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ARTICLE

On Hospitality: Levinas, Derrida, Ratty, and Mole

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Abstract

This essay explores the ethical stakes of hospitality through an unexpected pairing: the philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida and the riverbank encounters in the classic children's novel *The Wind in the Willows*. Levinas's account of the face of the Other and Derrida's reflections on unconditional hospitality illuminate the risks, demands, and vulnerabilities inherent in welcoming the stranger. Read alongside these thinkers, Ratty and Mole's unfolding friendship becomes a parable of ethical openness that resists calculation, merit, and control. Their encounters reveal how hospitality is continually tested by fear and disruption, yet remains an imperative that unsettles the reasons for exclusion wrought by the social and political forces that shape our world. In an age marked by displacement and contested borders, this literary-philosophical dialogue invites us to imagine forms of welcome grounded not in worthiness, but in responsibility.

Keywords: Derrida; ethics; hospitality; Levinas; Other; welcome

Forced displacement is one of the most pressing humanitarian crises of our era. Uprooted by war, climate change, and economic insecurity, millions of people are pressed from their homes into a precarious, dislocated existence. Powerful heads of state harden borders, erect walls, expand detention centers, and carry out deportations. Such leaders build their political capital through discourses of suspicion and hostility, mobilizing currents of nationalism and fears of scarcity, security, and identity to drive policies of exclusion and expulsion. Within prosperous societies, rising homelessness and ingrained prejudice against the poor and marginalized further remind us how fragile belonging has become.

Against this backdrop, the act of welcoming the stranger takes on urgent ethical significance. Beyond quaint notions of domestic courtesy or simple generosity, hospitality has become a critical moral and political fault line against which we can measure government policies and our understanding of what it means to live responsibly with others. Hospitality has long been one of philosophy's deepest concerns, and twentieth-century French thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida expanded its ethical and political stakes in ways that remain acutely pertinent to our turbulent times.

Levinas placed welcome and hospitality at the very heart of ethics, arguing that when we encounter the face of the Other, we are called to a responsibility to them before

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adherence to any laws or calculations. The face, for Levinas, bears the trace of the divine, not as a supernatural presence, but as an ethical demand that unsettles and obliges us.[1] Jacques Derrida, extending this insight, insisted that true hospitality demands unconditional openness to the arrival of the Other, which precedes rules, reciprocity, or even our comfort. Such welcome, Derrida acknowledges, is fraught with risk, for opening one's door to a stranger is also risking being disconcerted or even hurt. Much more than a simple virtue, opening one's door is to initiate a trembling threshold of unpredictable encounter.[2]

Philosophy subsequently wrestles with a paradox, for hospitality in practice necessitates conditions and limitations, yet true hospitality calls us to transcend them. Derrida called this tension an *aporia*, a perplexing, unresolvable dilemma, and, thus, not a problem to be solved but an ethical space we must inhabit.[3] It is in the push and pull between conditional and unconditional welcome, between preserving protection and embodying authentic openness, that the drama of our responsibility to the stranger lies.

As we shift from philosophy to practice, literature can illustrate these ideas with poignant clarity. One example appears in the first chapter of British writer Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows.* Though typically considered a children's tale, this story offers a profound parable of hospitality, rendering insights from Levinas and Derrida accessible for the desperate needs of our age.[4]

1. Ratty and Mole: A parable of welcome

The Wind in the Willows begins with Mole abandoning his spring-cleaning chores in his burrow because the season's penetrating "spirit of divine discontent" has called him forth.[5] With utter enthrallment, he eventually reaches the river for the first time in his life. Here Mole and Ratty encounter each other from opposite sides of the riverbank. Grahame captures this moment with vivid emphasis on the face. As Mole glances across the water, "something bright and small seemed to twinkle... Then as he looked, it winked at him, and so declared itself to be an eye; and a small face began gradually to grow up around it, like a frame round a picture."[6] The two strangers then regard each other cautiously, momentarily suspended in the unfamiliar gaze of the other. Here the face of the Other has broken into Mole and Ratty's respective purviews. In Levinasian terms, however, this moment involves more than the appearance of a literal face and the other's act of looking, for the ethical force of the face exceeds what can be seen. Through and beyond their physical countenance, it is the other's exposure and vulnerability that interrupts self-enclosure and calls forth responsibility even before words are exchanged. Importantly, this ethical claim of the Other is not grounded in

[1] Levinas 2015, 194–201.
[2] Derrida 1999, 26, 111.
[3] Derrida 1999, 30–32.
[4] This essay regards Ratty and Mole as literary figures through which to explore ethical human hospitality, rather than as part of Derrida's broader philosophical discussion of "the animal." For Derrida's challenge to the human/animal divide, especially his critique of the way Western philosophy collapses diverse non-human creatures into a single category, see *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008). For further discussion of hospitality and Derrida's work on animals, see Judith Still, *Derrida and Hospitality* (2010), as well as the broader treatments of hospitality in *The Conditions of Hospitality* (2013).
[5] Grahame 1993, 11.
[6] Grahame 1993, 13.

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reciprocity but arises from the demand of one upon the other that precedes recognition or sympathy.[7]

This dynamic finds quiet expression in the moment Ratty breaks the tension with a simple "Hullo." Yet, as Derrida warns, the word of welcome is not without problematic weight. To say "welcome" is to occupy the threshold, to speak from a place of authority, however peaceful, and to risk implying ownership over the space into which the Other is invited. The prospective host, in uttering this word, may unconsciously assert mastery over the terms of entry.[8] This possibility certainly applies to Ratty, for whom the river is his home and an extension of self, a locale of ease and familiarity that contrasts sharply with Mole's vulnerability as newcomer.

Ratty's greeting, however, presents far less like a claim to territory than a gesture of warmth in favor of encounter. Mole is not interrogated or evaluated; he is welcomed simply because he is there. Ratty invites Mole to join him in his boat, and when Mole accepts, Ratty reaches out his hand, steadying and guiding him safely aboard. In this seemingly ordinary moment, Ratty enacts the Levinasian insight that ethics begins in the encounter with the Other. Mole's face, so to speak, has entered into Ratty's settled world and issued a silent summons to respond to the exposed presence of the Other before him. Ratty could have remained aloof, uninterrupted, and secure in his domain, but instead he opens himself to the stranger, extending not only a word but a tangible act of welcome.

That this hospitality comprises risks is made clear in what follows, but Ratty's welcome remains unwavering even when Mole puts it to the test. Following Ratty's generous provision of a picnic by the river, a gesture emblematic of his commitment to Mole's inclusion, Mole nevertheless upends things. Eager to try rowing Ratty's boat himself, Mole disregards his gentle warning and lunges for the oars, capsizing the vessel and plunging them both into the water. By the ordinary logic of hospitality, Mole could have instantly forfeited his welcome. A guest who threatens the safety or order of the host is, as we know, easily turned away. Yet Ratty responds with kindness, helping Mole from the river with good cheer, easing his deep remorse.

Rather than ridding himself of this unpredictable stranger, Ratty extends hospitality further, inviting Mole to stay for a time at his home. There, he settles Mole by the fire, provides him with a dressing gown, slippers, and comforting food, before ensuring he sleeps in the best bed in the house. In this attentive kindness, Ratty enacts a generous hospitality that illuminates the tension Derrida identifies between the ideal of unconditional welcome and the conditions that inevitably shape any act of hosting. While Ratty still governs the terms of hospitality in his home, he nevertheless earnestly welcomes the stranger within, even when that welcome exposes him to possible further disturbance or disorder.[9] Ratty does not retract the welcome when Mole acts in objectionable, inconvenient ways; he deepens it, refusing the option of justifying exclusion based on Mole's "bad behavior." Ratty's welcome is not founded on merit but remains positively open to the Other as Other.

[7] For Levinas, the face is not reducible to a visible form or a set of perceptible features, nor is it a disembodied abstraction. Rather, the face exceeds perception by opening a dimension that resists thematization, an opening in which, for Levinas, its ethical 'infinity' lies. As he writes, "The face is not the mere assemblage of a nose, a forehead, eyes, etc.; it is all that, of course, but takes on the meaning of a face through the new dimension it opens up in the perception of a being" (Levinas 1997, 8). See also Levinas 2013a, 9–10.

[8] Derrida 1999, 15–16.

[9] Derrida 1999, 48, 111.

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As Ratty and Mole's flourishing friendship will attest, responding to the call of the Other transforms both host and guest, showing that hospitality unfolds through continual relational attentiveness.[10]

2. Hospitality's paradox

Derrida was clear that true hospitality is impossible to fully realize. No person, home, or state can ever open themselves without limit. Yet unconditional hospitality remains an imperative, a horizon that unsettles our practices of conditional welcome, preventing them from hardening into exclusion. Rules and protections will always be drawn, but unless they are haunted by this call to openness, they risk becoming instruments of rejection.[11] Ratty's gesture is therefore not sentimental but exemplary. He shows what it means to keep the welcome open, even when it brings disruption, even when the guest "fails" to meet expectations. To welcome in this way is to bear the risk of hospitality and to resist the urge to collapse it into withdrawal or recrimination, daring instead to remain vulnerable before the Other. Such vulnerability is integral to true hospitality, as without it, hospitality dissolves into mere contract or transaction.[12]

Ratty further exemplifies Derrida's insight that true hospitality cannot escape the mediations of home, language, and selfhood.[13] In welcoming Mole, Ratty becomes, in a sense, a guest in his own dwelling. He is no longer fully sovereign over its boundaries because the stranger has been invited within, interrupting his solitude, impacting his rhythms, and reframing his self-containment. Ratty's space, once familiar and ordered, is now reconfigured through the presence of the Other. Mole does not simply assimilate into Ratty's world; Ratty's world bends and adjusts in response to Mole. The host's identity is no longer fixed; it is haunted by the ethical demand of openness that Derrida insists is both impossible and imperative.

These complexities become further complicated by the presence of others. Levinas teaches that the ethical relation begins in the face-to-face encounter, the singular call of the Other that summons us to responsibility. Yet this intimacy is never sufficient. The moment a third enters the scene, the ethical dyad is interrupted, and the demand for justice arises.[14] Derrida deepens this insight. The third is not merely another Other, but a figure who forces the host to reckon with competing claims, to navigate fairness, boundaries, and the impossibility of welcoming all.[15]

In *The Wind in the Willows*, Toad functions as an obvious third. His presence disrupts the quiet hospitality between Ratty and Mole, introducing excess, entitlement, and disorder. Toad is not simply another Other; he is a challenge to the very structure of welcome. Ratty and Mole must negotiate their care for Toad as a friend, while resisting the collapse of hospitality into indulgence of his vanities or complicity in his waywardness. In this way, the riverbank

[10] Readings of *The Wind in the Willows* often note its male-dominated cast and the queer undertones in both Grahame's life and the Ratty–Mole relationship. Derrida's hospitality reflections also identify the feminine as a spectral force of ethical openness that unsettles masculinized logics of mastery. While these frames are not the focus here, they deepen interpretive possibilities surrounding Ratty's welcome.

[11] Derrida 1999, 35.

[12] Derrida 1999, 88–92.

[13] Derrida 1999, 57.

[14] Levinas 2013b, 106.

[15] Derrida 1999, 60.

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becomes a site of political tension, where ethical openness is tested by the need for discernment, and where hospitality must balance generosity with justice. Toad's capers dramatize the moment when hospitality moves from the personal to the political, from the trembling threshold to the contested terrain of communal life. Indeed, much of the novel can be read as a testament to the delicate task of Ratty, Mole, and Badger's balancing of hospitable openness toward Toad but not his destructive antics.

3. Hospitality today

As nations continue to debate who "deserves" entry, under what criteria, and with what limits, Levinas, Derrida, Ratty, and Mole together remind us that the obligation to the Other precedes law, politics, and statehood. The displaced, the migrant, the homeless neighbor each presents the face of the Other, summoning us to a responsibility that comes before anything else. Ratty's generosity shows that true hospitality cannot be reduced to calculation or convenience. He shows that true hospitality is an embodiment of moral courage in the face of uncertainty. Hospitality is never safe, yet if one seeks to control it entirely, it ceases to be hospitality at all. Ratty's act of individual welcome also gestures toward the larger work of dismantling the prejudices, fears, and suspicions that shape collective hostilities, reminding us that the courage to welcome at the level of the home is inseparable from the courage to welcome at the level of the nation.

The lesson of *The Wind in the Willows*, read alongside Levinas and Derrida, is not that conditions of welcome can be abolished, but that they must be held lightly, and prevented from hardening into disaffection and refusal. Ratty's welcome to Mole models living with hospitality's *aporia*: offering the best bed to the guest even when they have capsized our boat. In an age marked by displacement, this message is urgent. The true measure of our societies is surely marked by how we treat the stranger who arrives wet, unfamiliar, and disruptive at our door. As a site of ethical possibility, Grahame's riverbank tale mirrors to us that true welcome of the Other is not realized because they are deserving, but simply because they are there, and because ethics demands from us nothing less. Ratty leaves us, then, with this question: what would it mean for our homes, our politics, and our shared future, if we dared to be a little more like him?

Rena MacLeod is a Lecturer in Academic Communication and Creative Writing at CQUniversity in Queensland, Australia. Her scholarly interests lie at the intersections of philosophy, literature, and ethics. Drawing primarily on continental philosophy, her work explores questions of responsibility, hospitality, relationality, and ethical encounters with others. Her research examines how literature can make complex philosophical ideas accessible, illuminating contemporary social questions and enriching our understanding of human experience. She is particularly interested in the capacity of literary texts to affect readers in ways that expand ethical imagination, creating spaces to reflect on how we might cultivate greater attentiveness and care in our relations with others.

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