
The Non-Ethical Opening of Ethics: A Response to Derek Attridge

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Abstract

This paper is a response to Derek Attridge's review of my book *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008. Attridge's review was published in *Derrida Today* Vol. 2, Issue 2 (2009), pp. 271–281, the arguments of which have also been incorporated in Attridge's recent book *Reading and Responsibility*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

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Let me first thank Derek Attridge for his generous and challenging response to my work.¹ The frame that Attridge has provided for the debate is particularly valuable, since it opens for a critical discussion of the status of 'the other' and the notion of an 'ethics of alterity', which have been central not only to the reception of Derrida's thought but also to more general theoretical developments in the humanities over the last two decades.

In his own work, Attridge has exercised a considerable vigilance with regard to these matters. As he points out in his important book *The Singularity of Literature*, 'the other' has become a rather overworked term in contemporary academic discourse and to understand its significance for deconstruction we need to insist on its *relational* character. Nothing and no one is other in itself; it is only other by virtue of being *other than* something else and hence always

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a matter of relationality. Consequently, Attridge maintains that there is no absolute other 'if this means a wholly transcendent other' and he goes on to argue that 'absolute alterity, as long as it remains absolute, cannot be apprehended at all; there is, effectively, no such thing' (2004: 29–30).

The logic of deconstruction thus undermines any attempt to promote a transcendent or ineffable other. To press home the stakes of this argument is one of the chief aims of *Radical Atheism*, as I argue against the piety of both ethical and religious readings of Derrida. What I would like to do in this response is therefore to elucidate the stakes of my intervention, while gradually unpacking the analysis of hospitality that is at the center of the debate Attridge opens with regard to my arguments.

A good place to begin is Derrida's provocative assertion that the relation to the other is not characterised by a fundamental goodness or ethical imperative but rather by what he describes as *radical evil*. The term is taken from Immanuel Kant's treatise *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, but it receives a quite different meaning in Derrida's work. Schematically, the notion of radical evil can be seen as an intervention in one of the most fundamental theological debates, which concerns the origin of evil. The classic theological problem is how the omnipotence of God can be compatible with the existence of evil. If God created evil he is not absolutely good, but if he did not create evil he is not almighty. Augustine formulated the most influential solution to the problem by arguing that evil does not belong to being as such. Only the good has being and evil is nothing but the privation of goodness; a corruption that supervenes from the outside and does not affect the supreme good of being in itself. Thus, God can be the creator of everything that is (since all that has being is good) without being responsible for evil. The source of evil rather resides in the free will of human beings, which makes them liable to turn away from the good.

While prudently avoiding the theological assertions of Augustine, Kant pursues a formally similar argument by treating evil as an effect of the free will, which may lead one to follow the incentives of one's sensuous nature rather than the moral law. Evil is thus 'radical' for Kant in the sense that the possibility of evil is at the root of our human nature and cannot be eliminated from the way we are constituted. For Kant, however, the ever-present possibility of evil does not call into question the Idea of a good that is exempt from evil. Even though we as finite beings can never attain something that is good in itself, we can strive toward it as an ideal that in principle is thinkable and desirable. In contrast, Derrida argues that the possibility of evil is intrinsic to the

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good that we desire. Evil is thus 'radical' for Derrida in the sense that it is at the root of the good as such; without bearing the possibility of evil within itself the good would not be what it is.

While this may seem like an abstract argument, Derrida makes it concrete through the notion of hospitality. For example, Derrida argues that if I invite a good friend and we have a great time it is an irreducible condition that 'the experience might have been terrible. Not only that it *might* have been terrible, but the threat remains. That this good friend may become the devil, may be perverse. The perversity is not an accident which could once and for all be excluded, the perversity is part of the experience' (Derrida 1997, 9). Far from restricting this argument to the sphere of friendship, Derrida generalises it in accordance with the logic of radical evil. As he puts it: 'for an event, even a good event to happen the possibility of radical evil must remain inscribed as a possibility' since 'if we exclude the mere possibility of such a radical evil, then there will be no event at all. When we are exposed to what is coming, even in the most generous intention of hospitality, we must not exclude the possibility that the one who is coming is coming to kill us, is a figure of evil' (Derrida 1997, 9). Accordingly, Derrida emphasises that even the other who is identified as good may always *become* evil and that 'this is true even in the most peaceful experiences of joy and happiness' (Derrida 1997, 9). The point is not only that evil is a necessarily possibility but also that *nothing would be desirable* without it, since it is intrinsic to the experience of the good itself. Following his example of the friend, Derrida maintains that 'when I experience something good, the coming of a friend for example, if I am happy with a good surprise, then in this experience of happiness, within it, the memory of or the lateral reference to the possible perversion of it must remain present, in the wings let's say, otherwise I could not enjoy it' (Derrida 1997, 9).

The notion of radical evil is at the core of what I analyze as Derrida's radical atheism. According to Derrida, all religions are founded on the idea of the unscathed (*l'indemne*), regardless of whether the unscathed is posited as transcendent or immanent and regardless of whether it is called God or something else. The common denominator for religions is thus that they promote *absolute immunity* as the supreme good (Derrida 2002a). The good may be threatened from the outside – by corruption, idolatry, misunderstanding, and so on – but in itself it is immune from evil. Derrida's radical atheist argument is, on the contrary, that the good in itself is not a state of absolute immunity but rather *autoimmune*.² Even if all external threats are evaded, the good still bears the cause of its own destruction within itself. The vulnerability of the good is therefore

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without limit, since the source of attack is also located within what is to be defended.

As I argue at length in *Radical Atheism*, autoimmunity is intrinsic to the movement of *survival*, which takes the time to live by postponing death. On the one hand, to survive is to retain the past, to keep it in resistance to loss. On the other hand, to survive is to live on in a future that separates itself from the past and opens it to being lost. No matter how much I try to protect my life, I can only do so by exposing it to a future that may erase it, but which also gives it the chance to live on. The movement of survival is thus autoimmune. Life bears the cause of its own destruction within itself, so the death that one defends against in the movement of survival is *internal* to the life that is defended.

I argue that every moment of life is a matter of survival, since it depends on what Derrida calls the structure of the trace. The structure of the trace follows from the constitution of time, which makes it impossible for anything to be present *in itself*. For one moment to be succeeded by another moment – which is the minimal condition for there to be time – it cannot *first* be present in itself and *then* cease to be. Rather, every temporal moment ceases to be as soon as it comes to be and must therefore be inscribed as a trace in order to be at all. The trace enables the moment to be retained, since it is characterised by the ability to remain in spite of temporal succession. The trace is thus what allows the past to be related to the future and – by the same token – what allows life to resist death in a movement of survival. The trace can only live on, however, by being exposed to its possible erasure, and thus breaches the integrity of any immune system from the beginning.³

It is this irreducible dependence on and exposure to the tracing of time that Derrida calls the relation to ‘the other’. Accordingly, ‘the other’ does not primarily designate another human being. Rather, it designates the tracing of time that makes it impossible for anything to be in itself and exposes everyone – myself as well as any other – to corruption and death. Derrida’s radical move is to think this exposure to alterity as *unconditional*, in the sense that it is the condition for anything to happen. As he puts it: ‘Without autoimmunity, with absolute immunity, nothing would ever happen’ (Derrida 2005, 152). Following this logic of autoimmunity, Derrida argues that life is necessarily open to death, good necessarily open to evil, and peace necessarily open to violence. Inversely, an absolute life that is immune to death, an absolute goodness that is immune to evil, or an absolute peace that is immune to violence is for Derrida the same as an absolute death, an absolute evil, or

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an absolute violence. This is because an absolute immunity would close all openness to the other, all openness to the unpredictable coming of time, and thereby close the opening of life itself.

Accordingly, I argue that 'hospitality' to otherness is unconditional *not* because it is ideal or ethical as such but because one is necessarily susceptible to unpredictable events. Even the most conditional hospitality is unconditionally hospitable to what may ruin it. When I open my door for someone else, I open myself to someone who can destroy my home or my life, regardless of what rules I try to enforce upon him or her or it.

Derrida clarifies this by distinguishing between conditional hospitality as a matter of *invitation* and unconditional hospitality as a matter of *visitation*. No matter how many or how few I invite into my life, I cannot be immune from the visitation of others whom I have not invited and who exceed my control. Indeed—in a passage that Attridge also quotes—Derrida underscores that *nothing happens* without the unconditional hospitality of visitation. Unconditional hospitality is thus another name for the exposure to temporal alterity, which opens me both to what I desire and what I fear. The exposure to visitation is intrinsic to the hospitality I desire, since no one can arrive and nothing can happen without the unpredictable coming of time. But by the same token, the hospitality I desire also opens the door to what I fear. Hospitality can never be reduced to the invitation of an other who is good, but must be open to the risk of an evil visitation. Even the other who is welcomed as peaceful may turn out to be an instigator of war, since the other may always change.

This relation between invitation and visitation is, in my view, the key to answering the question that Attridge focuses on in his paper, namely, why Derrida says that unconditional hospitality is at once indissociable from *and* heterogeneous to conditional hospitality. On the one hand, I argue, unconditional hospitality is *indissociable* from conditional hospitality, since it is the exposure to the visitation of others that makes it necessary to establish conditions of hospitality, to regulate who is allowed to enter. On the other hand, unconditional hospitality is *heterogeneous* to conditional hospitality, since no regulation finally can master the exposure to the visitation of others. Even the most securely guarded borders may be transgressed or compromised from within. Otherwise there would be no need for protection in the first place. In effect, all limitations of hospitality are at the same time exposed to what they seek to exclude, haunted by those who—rightly or not—question the legitimacy of the determined restrictions.

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The relation between the conditional and the unconditional in Derrida's thinking can thus be described as an autoimmune relation. Inscribed within the condition for any hospitality is the unconditional tracing of time that breaches the immunity of both the one who offers and the one who receives hospitality, opening them to the possibility of transformation or destruction: for better or for worse. The entire force of Derrida's analysis of hospitality, I argue, hinges on understanding the relation between the conditional and the unconditional in this sense. The relation has been systematically misread, however, because of the assumption that the unconditional designates an ideal or an ethical demand rather than a necessary condition of life. Despite the nuances and sophistication of Attridge's account, he maintains a version of this misreading. Throughout his paper, he holds that the unconditional and the conditional are *heterogeneous*, but he does not think through what it means that they are at the same time *indissociable*. Thus, in concluding the argument of his paper, Attridge emphasises that without unconditional hospitality 'there would only be law, calculation, self-interest' (Attridge 2009, 280). If this were the case, the unconditional would be dissociable from the conditional, since we could have the conditional (law, calculation, self-interest) without the unconditional. Derrida's argument is, on the contrary, that there would be nothing conditional without the unconditional: we lay down laws and make calculations *because* we are unconditionally exposed to incalculable others. For the same reason, justice and the incalculable cannot be dissociated from law and calculation: Derrida explicitly emphasises that our exposure to the incalculable requires us to calculate and that doing justice to a singular other requires us to invent or transform the law.

It is therefore misleading to claim that for Derrida ethics is 'not a matter of calculation' (Attridge 2009, 279). Rather, Derrida argues that ethics *is* a matter of calculation. As he puts it, 'to be responsible in ethics and politics implies that we try to program, to anticipate, to define laws and rules' (Derrida 1997: 6–7).⁴ Derrida's point is that such calculation always takes place in relation to incalculable circumstances, which entail the necessity of negotiating the calculation and the possibility of revising or rejecting it as unjust. Given this logic we can account for the passages that Attridge quotes as a challenge to my reading. Derrida here claims that the conditional is guided and inspired, as well as given meaning and practical rationality, by the unconditional. The point is that there would be no need for conditional laws without the exposure to unpredictable events. Justice and hospitality cannot be reduced to a rule for how

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the law should be applied but are unconditionally exposed to singular events, which there is no guarantee that the law will have anticipated. This unconditional exposure is both what gives practical rationality to conditional laws and what inspires one to defend or to challenge them, depending on the situation.

The unconditional, then, does not designate an *ethical* openness but rather what Derrida calls ‘the non-ethical opening of ethics’ (Derrida 1976, 140). The non-ethical opening of the relation to the other gives rise to every chance of progress *and* every threat of regress. Hence, alterity cannot answer to someone or something that one ought to ‘welcome’ unconditionally. Rather, it precipitates affirmations *and* negations, confirmations *and* resistances that stem from the ‘same’ exposition to undecidable events. Indeed, it is the undecidable future that necessitates decisions. One is always forced to confront temporal alterity and engage in decisions that only can be made from time to time, in accordance with essentially corruptible calculations.

The ethical is therefore a matter of responding to alterity by making decisions and calculations, whereas the unconditional is the non-ethical opening of ethics, namely, the exposure to an undecidable other that makes it necessary to decide and calculate in the first place. Attridge himself argues that the ethical arises in *responding* to the other, but he wants to align this ethical response with an unconditional hospitality that welcomes the other ‘without consideration of its goodness or badness, without forethought about likely consequences’ and consequently without ‘any of the processes of judgment or classification’ (Attridge 2009, 278). However, what would it mean to respond to another without determining any conditions, without making any judgments, without any concern for whether the other is good or bad or what the other will do? Far from being ethical, such a response would not be a response to all, since it would be completely indifferent to the other. This is why I argue that an *ethics* of unconditional hospitality—in requiring that I not respond in a negative or protective manner but automatically welcome everything—would short-circuit all forms of responses and amount to a complete indifference before what happens. It is true that Derrida maintains that we are bound to the other before any decision, but this passive exposure to the other is precisely not ethical: it is the non-ethical opening of ethics that demands a response in the form of conditions, calculations, decisions.⁵

To clarify this, let us consider a passage from Derrida that Attridge quotes as an example of unconditional hospitality (Attridge 2009, 275). Derrida here argues that to be hospitable is ‘to let oneself be overtaken’

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and ‘*to be ready to be not ready*’ (Derrida 2002b, 361). In the same sentence, however, Derrida links the modality of being unprepared to the susceptibility of being ‘violated and raped, stolen . . . precisely where one is not ready to receive’ (Derrida 2002b, 361). This should surely make us pause. Derrida is *not* saying that we should let ourselves be overtaken and remain unprepared for what may happen; he is saying that such passive exposure to the other, such dependence on others who may turn out to violate us, is at work in everything we do, whatever we do, and that we need to take this into account to understand the exigencies of ethical decisions. What Derrida describes under the heading of unconditional hospitality is therefore, on my reading, the non-ethical opening of ethics. If we maintain, on the contrary, that unconditional hospitality has an ethical status as such, that there is an intrinsic ethical value in letting oneself be overtaken by the unexpected, we are at best operating with a pious assumption that the other who will overtake us is good and at worst advocating an ethics of submission, where the self should give itself over to the other even at the expense of being brutally violated or stolen.

Consequently, when I insist on the necessity of protection and calculation, I am not advocating a ‘purely calculated hospitality’ or a morality that insists on suspecting strangers (this being the two charges Attridge makes against my position). Rather, I take into account that the openness to the other is the source of every chance *and* every threat, which is why openness may give rise to the most generous welcome as well as the most paranoid suspicion and why there can be no such thing as a purely calculated hospitality. The task of deconstructive analysis is not to choose between calculation and the incalculable, but to articulate their co-implication and the autoimmunity that follows from it. It is not only that I cannot calculate what others will do to me; I cannot finally calculate what my own decisions will do to me, since they bind me to a future that exceeds my intentions, and in this sense I am affected by my own decisions as by the decisions of an other.

In pursuing this analysis of autoimmunity, however, deconstruction not only gives an account of necessity but also of ‘the dream beyond necessity’, to quote the phrase from Derrida that Attridge recalls. As I mentioned earlier, the religious version of a dream beyond necessity would be the dream of an absolute immunity: of a good that is immune from evil, a life that is immune from death, a peace that is immune from violence. Atheism has traditionally denied the existence of such an ideal, without questioning that we desire and dream of it. In contrast, the radical atheism of deconstruction not only denies the existence of

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absolute immunity but also seeks to elucidate that what we desire and dream of is itself inhabited by autoimmunity. Whatever I 'invite' into my life—whatever I welcome or desire—opens me to the visitation of an other who can destroy my life and turn my dream into a nightmare. Yet without the possibility of such visitation there would be no one to invite and nothing to desire. No one could come and nothing could happen, since life only can live on through the exposure to a future that opens the chance of survival and the threat of termination in the same stroke. Furthermore—and this is the radical atheist argument—without the threat that is intrinsic to the chance it would not be desirable in the first place. It is *because* things can be lost, because they have not always been and will not always be, that one cares about them. If things were fully present in themselves, if they were not haunted by the possibility of loss and alteration, there would be no reason to care about them, since nothing could happen to them.

Every dream and every desire is therefore informed by what Derrida describes as the unconditional affirmation of temporal finitude. This affirmation does not oblige one to accept whatever happens; it only marks the exposure to what happens as an unconditional condition of life. Whatever we do, we have always already said 'yes' to the coming of the future, since without it nothing could happen and nothing would be desirable. But for the same reason, every affirmation is essentially compromised and threatened by negation, since the coming of the future also entails all the threats to which one may want to say 'no'. Indeed, the affirmation of temporal finitude is not only the source of all joy in life but also the source of all suffering in life. The response to temporal finitude can therefore not be given in advance and may be resentful just as well as passionate. To reinvent ethics in the name of deconstruction one must, in my view, reckon with this double bind. In order to do so, however, one must understand unconditional affirmation not as an ethical passivity but rather as the non-ethical opening of ethics that calls for our active response.

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Notes

1. This response was originally written for a colloquium at Oxford University on March 4, 2010, where Attridge presented his response to *Radical Atheism* and our respective lectures were followed by a public debate. I am deeply grateful to the English Faculty at Wadham College for hosting and sponsoring the event. Very special thanks are due to Ankhi Mukherjee for organising and moderating the event and to Sarah Senk for conceiving the idea of the exchange and helping it become a reality.
2. For a programmatic description of the good as autoimmune, see 'Faith and Knowledge', where Derrida (2002a, 82) generalises the structure of radical evil: 'Nothing immune, safe and sound, *heilig* and holy, nothing unscathed in the most autonomous living present without a risk of autoimmunity. As always, the risk charges itself twice, the same finite risk. Two times rather than one: with a menace and with a chance. In two words, it must take charge of – one could also say: take in trust – the possibility of that radical evil without which good would be for nothing [*sans lequel on ne saurait bien faire*]'.
3. For a much more detailed analysis of the trace structure of time, see Hägglund 2008, chapters 1 and 2.
4. See also Derrida's (2005, 150) succinct account of the relation between the calculable and the incalculable in *Rogues*: 'According to a transaction that is each time novel, each time without precedent, reason goes through and goes between, on the one side, the reasoned exigency of calculation or conditionality and, on the other, the intransigent, nonnegotiable exigency of unconditional incalculability. This intractable exigency wins out [*a raison de*] and *must* win out over everything. On both sides, then, whether it is a question of singularity or universality, and each time both at once, *both* calculation *and* the incalculable *are necessary*'.
5. See here Derrida's emphatic assertion that 'I have always, consistently and insistently, held *unconditional hospitality*, as *impossible*, to be *heterogeneous* to the *political*, the *juridical*, and even the *ethical*. But the impossible is not nothing. It is even that which happens, which comes, by definition' (2002, 172n.12). For the same reason, Derrida underlines that *only conditional hospitality* 'belongs to the order of laws, rules, and norms – whether ethical, juridical, or political' (2002, 173n.12). The unconditional exposure to what happens that is indissociable from and yet heterogeneous to these ethical or political norms leads to what Derrida describes as 'the autoimmune aporia of this impossible transaction between the conditional and the unconditional, calculation and the incalculable. A transaction

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without any rule given in advance, without any absolute assurance. For there is no reliable prophylaxis against the autoimmune. By definition. An always perilous transaction must thus invent, each time, in a singular situation, its own law and norm, that is, a maxim that welcomes each time the event to come. There can be responsibility and decision, if there are any, only at this price' (Derrida 2005, 151). See also Derrida's claim that 'ethical responsibilities have their place, if they take place, only in this transaction—which is each time unique, like an event—between the two hospitalities, the unconditional and the conditional' (Derrida 2003, 130).