of translations of Greek scientific and philosophical works into Syriac and eventually into Arabic, while the magnificent city of Ctesiphon suffered irreversible decline after Muslim-Arab troops captured it. Eventually, its palaces and monuments were demolished and used as building materials for a new capital. The city’s name was Baghdad. It recycled its predecessor’s bricks and marbles – and continued its tradition of scholarship and sciences. Baghdad’s famed ‘House of Wisdom’ (*Bayt al-Ḥikma*) thus served as a library, archive, academy, scientific complex, and translation centre for Hellenistic, Persian, and Indian sources.

It would be overstating matters to claim that the early Islamic Empire might not have become the repository of ancient Greek knowledge without the migration of the last Platonists to Persia; one may never know with any precision how ideas travel nor whether they will be received favourably. Be that as it may, the Islamic world has been a ‘guardian civilization’ for centuries. It actively preserved the scientific sources of its predecessors and acknowledged its intellectual debt to other nations, especially Greeks and Persians. More importantly, it added substantially to the body of knowledge it inherited from previous civilizations. For a while, some Muslim philosophers and historians, coincidentally many of whom were Shi‘ites, even presented a ‘chronology’ in which Greek and biblical traditions were intertwined as if to say, ‘We are all connected’. This is what it looks like:

Empedocles – *King David* or *King Solomon* – *Luqmān* –
Pythagoras – Socrates – Plato – Aristotle

In the actual historical sequence, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle followed the Presocratics with no non-Greeks included into their timeline. Moreover, in Western sources, Empedocles is neither deemed the earliest nor one of the more prominent Greek philosophers. However, according to the Kurdish physician and historian al-Shahrazūrī (13th century), who collected the story from earlier Islamic texts:

The great and divine philosopher Empedocles, son of Ibn Nādir, born in Agrigento, was one of the greatest and principal sages in the judgment of all philosophers [...]. After he had studied philosophy in Syria with David and Luqmān, he returned to Greece and dedicated himself to the promotion of philosophy. It was also said that he studied with Solomon [...]. (Cited in Palacios, 1978, p. 45)

On this view, Empedocles' fame is connected to his studies with King David and the latter's son Solomon (who actually preceded him by about six centuries). The third figure is Luqmān, a Qur'ānic personage; a chapter of the Islamic scripture is named after him. Later sources state that he was an African sold into slavery but then released by a master who recognized his wisdom. On occasion, he is referred to as a Prophet.⁶

What is the meaning of this encounter between an ancient Greek, two biblical kings, and a Qur'ānic wise man? Since all these figures were said to be sages, the account was likely considered an allegory expressive of a worldview in which wisdom acted as the link between civilizations. In a different Islamic source, Empedocles is himself referred to as a Prophet by use of the term *ghiyāth*, which is derived from Sufism (Islamic mysticism), making him thus partake in a tradition that historically comes later (see Kingsley, 1995, p. 380). One cannot help noticing that this worldview places Islam between two earlier traditions. Moreover, it islamizes and appropriates historical figures who predate the event of Islam. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that the Islamic *philosophia perennis* tradition does not point out any one tradition as the mother civilization. Wisdom has no beginning; it pervades all cultures.

⁶ See Heller and Stillmann, 'Luqmān' in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, accessed online on 07 October 2022. The Qur'ānic sura XXXI is named after him.

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2.2 The Platonic Academy in Careggi

Centuries later, another revival of Ancient Greek studies took place in a different part of the world. The city where it began was Florence, and the time was the Renaissance. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (d. 1494) only. A fresco by Rosselli at Sant' Ambrogio, Florence (1484–1486) depicts him with Leon Battista Alberti (d. 1472) to the left and Angelo Poliziano (d. 1494) to the right.⁷ All three were members of the Platonic Academy in Careggi headed by Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino (d. 1499) and sponsored by the Medici family. What artist and art theoretician Alberti, Pico the philosopher, and Poliziano the Aristotelian and poet had in common was Humanism, a teaching that focused on human beings, their true potential, and how to educate for the highest possible human performance, what the Greeks called the *'aretē'* (ἀρετή), which can be translated as both the excellence and virtue of man. Unlike Alberti and Poliziano, however, Pico tapped into all civilizations known to the Renaissance.

Among Pico's synthesizing predecessors, one finds Byzantine philosopher Gemistus Pletho (d. 1452/54) who joined emperor John VIII on his trip to Italy in the hope of achieving unity between the Eastern and Western Churches; Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464), arguably the first Renaissance philosopher and the chief papal diplomat who helped to prepare the Council; and Ficino who translated the entire Platonic corpus, numerous neo-Platonic sources, and also the rare *Chaldaic Oracles* and the *Hymns of Zoroaster*, all from Greek manuscripts. Thanks to his tutor Elia del Medigo (d. 1493), a Jewish scholar, Pico also became the first known Christian philosopher acquainted with the Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) and Muslim-Andalusian philosopher Abu Bakr ibn Tufayl (d. 501/1185), whose philosophical novel *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqẓān* celebrates a self-taught protagonist who accomplishes himself as an Aristotelian rationalist before turning to Sufism (Islamic mysticism).

Like Ficino, Pico's motivation behind his relentless efforts to study one philosophical tradition after another was driven by the conviction that philosophy dwelled in all world civilizations and that one only needed to find the corresponding pieces in each to reconstruct it. Pico's answer to the question about human excellence is that one must explore all world traditions to find the path of

⁷ Available at <https://www.unikum.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/restaurodicosimo1.jpg> (accessed 12 October 2022).

self-achievement.⁸ That answer was a novelty in a Europe otherwise shaken by century-long debates pitting Platonists against Aristotelians, Christians against Pagans, Theologians against Philosophers, Averroists against non-Averroists, Franciscans against Dominicans, and the Western against the Eastern Church.

The vision that emerges from both the Islamic and Renaissance notions of a *philosophia perennis*, or, as Pico put it, *pia philosophia*, is grandiose and inspiring. However, let us face it, it is one thing to think ourselves the heirs of previous civilizations, which is a way of basking in the light of their achievements, and another to embrace (not merely accept or tolerate) the co-existence with parallel civilizations. While the ‘vertical axis’ aligns us with the past and lets us take on the convenient role of recipients and keepers of heritage by studying, assessing, and preserving the material and cultural legacy of earlier civilizations, the ‘horizontal axis’ connects us to contemporary civilizations and implicitly to their and our future. The horizontal axis presents us with the opportunity to not only act as heritage keepers but also to provide a *shared home* for contemporaneous civilizations – without depriving them of theirs. Heritage keepers are essential to preserving historical memory; they act as guardians on the vertical axis, at times with heroic dedication.⁹ It seems to me, however, that the role of the guardian on the horizontal axis is yet to be created. I propose to lay out the foundation for this type of guardianship by extracting it from the notion of hospitality, not the Derridian variant, but one that is conceptualized as a transformative event involving both the host and the guest. I call it ‘deep hospitality’.

3. Linguistic Hospitality, Guest-Friendship, and ‘Hostipitality’

In many ways, every culture and every civilization that has been in contact with other traditions and populations is or has become a host, in whatever modest ways and at least for some period in its history. However, I am thinking about more than just sanctuary

⁸ To get a sense of the vastness of Pico’s project, see *Syncretism in the West: Pico’s 900 Theses (1486). The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems*, with text, translation, and commentary by S. A. Farmer (1998).

⁹ One such heroic guardian is the Syrian archaeologist Khaled al-Asaad (1932–2015), who together with his staff hid artifacts from the Palmyra Museum and stayed behind alone to face ISIS troops. He paid the ultimate price.

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countries as in the case of Persia when it welcomed the last Athenian Platonists or, to move to a different world region, India accepting the Zoroastrians (the Parsis) fleeing forced conversion to Islam. There is a generosity that goes beyond offering shelter and securing survival. What else is there to share?

3.1 From Linguistic Hospitality to Guest-Friendship

French philosopher Paul Ricoeur speaks of ‘linguistic hospitality’ in the context of translations and emphasizes the ethical dimension of the task. Translators ought to be ‘hospitable’, i.e., they are to find a new ‘home’ for what they endeavour to express in another language. The effort is of ‘mediation’ between the terms in the original text and the ones in the receiving language. Even the most accomplished translator, i.e., the one ‘leading across’, cannot make every shade of meaning reach the other shore.¹⁰ The art of translating consists of neither entirely absorbing the hosted language – it would make the author disappear – nor surrendering to it, which would erase the reader. Naturally, Ricoeur had more ambitious plans than to solely reflect on the translations of texts:

Translation sets out not only intellectual work [...] but also an ethical problem. Bringing the reader to the author, bringing the author to the reader, at the risk of serving and betraying two masters: this is to practice what I like to call *linguistic hospitality*. It is this which serves as a model for other forms of hospitality that I think resemble it: confessions, religions, are they not languages that are foreign to one another, which we must learn in order to make our way into them. (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 23, my emphasis).

Ricoeur is quite clear that the lessons to be learned from the hospitable translator extend into other and larger domains. In what follows, I retain his notion of ‘linguistic hospitality’ to explore the *hosting of untranslated words*, which comes closer to the hospitality extended to *strangers*.

On rare occasions, a country may refuse to *host words* from other languages or attempt to purge itself of traces betraying the presence or influence of another language. One notices this urge in French culture beginning in the sixteenth century when the exclusion of formerly popular ‘Italianisms’ started. A major factor was also the

¹⁰ For the etymology of ‘translation’, see Davidson (2012, p. 3).

Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterêts (1539), a royal edict that made 'Francien' the country's only official language and was followed by many more laws issued in defence of French to this day. Eventually, the official language politics cleansed a formerly hospitable French of Italian and Occitan vocabulary although it originated in sister languages.¹¹ Needless to state that this happened at the expense of the expressivity of French. The language that declined to be a host and became, to use Cartesian terms, 'clear' and 'distinct', ended up impoverishing itself; the refusal to host became a culturally costly matter. As is widely known, the more recent efforts to rid French of English words have, so far, failed. The French case, however, is a historical exception. Typically, languages give and receive hospitality. Turkish thus abounds with Arabic, Persian, and (via Venetian traders) Italian words, while much Turkish vocabulary survived in the Balkan countries long after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. An extraordinary case is the hosting of hundreds of Arabic technical terms in European languages, usually via Latin. They are a reminder of an earlier period when Muslims excelled in sciences. These terms are still applied in modern mathematics, medicine, astronomy, chemistry, optics, and many more fields of study. For instance, *algebra*, *alchemy*, *algorithm*, *alkali*, *almanac*, *Altair*, *azimuth*, *Betelgeuse*, *borax*, *cipher*, *elixir* (originally Greek), *soap*, *sugar*, *syrup*, and *zenith*. They are commonly called 'loanwords', as if they were going to be returned one day. If anything, they are on permanent loans. However, if the receiving language is the host, does that not make the language of origin the 'guest'? Like many other languages, Turkish would be both a linguistic host and a guest.

Someone could say, 'Those Arabic scientific terms are already there in European languages'. In other words, it is too late to think of hosting them; the terms in question have already been acclimatized and incorporated. And anyway, how many speakers of English, French, German, *etc.* even know that *Betelgeuse* is derived via French from *yad al-jawzā* (meaning 'hand of the Gemini')? That is precisely why hospitality needs to be extended – even *post factum*. It accords words like *algorithm*, *almanac*, or *cipher* a 'guest-home', which transforms a takeover into a welcome that also expresses gratitude towards the culture of origin for enriching one's native vocabulary. Coincidentally, *cuma*, etymologically related to 'come', once meant 'guest', and Old English for 'will', i.e., 'willa' (from Proto-Germanic **wiljon-*) means, among other things 'desire',

¹¹ See Scheel's PhD thesis *French Language Purism: French Linguistic Development and Current National Attitudes* (1998).

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'joy', and 'delight', making the guest 'one whose coming suits another's will or wish'.¹² Seen in this light, Arabic scientific terms are not absorbed but given a dwelling. To extend linguistic hospitality also implies an acknowledgement that guest terms continue to exist in their language of origin; they have not been taken hostage.¹³ The concept that applies here is one of 'guest-friendship', a term that in English translates the Greek *'xenía'* (ξενία). *'Xenos'* means stranger, foreigner, and is also a word for friend. How can strangers be friends? The answer is simple: they become friends once you host them.

3.2 Guest-Friendship: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hospitality in Ancient Greek and Arab Cultures

When it comes to *hosting strangers*, ancient Greek literature is filled with examples of good and bad guest-friendship. While Jacques Derrida's reflections on hospitality focus on *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles' last tragedy, for reasons to be clarified below, I deliberately choose my examples from *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Both Homeric epics may be read as manuals of hospitality with 'Dos and Don'ts' encapsulated in individual stories. Zeus himself in his role as Zeus Xenios, patron of the strangers, is the embodiment of hospitality and, at times, appears to humans asking them for shelter. In Homer's epic poems, Telemachus and Nausicaa are exemplars of ancient Greek guest-friendship. While the former treats Athena (like Zeus, the protector of strangers) as an honoured guest, only recognizing her divine status upon her departure, the latter offers protection to stranded and naked Ulysses without suspecting his fame and royal standing. According to the etiquette of ancient Greek culture, one was only permitted to ask the guest's name after attending to their basic needs. True hospitality is gratuitous and does not desire anything in return. In the case of Nausicaa's encounter with the King of Ithaca, hospitality also restored the guest's identity: Ulysses became again regal.¹⁴ One should note, however, that there also existed a ritualized form of guest-friendship whereby hospitality

¹² See <https://www.etymonline.com/word/welcome>.

¹³ Derrida too has use for the term 'hostage' but places it in a different context. The guest makes the host hostage, i.e., he is 'the one who keeps him at home'. Also, Derrida derives French 'otage' from *hoste*, *oste*. See Derrida (2000b, p. 9).

¹⁴ For how hospitality and recognition are linked, see Murnagham's *Disguise and Recognition in The Odyssey* (1987, pp. 92–93).

was reciprocal and cultivated among social equals. It was hereditary between well-to-do families living in different Greek cities and ensured physical and legal protection when they travelled. However, the stories of Telemachus and Nausicaa exemplify an ethics of hospitality that is entirely selfless and spontaneous. This ethics was not unique to the Greeks; think of Arab guest-friendship. It has risen to the level of an art form and continues to be practiced, not only among Bedouins. *Karam*, the Arabic term for hospitality, also means generosity and clearly delineates the ethical standard hosts abide by, even if it should be to the detriment of their families' well-being. To this day, the best compliment one could pay a host is that they are more generous than Ḥātim ('*akram min Ḥātim*'), in remembrance of the pre-Islamic poet Ḥātim al-Ṭā'iyī (sixth century AD) who slaughtered his horse (all he had left) to feed guests, while his own family was starving (see Avempace [Ibn Bajja], 1963, p. 131). In contrast to *xenia*, *karam* has no connotations of 'strangeness' or 'foreignness'. The word for guest (*ḍayf*) simply means the one 'adjoined to the family and fed with them'.¹⁵ As in ancient Greece, however, the code of hospitality included an obligation to offer not only food and clothing but also legal protection since the guest had no rights in a tribe other than his or her own. Later, the ancient Arabian code was Islamicized. *Karam* and cognates of this term thus appear forty-seven times in the Qur'ān. In one verse, God himself is referred to as '*Karīm*' (generous).¹⁶ There is also an aesthetic dimension implied in *karam*'s additional meanings of nobility and grace exemplified even in as simple a gesture as the brewing and serving of coffee, which in Arab culture is the privilege of the male head of the household. The gesture expresses a joyful and chivalrous mindset comparable to the medieval ideal of the knight who served his beloved;¹⁷ a recompense would be considered an insult.

I am indebted to Dr Robert Littman, my colleague in Classics at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, for this source.

¹⁵ See Lane's *Arabic-English Lexicon* (1863), also available at <http://www.tyndalearchive.com/TABS/Lane/>.

¹⁶ See <https://corpus.quran.com/qurandictionary.jsp?q=krm>.

¹⁷ Whereas it is true that the gracious host is honoured in Arab culture, I would not go so far as calling them the 'dandy of the desert', as Toshihiko Izutsu suggests. See Siddiqi (2015, p. 33). The statements collected by Andrew Shryock that speak of hospitality as the sacred and intoxicating 'Arab madness' are closer to my lived experiences in North Africa. See Shryock (2009, p. 34).

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In both ancient Greek and Arab cultures, the cultivation of guest-friendship was a way of life. Significantly, while the code of hospitality was culturally mandated, the ideal pursued in practice was one in which the host felt personally rewarded by accommodating the 'stranger-friend' in need of shelter and protection. The ethics of guest-friendship was complemented by an aesthetic dimension that also introduced (the decidedly non-Kantian) element of pleasure, a pleasure derived from the gratuitous act that celebrates the guest and hospitality itself. Oddly, the aesthetics and pleasure of giving are missing in Derrida's reflections on hospitality.

3.3 Derridian Hospitality or 'Hostipitality'?

In twentieth-century Western culture, one needs to turn to Jacques Derrida to find a similarly uncompromising understanding of hospitality, which may be a remnant of his upbringing in Algeria. Some studies suggest parallels between his views and those found in North Africa and the Sahel. Andrew Shryock thus writes: 'Most people do not hear Derrida's accent when he talks about the power of giving and receiving, largely because they do not know how Bedouin sound when they discuss such things'.¹⁸ Knowing the value of *karam* in Arab culture, one may have high expectations of Derridian hospitality. Indeed, the French philosopher agonized over the difficulty inherent in the notion and the very word 'hospitality'. Let us begin with a much-cited passage from his *Of Hospitality*:

Let us say yes *to who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any *identification*, whether or not it is to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female. (Derrida, 2000a, p. 77)¹⁹

¹⁸ Shryock (2009, p. 32). Towards the end of *Of Hospitality* (2000a), Derrida mentions the violence France inflicted on Algeria, but there is no suggestion of a debt, intellectual or cultural, that he felt he owed his birth country. Derrida made his accusations as a Frenchman, not a North African, despite his self-description as 'a little black and very Arab Jew' (see Wise, 2009, p. 27).

¹⁹ In his lecture 'Hostipitality', Derrida freely paraphrases a passage from Martin Heidegger's *What Is Called Thinking?* (1968): 'We might call [*heissen*] a guest [*hôte*] welcome [*Geheiss*]. This does not mean that we

The ‘arrival’ (or, as Derrida puts it in French, the *arrivant*, i.e., the one in the process of arriving) has not been invited, which would give the host the opportunity to prepare the beginning – and the end – of hospitality. Other than invitation, ‘visitation’ brings out one’s true hospitable nature, if it is there at all. Nevertheless, even when hosts do open their doors to unexpected visitors, Derrida’s concern is that guests are overwhelmed by the host’s hold. One cannot be in the position of the host without implicitly saying, ‘this is mine, I am at home’ (Derrida, 2000b, p. 14), which suggests that the guest is not. For Derrida, the philosophical problem at hand lies in the incompatibility between the ‘unconditional’ law of hospitality and the ‘conditionality’ of hospitality on the ground:

To [...] ‘bid’ someone welcome ‘to one’s own home’, where, in one’s own home, one is master of the household, master of the city, or master of the nation, the language, or the state, places from which one bids the other welcome [...] and grants him a kind of *right of asylum* by authorizing him to cross a threshold that would be a threshold <a door that would be a door>, a threshold that is determinable because it is self-identical and indivisible, a threshold the line of which can be traced. (Derrida, 2000b, p. 6)²⁰

This is part of the problem as to why Derrida speaks so often of the conditionality of hospitality. The threshold remains a separation even when the guest crosses; the home space is always the host’s domain. Derrida was keenly aware of how rigorous his notion of unconditional hospitality was, and that hospitality always included some form of hostility, whether it is the need to overcome one’s inner resistance or the urge to translate the guest’s ‘strangeness’ in terms of one’s own culture. He, therefore, coined the term ‘hostipitality’, thereby emphasizing, like French linguist Émile Benveniste, ‘host’ as the root common to both hospitality and hostility.²¹ In reference to

attach to him the name “Welcome [*Geheiss*]”, but that we call him to come in and *complete his arrival* [my italics] as a welcome friend’ (2000b, p. 12).

²⁰ The gendering of the host in this passage is intentional. Derrida correlates the power imbalance between host and guest with the male assertiveness of the host: ‘When Klossowski describes the law of hospitality in speaking of a master of the house, a master of places like the family and a master of the wife, husband of the wife who becomes the stake and essence of hospitality, he is well within the domestic [...] logic which seems to govern this Indo-European history of hospitality’ (2000b, p. 13).

²¹ See the section on ‘Hospitality’ in Émile Benveniste, *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society*, (2016, pp. 61–73). The original

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Immanuel Kant's reflections on 'Hospitalität' (also rendered in German as 'Wirtbarkeit') in *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795), Derrida adds a dark observation placed within parentheses:

(a word of Latin origin, of a troubled and troubling origin, a word which carries its own contradiction incorporated into it, a Latin word which allows itself to be parasitized by its opposite, 'hostility', the undesirable guest [*hôte*] which it harbors as the self-contradiction in its own body [...]). (Derrida, 2000b, p. 3)

Anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers makes a similar observation but focuses on the transformation of the stranger into the guest: 'The inversion implies a transformation from hostile stranger, *hostis*, into guest, *hospes* (or *hostis*), from one whose hostile intentions are assumed to one whose hostility is laid in abeyance' (Pitt-Rivers, 1977, pp. 101–102). What neither Derrida nor Pitt-Rivers realized is that in English too host and guest are both derived from *hostis*.

4. Mediation Starts from the Middle

On the one hand, the purity of Derrida's ideal of hospitality is the gold standard to keep in mind for anyone seriously considering to be a genuine host. On the other, its unconditionality impedes the implementation of the ideal, which is why he frequently referred to it as the 'impossible'. This is where in a Derridian world the 'hostipitality' that dwells within hospitality traps hospitality. According to the French philosopher, there is 'a non-dialectizable antinomy' between the law of unlimited hospitality and the 'laws' of hospitality, i.e., rights and duties as defined by various cultures in legal, religious, or ethical terms (Derrida, 2000a, p. 77). Be that as it may, it is possible to remove the hegemony of hosts without making them obsolete; there is no hospitality without a host. One must turn to Hegel, the master of dialectics, to find the solution. The way out of the difficulty is not thinking in terms of two but three. And more importantly, rather than focus on the host and guest, which brings up the power imbalance problem, I propose to focus on the notion of guest-friendship as the mediating factor. This precludes the issue of power altogether.

French version appeared in 1969. Derrida acknowledges his debt to Benveniste's method of clustering words pertaining to a 'well-established social phenomenon' such as hospitality (2000b, pp. 13–14).

While Ricoeur suggested a hospitable translator as the intermediate, which only put the burden on one of the players (the other two being the author and reader), I like to use a dynamic Hegelian structure to ensure a built-in mediation process, in which every element is an actor.

In Hegel's famous Lord and Bondsman dialectic, the emphasis is not on the opposites but on a unity that separated into two. That unity for Hegel is self-consciousness. Suppose we substitute self-consciousness with the notion of guest-friendship and understand that it is a relational term, without which there could be neither a host nor a guest. In that case, hospitality is placed in a very different setting. Here is a quotation from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in which I inserted the notion of guest-friendship where the original speaks of self-consciousness:

The middle term is *guest-friendship* which splits into the extremes; and each extreme [*host, guest, my insertion*] is this exchanging of its own determinateness [i.e., being *host* or being *guest, my insertion*] and an absolute transition into the opposite. Each is for the other the middle term, through which each mediates itself with itself and unites with itself; and each is for itself, and for the other, an immediate being on its own account, which at the same time is such only through this mediation. They recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another. (Hegel, 1977, p. 112)²²

The ingenuity of the Hegelian dialectic turns each of the three terms into a mediating force. Both the 'host' and the 'guest' realize they need each other. No one is a host without the existence of a guest, and *vice versa* the notion of a guest presupposes a host; neither can exist without the other. What started with the dominant position of the host is transformed into a model in which the positions of host and guest are interconvertible, and transformation follows what Hegel calls '*Aufheben*', meaning both sublation and preservation.

²² After I delivered my online lecture, I discovered that other attempts have been made to use Hegel's Lord and Bondsman dialectic to explore or salvage Derrida's imbalanced relationship between host and guest. They apply a different methodology and do not recognize that what I call the 'transformative event' requires a third element. See, for instance, Shaul's 'Recognition and Hospitality: Hegel and Derrida' (2019). There are also attempts to work with Hegel to address the question of hospitality regardless of Derrida's dilemma, see e.g., Pagano, 'Recognition and Hospitality' (2019).

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The guest is as much a host as the host, and the host as much a guest as the guest. As the two actors in the relationship of guest-friendship recognize each other and themselves in the dynamic setting, they are transformed by the experience and realize that they are both hosting each other and are, therefore, both guests. To apply Hegel's notion of 'sublation-preservation', when guests 'preserve', they become their host's *guardians*, i.e., they host the host; and hosts find themselves their guests' guests. Coincidentally, to 'guard' comes from old or middle French '*garder*', which is derived from Proto-Germanic '**wardōn*' (meaning 'protection', 'attention', 'keeping'), and Proto-Indo-European root '*wer-*' (meaning 'to heed', 'defend').²³ Remarkably, the transformative journey of this ancient Indo-European root that came to characterize the present notion of guest-friendship has been itself a multiple linguistic guest, while also serving as the host.

By contrast, there are no actors in Derrida's hospitality narrative, only static figures unable to embody the roles they are meant to fulfil. And yet, the notion of a unity that splits into opposites comes up in Derrida's linguistic reflections on hospitality. It lies precisely there where he underlines the common origin of *hôte* (host) and *hôte* (guest); they go back to the same root. However, no transformative event follows the semantic split for the simple reason that *hôte* and *hôte* do not engage each other. The major difference between Derrida's and my reading of ancient Greek hospitality is that I translate it as guest-friendship, which places host and guest in an interactive relationship; there is no friendship without a dynamic framing of the figures involved. The French language does not have an equivalent term, which may have suited Derrida's critique of the poor state of hospitality accorded the stranger, i.e., the North African immigrant in France. But it is not just the language that frames the event of hospitality in his philosophy; Derrida easily ventured into German when it supported his quest. It is significant to understand why he chose the Greek literary figure that he did. Derrida thus focuses on Oedipus as portrayed in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*; it gives him a protagonist who is never truly at home. Neither in his native Thebes nor his adopted Corinth is the tragic figure in a position to assert, 'This is mine, I am at home'. At the end of his life, the only place that is his is the burial place he chooses himself in the grove of the Erinyes, near Athens. It is about this burial place, where Oedipus believes he will be redeemed

²³ See <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=guard>. Like Derrida, I, too, learned from Benveniste to apply transcultural etymology.

from his tragic deeds (and where his death will be a gift of peace to the King of Athens who ‘hosted’ his dead body), that Derrida writes: ‘The guest (*hôte*) becomes the host (*hôte*) of the host (*hôte*)’ (Derrida, 2000a, p. 125). Sadly, the hosting guest he is referring to is dead Oedipus. In *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, Derrida plays again with a similar formula and imagines a guest becoming the host’s host (Derrida, 1999, p. 42). However, what is missing is the transformative event that engulfs both the host and the guest, which is the only means by which the positions can become convertible. Again, mediation must start from the middle.

The plot in the *Odyssey* is very different. Ulysses returns to his palace in Ithaca after twenty years of wandering – as a guest. His son Telemachus receives him graciously without recognizing him. The son honours the stranger in the same way as he had done with the goddess Athena and defends him against the unruly suitors-guests courting his mother. These were uninvited – like Ulysses – but embodied bad guest behaviour. The takeaway message seems to be that Ulysses, who has been the guest of many hosts during his long home-coming, needed first to become a guest in his house before he could again be the host. By first being a guest, he ceases to be a stranger, and, once again, his identity and dignity are restored. However, when he eventually asserts himself as the host, he does not revert to the same position he occupied before he went to war – he becomes the ‘host-guest’.

Notably, except for Kant, none of the classical Western ethicists wrote on hospitality. In twentieth-century thought, philosophers typically resort to epic literature and poetry to develop their ideas. Thus Martin Heidegger used Hölderlin’s poems as a foil to distil his understanding of dwelling and hospitality (see Winkler, 2017), a device that became a source of inspiration for Derrida. Similarly, Emmanuel Lévinas developed some of his views on the subject as a reflection on biblical stories (see Hatley, 2005; Katz, 2005).

5. Journeying from Being a ‘Hostage’ to Becoming a ‘Guardian Civilization’

I introduced Arab and ancient Greek hospitality as models of guest-friendship. This, however, does not mean that all Arabs or all Greeks have always been hospitable or perfect guests. We may think of Paris, who was Menelaus’ guest and stole the latter’s beautiful queen, or of the guests who ate Penelope and Telemachus out of house and home;

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in both stories, the violation of *xenia*, seen as an insult to Zeus, ends up being punished most harshly. Nevertheless, guest-friendship is understood to be an honoured way of life in both cultures affording individuals a social setting in which to realize themselves as moral subjects, whether in the position of the host or the guest. In current Western civilization, hospitality plays a minor role in the hierarchy of values and, as a result, does not contribute to stronger bonds within the fabric of society or among different societies. We use the expression 'to be a gracious host' but mean by it the kind of generosity extended for a limited time, usually for one evening. Hospitality is not presented as a value to strive for, whether culturally, intellectually, or religiously. We philosophers, at least some of us, praise it in ethical terms, but that does not change anything on the ground. Children are not educated to be hospitable and to delight in taking a step back, and we adults are not exactly acting as exemplary role models. How, then, can we, the nations of the world, become hospitable, which, to put it in no uncertain terms, would expose us to change when we come to reflect our guests and are thus made vulnerable?

Considering the countless past and present conflicts among civilizations and even within one and the same society, resorting to guest-friendship to overcome differences and incompatible claims seems a remote possibility. Nevertheless, in the same way that individuals are able to extend and accept hospitality graciously, the world's civilizations, too, can learn how to be each other's hosts and guests and thus become each other's guardians. Governments may be unteachable; societies, however, are capable of reinventing themselves. Think of post-WWII Germany: apologies, reparations, and collaborations paved the way to friendship with France, its historical enemy, and Israel, where the survivors of the Holocaust and their descendants found a new home.

Let us think of a particularly complicated relationship, such as the sectarian one. How would one get Sunni and Shi'a communities (or Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland) to be each other's 'guest-friends'? The opposed parties in both settings are 'hostages' of their respective historical narratives and in need of a 'wrong' version of themselves to support their claim to authenticity. The challenge is to get the 'hostile' camps to think that maybe, just maybe, the other community might be embodying a valid version of the same core teaching. Even if a central authority acceptable to the opposed groups existed, ordering the two communities to give up their narratives would fall on deaf ears. On the one hand, the sectarian narratives are identity-building, on the other, they are also what

keeps the communities in question trapped. They fail to recognize that no religion or school of thought is able to completely survey its sources and traditions, which is why there is necessarily a potential for multiple expressions. Thus, societies that reject the possible legitimacy of a competing narrative end up becoming hostages to a self-understanding in which every single feature, every ritual, and every source pertaining to their beliefs are considered 'true' and their sole 'possession'. Any variant is branded *eo ipso* an error, or worse a heresy.

Clearly, the lack of communication between sectarian groups could neither be solved by promulgating a law to enforce hospitality. When Kant insisted on the right to '*Wirtbarkeit*' in *Perpetual Peace*, he had in mind a stranger's right not to be treated with hostility, but he still gave the '*Wirt*' (host) the right to reject the stranger. Although one can appreciate Kant denouncing the 'inhospitable conduct' of European colonial powers and requiring that laws regulate the relationships between states, hospitality as developed in the present narrative, i.e., as 'deep hospitality', needs to mean more than not harming the stranger or salvaging refugees from the sea as it is currently happening daily in most Mediterranean countries. The latter is mandated by international sea law and is, without a question, the right thing to do. Yet, it is different from the rescue provided by fishers who go out individually to save shipwrecked fellow human beings. They would not be breaking any law by staying at home, and yet, they rush out even on a stormy day because they see the refugees who are exposed to the elements as a reflection of themselves. Deep hospitality does not replace societal law regulating international hospitality, and these two do not necessarily complement each other either. They may influence each other mutually, but they operate in a different manner. Deep hospitality generates spontaneous, gratuitous acts of guest-friendship. It is a value, not a matter of being law abiding. However, it would be a mistake to expect that deep hospitality requires the kind of self-effacement and self-sacrifice typically associated with women in traditional societies. One finds this type of value-based model in Lévinas's call to recover the silent and withdrawn 'feminine welcome'; traces of this thought are reflected in Derrida.²⁴ His valorising of womanhood and maternity places the feminine, whether identified with concrete women or not, in a 'pre-

²⁴ See Winkler (2017). For a broader discussion of Lévinas's reflections on the feminine, see *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca* by Katz (2003). As for the feminine as the essence of hospitality in Derrida, see footnote 20.

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ethical' realm or outside ethics altogether. It is much too close to how Hegel reflected upon the sacrifice of Antigone who followed divine (rather than human) law; it leaves women unable to develop their subjectivity.²⁵ Lévinas's prose is of an eerie beauty and justly enhances the role women played in the biblical tradition but cannot inspire today's men and women to think of hospitality as a way of life. Men have no desire to renounce their subjectivity (there is no reason they should), and women have been silent much too long.²⁶

The question thus remains: how does one evolve from being a 'hostage civilization', which to varying degrees applies to all societies, to being a 'guardian civilization'? Moreover, what is one to think of societies that have deliberately isolated themselves and chosen to ignore other civilizations altogether?

6. An Adaptation of Qustantin Zurayq's Reflections on Change

During its communist period, Albania used to be Europe's hermit kingdom in the way one thinks of North Korea today; it actually drew its inspiration from the latter. Both countries can be considered hostage civilizations. They took hostage of themselves knowing that it would prevent them from advancing; priority was given to shutting out external influence. Qustantin Zurayq (also spelled Constantine Zurayk, d. 2000), a twentieth-century Arab philosopher and diplomat, was confronted with a similar challenge while reflecting on the multiple dilemmas the Arab societies of his day faced. The situation on the ground was less radical than in the hermit kingdoms. There were no closed borders, no economic restrictions, and control was not exerted over all spheres of life. However, on the whole, Zurayq found the Arab world stuck in a solely religiously defined tradition, a glorified historic past never to return, and a culture they were unable or unwilling to invigorate. He identified three binaries: modern vs religious tradition, past vs future, and foreign vs one's own culture. None of the binaries hold a solution; on the contrary, each presents a trap. Zurayq deemed the excessive attachment to the past a nefarious choice for those who wanted to preserve their culture and saw it thus as a matter of 'retrograde reactionism'. Societies end up holding on to the form of tradition at the expense of its content; they attach themselves to the past, which leads to the neglect of the present and with that to the loss of creativity. By the

²⁵ See Hegel in *Phenomenology* (1977, pp. 261, 284) and in *Philosophy of Right* (1967, pp. 114–115).

²⁶ For a feminist discussion see Anderson (2019).

same token, the negation of one's tradition and one's exclusive orientation toward the future prevents a critical review of the past and triggers the loss of one's cultural identity. Zurayq calls this option 'recalcitrant futurism'.²⁷ Upon analysing the dilemma 'foreign or one's own culture', he finds that the rejection of a foreign culture in favour of one's own leads to totalitarianism, breeds fanaticism, and generates cultural paralysis. Surprisingly, the uncritical acceptance of a foreign culture at the expense of one's own also produces cultural paralysis since the ensuing suffocation of one's roots prevents a creative response to the traits taken over from another civilization. Finding a 'middle' position is the way out of the dilemma. To put it in terms of the deep hospitality theory sketched in the present inquiry, both the refusal and the embracing of other civilizations create severe difficulties for the position of the host. The parallels to the hosting or not hosting of words and strangers are striking. On the one hand, the complete and uncritical espousal of foreign ideas erases the host; the 'guested' culture takes over. On the other hand, radical rejection bans the guest and turns the host into the master of a home soon to crumble.

Zurayq is being rightly perceived as a Neo-Kantian (see Kassab, 1999). Nevertheless, his attempts to mediate between the opposing poles of the binaries he analyses also reveal a Hegelian streak. Ultimately, the extremes are not there to showcase the dilemmas he identified but to offer a spectrum on which civilizations may calibrate their exact position. It allows them to seek at different times the vicinity to one or the other pole to suit their needs without losing their unique 'character', what Zurayq called '*shakhsiyya*'. When Zurayq wrote *Fī Ma'rakat al-Ḥaḍāra (On the Fight for Civilization, 1964)*, his sight was on the Arab world. Nevertheless, what he says about the need to 'fight' applies to all civilizations, mainly since his understanding of fighting implies critical self-examination and examination of other civilizations. No civilization can survive as a stand-alone. It is precisely the encounter with other civilizations which secures one's future by responding freely and creatively to them. Self-preservation and the preservation of other civilizations are therefore inseparable in this world view. They are the soil upon which cultures thrive, and none is hostage to others or itself. They are in a continuous stream of exchanges and thus become civilizations on the move.

²⁷ See Faris (1988, pp. 24–25), Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' (2004, pp. 296–318), and Kassab (2009, pp. 65–74).

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To go back to sectarian tensions, the goal is to make the Shi'ite become the guardian of the Sunni Muslim and *vice versa*. This entails fighting in Zurayqian fashion for the other community's right to its narrative and thus preserving their own identity. As hostage civilizations they needed a negative foil to make sense of who and what they were. However, by becoming each other's host-guests they add a dimension to their self-understanding that says they could not be who and what they are without the existence of the other. After all, the other view could hold a *shakhsiyya* trait that has escaped them or can become an innovative further development, which might need reviewing, or was simply lost in their tradition. Similarly, at the level of civilizations with no common legacy, each holds both unique and shared features that may help other world civilizations sustain each other mutually or, better even, become each other's sustenance. Slavic culture and Slavic languages are hardly ever seen as repositories of human experience and wisdom in a Western context; this is another relationship in need of deep hospitality.²⁸ However, a look at, for instance, Bulgarian 'сѡхранител' (*sahranitel*, with the meanings of 'guardian', 'custodian', 'protector', and 'keeper' reveals the root 'храна' (*hrana*, meaning 'food'), derived from Proto-Slavic **xorna* and possibly related to Proto-Indo-European **ǵr̥h₂nóm* (grain).²⁹ The same root is also contained in Bulgarian охрана (*ohrana*, meaning 'protection', 'safeguard', 'safe conduct') and сѡхранение (*sahranenie*, 'safe-keeping'). The guardian is thus the one who keeps you safe by 'nourishing' you.

We are a long way from a world where civilizations are each other's cultural and spiritual 'food'. If they were, no one would lack physical food either. Nevertheless, one ought to hope and dream. Hope is not a sign of weakness but, as Kant put it, an ethical obligation. It prepares the ground for change. And dreams? They sustain hope.

²⁸ Benveniste includes some Slavic terms in his chapter on Hospitality: '*hostis* in Latin corresponds to *gasts* of Gothic and to *gostī* of Old Slavonic, which also presents *gos-podi* 'master', formed like *hospes*' (2016, p. 65). Derrida adds '*hospodar*', i.e., 'prince', 'lord' (2000b, pp. 13–14). '*Gospod*' ('Lord') is also the term used for God.

²⁹ See <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Reconstruction:Proto-Slavic/xorna>. All Slavic languages have terms with the root '*hrana*' connoting protection, guardianship, or preservation. Serbian thus uses the word '*сахрана*' (*sahrana*) for burial with the meaning of interring and thus safekeeping the deceased body.

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