

Non-Familiarity and Otherness: Derrida's Hermeneutics of Friendship and its Political Implications

by
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Introduction

The objective of the present essay is very modest: to retrace the basic elements of Derrida's hermeneutics of friendship. Why a hermeneutics? Because it concerns a conception of friendship that is not a readily given one in the form of something present at hand; it is rather a conception oriented towards the future, something that is to come (*à venir*).¹ As such, it requires us not to understand friendship by way of the already familiar model of brotherhood/fraternity. More precisely, we should not take brotherhood as the unique and ultimate model for an understanding of this form of human relation. In fact, if friendship is understood only according to the model of brotherhood, this mode of understanding will fix and limit friendship within the mode of relation that gives priority to the relation defined by blood and kinship, i.e., a relation that is always already familiar and familial, even androcentric. At the time of globalization understood in a pluridimensional sense, our task is rather to prepare ourselves for the encounter of foreigners and strangers who are different from us, who incarnate figures of the unforeseen, the unexpected, the unpredicted, and the unpredictable. If our understanding is correct, this novel conception of friendship will be rich in promise:

¹ J. Derrida, "The 'world' of the Enlightenment to come (exception, calculation, sovereignty)," *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. 33, 2003, 9-52. Cf. also, J. Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1994), 149. Derrida uses the term "to come" ("*à venir*") to distinguish it from "future" (*l'avenir*), a term usually understood simply as the continuation of the present. We shall see that "to come" is not the simple continuation of the present, it comprises rather the dimension of expectation and promise: there is something "to come." This conception has evidently a strong resonance of utopianism, a term Derrida refuses. He prefers to speak of "the messianic moment." Cf. J. Derrida, "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism," in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), 83.

it will provide the basis for a new politics of international relations. Or, in Derrida's terms, a new International ("*nouvelle Internationale*").²

I The Traditional Concept of Friendship: Privilege of the Self(-same) and the Identical over against the Other and Difference

Generally speaking, we know that friendship does not belong to the order of material things or objects, but rather to the order of human relations. However, we are used to understand friendship according to the model of kinship, i.e., the relation by blood. In the Chinese tradition, we call good friends brothers. In addition, there is, in the very popular history of the Three Kingdoms (Third Century A.C. in Ancient China), the famous friendship between Liu, Guan, and Zhang (or "Lau, Kwan, and Cheung" in Cantonese Chinese, the spoken language of Southern China that is inherited directly from the spoken language of Medieval China). The three men swore to remain faithful to one another as brothers until the end of their life. The model of faithfulness inspired by the friendship between Liu, Guang, and Zhang has remained, for almost two thousand years, the supreme model of friendship for the Chinese. This androcentric model, which understands itself with reference to the mode of kinship and brotherhood, dominates our conception of friendship to the point that we understand friendship among women also as that between sisters. In the Chinese tradition, if the friendly relation is one between a man and a woman, it must be understood as something between a brother and a sister, otherwise it will be suspect and seen as morally incorrect. In other words, family and kinship is the normative and guiding mode of understanding of our relation with the Other. We call this mode of understanding one that favors identity and suppresses difference; or simply one that privileges the self over the Other. Because it is a model that fixes the characteristics of family and kinship as an evaluative criterion of the friendly relations between individuals of different origins, a mode of understanding that emphasizes the identical and the resemblance and minimizes or even neglects the differences inherent to them. Pushed to the extreme, this mode of understanding privileges the self and the identical over against the Other and difference.

² The subtitle of Derrida's *Spectres de Marx* (*Specters of Marx*, Eng. trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York: Routledge, 1994) is precisely "L'État de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale" ("the state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the New international").

In fact, the above model for an understanding of friendship is not the monopoly of the Chinese tradition. In the West, this androcentric model has also been reigning for thousands of years. According to Derrida, the Roman philosopher Cicero shares this concept of friendship, which privileges the self and the identical over against the Other and difference. In his famous treatise on friendship, *De Amicitia*, Cicero declares solemnly: "I am not now speaking of the friendship of everyday folk, or ordinary people [...], but of true and perfect friendship, the kind that was possessed by those few men who have gained names for themselves as friends."³ For Cicero, true and perfect friendship is something great and magnificent. It has the magic power of tying friends together, such that "friends are together when they are separated, [...] rich when they are poor, strong when they are weak, and—a thing even harder to explain—they live on after they have died, so great is the honor that follows them, so vivid the memory, so poignant the sorrow."⁴

Cicero has had without doubt very profound personal experiences of true and perfect friendship. But what does he mean by true and perfect friendship? Here comes his answer: "The man who keeps his eye on a true friend, keeps it, so to speak, on a model of himself."⁵ In other words, for Cicero, a true friend is either someone who takes me as a model of learning, or someone whom I take as model of imitation. To Derrida, Cicero's concept of friendship is very peculiar. It even appears strange if we push further the analysis of Cicero's train of thought: "The Ciceronian friendship would be the possibility of quoting myself in exemplary fashion, by signing the funeral oration in advance—the best of them, perhaps, but it is never certain that the friend will deliver it standing over my tomb when I am no longer among the living. Already, yet when I will no longer be. As though pretending to say to me, in my very own voice: rise-up again."⁶ In any case, Cicero's concept

³ Cicero, "On Friendship," originally from *On Old Age and Friendship*, Eng. trans. Frank Copley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), now in *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship*, ed. Michael Pakaluk (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1991), 79–116; this quotation p. 88. The text Derrida uses is the Latin-French bilingual edition of Cicéron, *Laelius de Amicitia* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, texte établi et traduit par R. Combes), 16; cf. J. Derrida, *Politiques d'amitié* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1994), 19; *Politics of Friendship*, Eng. trans. G. Collins (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 3.

⁴ Cicero, "On Friendship," in *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship*, 88; Cicéron, *Laelius de Amicitia*, 16; quoted in J. Derrida, *Politiques d'amitié*, 21; *Politics of Friendship*, 5.

⁵ Cicero, "On Friendship," 88; Cicéron, *Laelius de Amicitia*, 16; quoted in J. Derrida, *Politiques d'amitié*, 21; *Politics of Friendship*, 5.

⁶ J. Derrida, *Politiques d'amitié*, 21; *Politics of Friendship*, 5, translation modified.

of friendship, again according to Derrida, “leans sharply to one side—let us say the side of *the same*—rather than to the other—let us say *the other*.”⁷ In our own words suggested above, Cicero’s concept of friendship has evidently the tendency to privilege the self and the identical against the Other and difference.

II “Beyond the Principle of Brotherhood/Fraternity”: The Need of Another Conception of Friendship

What is the problem posed by Cicero’s concept of friendship? For Derrida, the conception of friendship concerns something not only purely and simply of the individual and the private order, but something that determines the social space in which we establish our relations with the Other. This social space is placed “prior to all organized *socius*, all *politeia*, all determined ‘government,’ *before* all ‘law’.”⁸ Here Derrida unearths a dimension of friendship hardly suspected, at least since the Modern era: a public dimension older than any given social and political organization. In the context of the West, the androcentric conception of friendship, understood according to the model of brotherhood and kinship, is transmitted from Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire through Christianity to our time: Christians are considered as brothers and sisters within the Holy Family. According to Derrida, this androcentric conception of friendship unveils itself as a mode of understanding that governs, in Modern Europe, the construction of the models of political organization and political discourses concerning the nation: from national sovereignty and national border to parliamentary democracy and even the politics of immigration.⁹ On the basis of *his* analysis of the discrimination between friend and enemy proposed by the German political theorist Carl Schmitt, discrimination that, according to the latter, constitutes the condition of a possibility of war, Derrida even goes so far as to say that the conception of friendship serves as the foundation of the discourse and the strategy of war.¹⁰

The clarification proposed by Derrida on the foundational role of the conception of friendship in social and political constitutions contains very

⁷ J. Derrida, *Politiques d’amitié*, 20; *Politics of Friendship*, 4, translation modified.

⁸ J. Derrida, *Politiques d’amitié*, 258; *Politics of Friendship*, 231.

⁹ J. Derrida, *Politiques d’amitié*, 260; *Politics of Friendship*, 233.

¹⁰ J. Derrida, *Politiques d’amitié*, 274-279; *Politics of Friendship*, 245-249.

significant political implications. On the one hand, it allows us to understand that from the Greek and Roman antiquity down to Modern Europe, there is a certain connection between the patriarchal system of political organization and the androcentric social organization of the West with its traditional concept of friendship. On the other hand, it also allows us to understand that the androcentric conception of friendship, which favors the self and the identical over against the Other and difference, plays the mediating role in generating disputes over issues around national sovereignty and national borders. These disputes have contributed to the outbreak of so many wars since the beginning of the Modern Era. We even believe to have ample reasons to ask: does not the appearance, in the history of humanity, of Empires of different forms and in particular of hegemonic nations since the later part of the Nineteenth Century, have, in one way or another, some inner connection with the androcentric conception of friendship described above?¹¹

If, on the one hand, what is unveiled in the conception of friendship is the relation with the Other, that conception of friendship is at the basis of models of modern social and political organizations and even at the basis of the constitution of the international order; if, on the other hand, we are not satisfied that the present economic system functions on the basis of an exploitation of workers and employees, that it lacks justice and solidarity in our present society, that the present mode of political operation is full of lies and violence, that the international order is an order near to that of brutal force, then we should begin to sketch a different concept of friendship and weave another mode of linkage with the Other. The latter will serve as a starting point for inventing a new model of social and political organization. Derrida explains that he is not rising against family relations and brotherhood in themselves.¹² Rather, he simply dreams of "a friendship which goes beyond this proximity of the congeneric double [kinship and androcentrism]," i.e., a politics that would then be "the politics [...] 'beyond the principle of brotherhood / fraternity'."¹³

The friendship dreamt of by Derrida is understood from the self-Other relation. This relation is a double one. As human beings, myself and the Other resemble one another and our relation in this respect is symmetrical. But as a singular being, the Other is different from me, and her / his relation

¹¹ This issue is evidently too complicated to be tackled within the limit of the present paper.

¹² J. Derrida, *Politiques d'amitié*, 338; *Politics of Friendship*, 305.

¹³ J. Derrida, *Politiques d'amitié*, 12; *Politics of Friendship*, viii, trans. modified.

with me from this perspective is asymmetrical.¹⁴ Ordinary ethical doctrines and liberal political theories are content with the symmetrical relation between the Other and myself, and that is why their theories are often limited to concepts of individual freedom, autonomy, and equality of rights. We know that Derrida subscribes to Levinas's thinking that "ethics precedes ontology."¹⁵ This thinking emphasizes the respect and the infinite responsibility towards the Other, and advocates the primacy of response to the Other in front of her/his call. In this mode of relation with the Other, individual freedom and autonomy become secondary; in contrast, the infinite responsibility with respect to the Other and the response to the Other come to the fore. In this mode of relation with the Other, we lean towards the Other, that is why it is a "heteronomic" or dissymmetrical relation.¹⁶ Derrida hopes to forge a new concept of friendship, one that is defined by the primacy of respect and the infinite responsibility towards the Other. The task of this concept of friendship is to redefine a "heteronomic" social space, a space in which the responsibility with respect to the Other precedes the autonomy of the self. It is on the basis of this new social space that a new model of political organization and international order could be constructed.

III Temporal Analysis of Friendship: "To Come" and "Dissymmetry" as Elements of Philosophy of Hope

Where can the new concept of friendship so much hoped for by Derrida be found? According to the author of *Politics of Friendship*, we can discern it in a short article on friendship collected in *Les Essais* of Michel de Montaigne.

¹⁴ J. Derrida, "Violence et métaphysique: Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Lévinas" (1964), in *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 117-228, in particular 184-185; "Violence and Metaphysics. An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference*, Eng. trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79-153, in particular 125-126.

¹⁵ According to our knowledge, Robert Bernasconi was the first to have drawn attention to the debt owed by Derridian deconstruction to Levinas's ethics. Cf. his very insightful articles "The trace of Levinas in Derrida," in *Derrida and Différance*, ed. D. Wood and R. Bernasconi (Coventry: Parousia Press, 1985), 17-44; "Deconstruction and the Possibility of Ethics," in *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, ed. J. Sallis (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 122-139. For a work of larger magnitude, cf. Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1992, 2nd edition 1999).

¹⁶ J. Derrida, *Politiques d'amitié*, 258; *Politics of Friendship*, 231. Cf. also J. Derrida, "The Politics of Friendship," *The Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988): 633-634.

Derrida quotes and comments the famous saying of Montaigne, who declared in turn that he had taken it from Aristotle: "O my friends, there are no friends (*O mes amis, il n'y a nul amy*)."¹⁷ At first sight, Montaigne's saying commits a "performative contradiction." Because on the one hand it calls to her/his friends but on the other it declares that there is no friend. However, Derrida reminds us that there is performative contradiction only when we understand this saying as a statement comprising two absolutely symmetrical and homogeneous parts. Yet there is precisely another possibility to understand Montaigne's words. It can be understood as an apostrophe ("*O!*") which expresses a kind of pain and complaint as well as an observation of fact (there are no friends). The apostrophe is a call. It serves as a request, a longing for, and a prayer. It is then a performative use. This saying launches a call towards us, to all who listen to the call: "Be my friend!" Its temporal mode is the future, since it calls potential friends to come. If Montaigne's words are read in this way, they are no longer in contradiction with themselves, because it is precisely in knowing this fact, that there is no friend, that we launch a call toward people to become our friends.¹⁸ To Derrida, if we proceed to carry out a more detailed analysis of this saying, it will not be difficult to see that our capacity of response towards the call "Be my friend!" comes precisely from the fact that the caller lacks friendship in the present situation, and that friendship becomes an object of desire and longing. At the moment of reply to this call, "if I give you friendship, it is because there is friendship (perhaps); it does not exist, *presently*."¹⁹ Derrida's analysis unveils a hidden characteristic of friendship: "it is never a present givenness," but belongs to the dimension of future. It enters into presence only in response to the call of the others; it is a space opened on condition that we respond to that call by an act of responsibility to the request of the others. That is why friendship "belongs to the experience of expectation, promise, or engagement."²⁰

However, Derrida pushes one step forward in his analysis and indicates that if we can observe that one lacks friends, it is also because we have already a certain idea, or even a certain ideal, of friendship. In fact, what Montaigne regrets is not that "there is no friendship," but that "there is no

¹⁷ Montaigne, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Albert Thibaudet et Maurice Ray (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 189; Derrida's citation can be found in *Politiques d'amitié*, 18; *Politics of Friendship*, viii.

¹⁸ J. Derrida, *Politiques d'amitié*, 261-262; *Politics of Friendship*, 234-235.

¹⁹ J. Derrida, *Politiques d'amitié*, 262; *Politics of Friendship*, 235.

²⁰ J. Derrida, *Politiques d'amitié*, 263; *Politics of Friendship*, 236.

friend.”²¹ More exactly, when we say that “there is no friend,” we do not mean that we do not know anybody else; rather, we want to say: “there is no true friend” or “there is no-one who would live up to our ideal of friendship.” For example, we expect our friends to be faithful to us; but the reality is that we often find that the so-called friend “is not friend enough,” and it is for this reason that we regret that “there is no true friend who is hundred percent in conformity with our ideal.” But this regret indicates also that we have already a certain understanding of friendship. Moreover, when we call for the others and when the others call for us, we have already established a certain form of minimal friendship with the others, otherwise they will remain indifferent toward our call and we shall not be able to hear the others’ call launched toward us. This kind of minimal friendship arises from the fact that we live with these others in a kind of minimal community, that we share common experiences in a minimal way, for example a common language, or we aspire toward sharing through a common language. There is thus a dimension of the “past” in the midst of the call for friendship. This dimension remains at the very bottom of our experience of friendship, which is why it is often unknown to us, unsuspected, or even unrecognized. It can be understood as “a friendship prior to friendships.”²² It is basic, unfathomable, incapable of being measured, an incommensurable friendship. This friendship of the dimension of the past is a friendship of the pre-ontological order.

In Derrida’s reading, the friendship aimed at by Montaigne’s apostrophe is not traditional friendship of the Ciceronian kind. For the latter, friendship is conceived according to a preexisting model and an imitable mode. By contrast, the friendship at which Montaigne aims is to come, but at the same time it is rooted in the past. It appears then in the “future anterior” mode.²³ This mode of friendship unveils itself as a movement toward the future on the basis of a past without trace. Thanks to this movement, a space is open in order to respond to the call of the others, to let them come and to receive them. It is a movement that leans toward the future, and the space it opens is a space that leans toward the Other. As a result, this space is a dissymmetrical one.²⁴ It is only with this space of dissymmetrical friendship that we can get out of the enclosure of the friendly space of the Western tradition. The latter is androcentric and conceived according to the familiar and familial

²¹ J. Derrida, *Politiques d’amitié*, 262; *Politics of Friendship*, 235.

²² J. Derrida, *Politiques d’amitié*, 264; *Politics of Friendship*, 236.

²³ J. Derrida, *Politiques d’amitié*, 280; *Politics of Friendship*, 250.

²⁴ J. Derrida, *Politiques d’amitié*, 280; *Politics of Friendship*, 250.

mode of fraternity/brotherhood in which the self and the identical prevails over the Other and difference. It is only with a space of dissymmetrical friendship that we can face the challenge of responding to the infinite responsibility towards the others. This space of friendship excels by the ethical care for the others and not by economic profit, technical utility, political domination, ideological authority, or military power. However, this space of friendship is not given in the present; it shows itself only in the future, which is not yet apparent. It is even unapparent and belongs to an *unpresentable* future.²⁵ It can only be the object of expectation and the goal of eternal efforts, because if it became a givenness of the present as a thing, the movement toward the future which it incarnates would come to a halt. In this way, the space that renders possible the response to the call of the others, the space that lets them come and receives them, would be closed henceforth. In consequence, our relation with the Other, the foreigner and the singularly unseen or unheard would be interrupted. If we were enclosed in the identical, the always already familiar and the order of banal normality, we would remain in the pure extension and repetition of the present and we would neither know nor dare how to innovate anymore. Then there would no more be hope.

Derrida's reading of the kind of friendship aimed at by Montaigne's apostrophe liberates a new phenomenology of friendship. The latter, inspired by Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology, is a phenomenology of the unapparent.²⁶ It is first of all a hermeneutics of friendship, because its object is not a givenness in the present but can only be aimed at by an effort of returning to the unfathomable past and of opening towards the innovative future. It is also a philosophy of hope, because it prolongs the infinite compassion towards the others of the ethics of Levinas by a "messianicity without messianism." For Derrida, a philosophy animated by a messianicity without messianism is a philosophy that "would be the opening to the future or to the coming of the other as the advent of justice, but without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration."²⁷ That means: this movement of opening would not stop at a concrete, i.e., individual and particular figure of the prophet, because in doing so it would run the risk of degenerating into idolatry.

²⁵ J. Derrida, *Politiques d'amitié*, 280; *Politics of Friendship*, 250.

²⁶ M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1927), § 7C, 35-36. *Being and Time*, Eng. trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (London: SCM Press, 1962), 59-60.

²⁷ J. Derrida, *Foi et savoir* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000), 30; "Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p.17.

IV The Three Modalities of Response to the Other: From the Singular Other to the Other of the Communal Dimension

If we understand friendship, following Derrida, as a space of opening to the future and the coming of the other, we must also raise questions around the preparation of the coming of the other, namely: how to give hospitality to others who are different from us, who do not have kinship relation with us, and who are even strangers? Derrida explains this by his analysis of the three modalities of response to the Other: respond (answer) for oneself (“*répondre de soi*”), respond (answer) to (“*répondre à*”) and respond (answer) before (“*répondre devant*”).

Firstly, Derrida remarks from the standpoint of pragmatics of language that a responsible way to answer others demands that we respond necessarily by the proper name.²⁸ In other words, we respond necessarily in our own name—in the dual meaning of the French *répondre*: responding /answering for oneself.²⁹ In fact, it is difficult to imagine that a friendship is formed without the proper name, even if the latter does not correspond necessarily to a patronymic name registered on the identity card.

Secondly, the response to the other is always a response toward the other, in the way of the dative mode of the grammar. Structurally speaking, the responsibility for me to respond to (to answer) the other consists, on the one hand, in the fact that I expose myself before her/him, that is to say the relation myself-other is prior to my response/answer in my proper name. On the other hand, I respond/answer for the other in so far as this response is addressed to this singular other, and not arbitrarily to anyone else. In this response/answer, I let the other remain the same as herself/himself. I also let the other conserve her/his freedom. That is why, in the structure of this relation between myself and the other, I lean toward the other in such a way that this relation is dissymmetrical. This is precisely the respect and the responsibility for the other.³⁰ Like Levinas, Derrida insists that the respect and the responsibility for the other are shown through the dissymmetry towards the other and not by the equality with the other. Otherwise we

²⁸ J. Derrida, *Politiques d'amitié*, 281; *Politics of Friendship*, 251.

²⁹ J. Derrida, *Politiques d'amitié*, 280. Derrida reminds us that “even though idiomatic English here and there will require that we translate *répondre* by ‘answer,’ the reader should not forget to hear the Latin root of ‘responsibility’.” Cf. “The Politics of Friendship,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988): 633-634, 638.

³⁰ J. Derrida, *Politiques d'amitié*, 281-282; *Politics of Friendship*, 251-252.

remain indifferent to her/him. And our task is precisely to break the inertia of indifference in front of the expansion of injustice.

Thirdly, responding/answering before the other: it is the question of the transition from the response to the Other as a singular being to the response to the Other in the plural and communal sense of the term. My response/answer to the Other as a singular being takes place evidently in the situation of face-to-face with the Other. But if my answer is not motivated by any private interest, this answer contains already a certain "public" and "common" character, because this answer, having nothing shameful to hide, can be done in public and in the open. The "public" and "common" character of this answer to the Other as singular being endows it with a certain form of universality. And if this answer is done before a third party as witness, it is supplemented by a form of universality comparable to that of a law. Here the singular and the universal do not oppose one another, but intertwine with one another and interpenetrate one into the other. According to Derrida, the modality of answer "before," as in "before the law" or before a court, "marks in general the passage to an institutional agency of alterity."³¹

Derrida's analysis of the three modalities of response to the Other gives rise to the two dimensions of respect and responsibility for the Other: a dimension for the Other as singular being and that for the Other as community. What is significant is that these two dimensions are neither separated from one another nor opposing one another. On the contrary, they intertwine and interpenetrate one another. Since the respect of the Other begins by the respect for a singular being in the situation of face-to-face and of listening, it is very different from the moral respect proposed by Kant.³² For Kant, moral respect merits its name only insofar as it is respect for the mere moral law.³³ It is a kind of impersonal respect, and hence abstract, cold, and distanced. But the respect for the Other is a friendly respect and is practiced necessarily in the situation of face-to-face and of listening. It is thus concrete, without the coldness and abstraction of the Kantian respect, yet comprises always the advantage of universality cherished by the master of Königsberg. This is because, as we have shown above, respect and

³¹ J. Derrida, *Politiques d'amitié*, 282; *Politics of Friendship*, 252.

³² J. Derrida, "The Politics of Friendship," 640.

³³ I. Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, Eng. trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 55.

responsibility for the Other can pass from the dimension of the singular to that of communal universality.

V Friendship is not Assimilation: Friendly Respect and Distance

In order to explain the difference between friendship and love, Derrida returns again to Kant. However, it is not to a conventional Kant, but to one whom he draws from “a rigorous rereading of that Kantian analysis of respect in friendship.”³⁴ From Kant’s analysis of friendship, Derrida shows that if love comprises necessarily an intense force of attraction in such a way that the being who loves always aspires to the fusion with the one who is loved, “there is no friendship without ‘the respect of the other’.”³⁵ Kant’s essential contribution to the understanding of friendship consists in his introduction of the “imperative of distance,” which functions as a principle of rupture and interruption in the traditional discourse of friendship in the West. This imperative of distance “can no longer be easily reconciled with the values of proximity, presence, gathering together, and communal familiarity which dominate the traditional culture of friendship.”³⁶ Derrida himself emphasizes precisely the importance of distance and “spacing” (*espacement*) in the moral respect towards a friend. In fact, the situation of face-to-face with the other and the listening to the other cannot be realized without a minimal distance. That is why the respect for the friend consists, in the response to her/his call, not in assimilation, but in the safeguard and the recognition of her/him as an irreducible “transcendent alterity.”³⁷

In his explication of the importance of distance as a constitutive element of friendship, Derrida receives theoretical reinforcement from Maurice Blanchot, the great philosophical writer of contemporary France. Derrida quotes a long passage from a book by Blanchot whose title is precisely *L’Amitié* (“Friendship”), a work that Derrida qualifies as one of the “great canonical meditations on friendship.”³⁸ Let us share the reading of this very beautiful passage of Blanchot:

³⁴ J. Derrida, “The Politics of Friendship,” 640.

³⁵ J. Derrida, *Politiques d’amitié*, 283; *Politics of Friendship*, 252.

³⁶ J. Derrida, *Politiques d’amitié*, 285; *Politics of Friendship*, 255.

³⁷ J. Derrida, “The Politics of Friendship,” 641.

³⁸ J. Derrida, *Politiques d’amitié*, 323; *Politics of Friendship*, 290.

Nous devons renoncer à connaître ceux à qui nous lie quelque chose d'essentiel; je veux dire, nous devons les accueillir dans le rapport avec l'inconnu où ils nous accueillent, nous aussi, dans notre éloignement. L'amitié, ce rapport sans dépendance, sans épisode et où entre cependant toute la simplicité de la vie, passe par la reconnaissance de l'étrangeté commune qui *ne nous permet pas de parler de nos amis, mais seulement de leur parler*, non d'en faire un thème de conversation (ou d'articles), mais le mouvement de l'entente où, nous parlant, ils réservent, même dans la plus grande familiarité, la distance infinie, cette séparation fondamentale à partir de laquelle ce qui sépare devient rapport. Ici, la discrétion n'est pas dans le simple refus de faire état de confidences (comme cela serait grossier, même d'y songer), mais elle est l'intervalle, le pur intervalle qui, de moi à cet autrui qu'est un ami, mesure tout ce qu'il y a entre nous, l'interruption d'être qui ne m'autorise jamais à disposer de lui, ni de mon savoir de lui (fût-ce pour le louer) et qui, loin d'empêcher toute communication, nous rapporte l'un à l'autre dans la différence et parfois le silence de la parole.³⁹

We have to renounce to know something essential of those to whom we are tied; I want to say, we should welcome them in the relation to the unknown in which they welcome us, us too, in our remoteness. Friendship, this relation without dependence, without episode, into which, however, the utter simplicity of life enters, implies the recognition of a common strangeness which does not allow us to speak of our friends, but only to speak to them, not to make of them a theme of conversations (or articles), but the movement of understanding in which, speaking to us, they reserve, even in the greatest familiarity, an infinite distance, this fundamental separation from out of which that which separates becomes relation. Here, discretion is not in the simple refusal to report confidences (how gross that would be, even to think of), but it is the interval, the pure interval which, from me to this other who is a friend, measures everything there is between us, the interruption of being which never authorizes me to have him at my disposition, nor my knowledge of him (if only to praise him) and which, far from curtailing all communication, relates us one to the other in the difference and sometimes in the silence of speech..

The above lines from Blanchot, of a supreme limpidity and stylistic beauty, constitute probably the best description of the distance by means of which mutual respect between friends can be maintained. What is essential is first of all to preserve the difference between myself and the Other, but it

³⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 328-329, quoted in J. Derrida, *Politiques d'amitié*, 327; *Politics of Friendship*, 295.

is also important to forbid the use of friendly connection to attain one's own ends. In short, the autonomy of the friend should always occupy the first rank in terms of importance.

VI Political Implications of Derrida's Hermeneutics of Friendship

If our reconstruction and presentation of Derrida's hermeneutics of friendship is correct, it will not be difficult for us to see that it contains a new ethical vision: the well-being of human life consists no more in the unilateral pursuit of *arête* in the manner of the Ancient Greeks, that is to say the cultivation of individual excellence. It consists rather in the respect of the Other and the response to her / his call, including the reception and the hospitality of the others who are foreign and unknown to us. In fact, if we understand that the relation we tie to another is incommensurable, that the value inherent to every figure of Otherness is unique and incommensurable, then how can we go on to speak of individual excellence?

Derrida's hermeneutics of friendship also leads towards a new political practice: a democracy to come.⁴⁰ To speak of a democracy to come means: we recognize that democracy has its inherent value, but we do not keep ourselves silent about the insufficiency of today's institutions, which is responsible for its practice, in particular that of parliamentary democracy. Hence we have to supplement it by other instances, and this is precisely the role to be played by the democracy to come cherished by Derrida. Its possibility comes precisely from the new conception of friendship explained throughout this essay. If the latter leads towards the construction of a community without hermetic enclosure which, on the contrary, is equipped with multiple ways of passage, then it contributes to laying the foundation of a new politics of reception of the others. In his comments on the political implications of Levinas's ethics of Otherness, Derrida declares that the politics of reception of the Other takes its point of departure from the awareness of the singular responsibility for human universality. As such, this politics cannot be reduced to a "tolerance" with respect to the other, "except

⁴⁰ J. Derrida, *Politiques d'amitié*, op. cit., pp. 339-340; *Politics of Friendship*, op. cit., p. 306. For a more recent discussion, cf. J. Derrida, "The 'world' of the Enlightenment to come (exception, calculation, sovereignty)," *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. 33, 2003, pp. 9-52. Cf. also Simon Critchley, "The Other's Decision in Me (What Are the Politics of Friendship?)," in *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity* (London & New York: Verso, 1999), pp. 254-286 especially pp. 279-281.

that this tolerance demands itself the affirmation of a 'love' without measure."⁴¹ Derrida subscribes to the highest demand towards a politics of reception formulated by Levinas:

To give shelter to the other human being in one's own land or home, to tolerate the presence of the landless and the homeless on an "ancestral soil" so jealously—so maliciously—loved, is this the criterion of humanness? Indisputably so.⁴²

The democracy to come advocates a different politics of the border and a different politics of humanitarian action. It demands that humanitarian action should no longer be considered exclusively from the interest of the sovereignty of the nation-state. It advocates a politics of reception which goes beyond the interest of the nation-state in such a way that foreigners, vagrants, new immigrants and the homeless could be sheltered. The democracy to come will also be practiced as a new internationalism. It demands that the practice of democracy to come not be limited to the inner side of the geographical border of a country, that international organizations—non-governmental organizations such as Médecins sans frontière, Green Peace, Amnesty International—serve as supplementary institutions which exercise pressure on governments of nation-states.⁴³ The democracy to come does not practice anarchism, but brings about, from the outside and from the underside of a national government, policies on problems which national governments cannot and do not want to solve: to stretch out hands to refugees, national and social minorities, all those who need help in poor countries, and even to the Earth's environment, which is seriously ill today. The democracy to come emphasizes the practice of justice for the Other as the infinite responsibility for others. That is why it does not accept the refusal to carry out justice for the Other and the indifference toward the call of the others under various excuses such as lack of resources, the limit of geographical border, the absolutely primal value of the market. It considers the protection of this Other—Nature—as imperative too. It resists against a globalization aimed uniquely at merchandization and extension of the market. Against old-style cosmopolitanism which, just as Kant proposed during the

⁴¹ J. Derrida, *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris: Editions Galilee, 1997), 133.

⁴² E. Levinas, *À l'heure des nations* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1988), 114; *In the Time of the Nations*, Eng. Trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 98, trans. modified ; quoted by Derrida in *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*, 134.

⁴³ J. Derrida, *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*, 134.

eighteenth-century Enlightenment, is conceived on the unique basis of national sovereignty, the democracy to come advocates a new cosmopolitanism which aims at promoting a greater solidarity and a greater justice on the planetary scale, instead of imposing a so-called “new international order” dominated by a hegemonic super-power. In short, the hermeneutics of friendship liberated by Derrida’s deconstruction is not nihilism, but a promising philosophy of hope looking to the future.