

ABSTRACTION FOUNDING HOSPITALITY

LA ABSTRACCIÓN QUE FUNDA LA HOSPITALIDAD

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Abstract: One of the most typical epistemological mechanisms of the European thought is passing from many to one. This mechanism has two main roots: the first has to do with religious thinking and the second has to do with logical and philosophical thinking. I shall try to argue that these two roots strengthen one and the same thing, namely, the theoretical condition of hospitality itself.

Key words: ABSTRACTION; IDEALITY; HOSPITALITY

Resumen: Uno de los mecanismos epistemológicos más típicos del pensamiento europeo es pasar de muchos a uno. Este mecanismo tiene dos raíces principales: la primera tiene que ver con el pensamiento religioso y la segunda tiene que ver con el pensamiento lógico y filosófico. Trataré de argumentar que estas dos raíces refuerzan una misma cosa, a saber, la condición teórica de la hospitalidad en sí misma.

Palabras clave: ABSTRACCIÓN; IDEALIDAD; HOSPITALIDAD

One of the most typical epistemological mechanisms of the European thought is passing from many to one. This mechanism has two main roots: the first has to do with religious thinking and the second has to do with logical and philosophical thinking. I shall try to argue that these two roots strengthen one and the same thing, namely, the theoretical condition of hospitality itself.

Let us start from the second one, which is logical and philosophical thinking. We can make reference to what Plato teaches us in his *Symposium*: we call a body “beautiful”, then we realise we call another body “beautiful”, then we realise we call a soul “beautiful”, then we realise we call a law “beautiful” and then we realise we call a knowledge “beautiful”. At last, we realise that there is something, namely, the very idea of the beautiful, which is precisely the one thing that many different things share: we retain what does not vary and do not retain what varies passing

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from a beautiful body to another beautiful body, to a beautiful soul, to a beautiful law and to a beautiful knowledge, and we get to the very idea of the beautiful. The epistemological mechanism we have described is what we call abstraction, which is exceedingly important to us, since it gives us most powerful epistemological, and ethical, tools.

Before reasoning on these tools, let us keep focusing on Plato's lesson on abstraction by making reference to his *Republic*. The question is the following: "What sort of knowledge is there which would draw the soul from becoming to being?" (*Resp.* 521d²), namely, from the disordered instability of many which vary to the ordered stability of one which does not vary? And the answer, which has to do with a mathematical example, is the following: it is what brings to "What is absolute unity" (*Resp.* 525a), namely, "the way in which the study of the one has a power of drawing and converting the mind to the contemplation of true being" (*Resp.* 525a). And "all arithmetic and calculation [...] appear to lead the mind towards truth [...] in a very remarkable manner» (*Resp.* 525a-b): "arithmetic has a very great and elevating effect, compelling the soul to reason about abstract number, and rebelling against the introduction of visible or tangible objects into the argument» (*Resp.* 525d), since in "those numbers which can only be realized in thought" (*Resp.* 526a) "there is a unity such as you demand, and each unit is equal, invariable, indivisible" (*Resp.* 526a). Thus, "arithmetic is a kind of knowledge in which the best natures should be trained" (*Resp.* 526c) and "which legislation may fitly prescribe" (*Resp.* 525b): "we must endeavour to persuade those who are to be the principal men of our State to go and learn arithmetic, not as amateurs, but they must carry on the study until they see the nature of numbers with the mind only" (*Resp.* 525 b-c), and "the philosopher also, because he has to rise out of the sea of change and lay hold of true being, and therefore he must be an arithmetician" (*Resp.* 525b). According to Plato, the reason why passing from many to one is exceedingly important to us is that the "unit", namely, the result of abstraction, is "equal, invariable, indivisible". Let us reason on these three adjectives by starting from the third one. The third one, which is "indivisible", seems to mean that we have the guarantee that the result of our abstraction is ultimate: if we say, for instance, that the very idea of the beautiful is X, then we know that it is not made by two parts starting from which we have to keep abstracting, but it is what all the beautiful objects share. The second one, which is "invariable", seems to mean that, once we have the ultimate result of our abstraction, we have the ideal type of all the past, present and future real tokens, which means that we have what founds our knowledge of reality: if we say, for instance, that the very

[2] See Plato, *Republic*, ed. by B. Jowett, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888.

idea of the beautiful is X, then we know, firstly, how to recognise all the past and present beautiful objects and, secondly, how to recognise all the future beautiful objects, namely, how to make beautiful objects by ourselves. This point is crucial from an epistemological point of view, since it is what gives us, and strengthens in us, the capacity of making both novel and better objects. If we say, for instance, that the very idea of the beautiful is X, then, when, after having seen many beautiful houses, we make a beautiful house by ourselves, we know what we should retain and what we should not retain of all the many beautiful houses we have seen, namely, we know how to strengthen the former by varying the latter, and we make, at last, a beautiful house which is both novel and better, namely, which is more beautiful than all the many beautiful houses we have seen, since it precisely retains, and strengthens, what all the beautiful houses share. On the contrary, if we do not make our house by founding it on the very idea of the beautiful, namely, on the ultimate result of our abstraction, then we can make nothing but a replica of one of the many houses we have seen, since we do not know what to retain and what not to retain, and how to strengthen the former by varying the latter. Now, let us reason on the first one, which is “equal”. It makes us pass from the realm of epistemology to the realm of ethics, which is most meaningful for reasoning on hospitality. It seems to mean that the other crucial result of abstraction has to do with equity: if we say, for instance, that the very idea of the beautiful is X, then we know that there is at least something that very different objects, such as bodies, souls, laws, knowledge and houses, share, which means that we know that there is at least an essential reason to recognise as “equal” objects which are both ontologically and hierarchically very different. We may have, on the one hand, our body, which is called beautiful by ourselves after a week at the thermal baths, and, on the other hand, the law $E = mc^2$, which is called beautiful by all the human beings who know physics. The two objects are very different, both since they are ontologically very different and since the latter is much more beautiful than the former, but, interestingly enough, we have an essential reason to think that they are somewhat comparable, and even somewhat “equal»: they have to do with one and the same idea (among the other possible ideas), namely, they have to do with one and the same abstraction (among the other possible abstractions).

Let us try to make it clearer through an image. We may suppose that we have three very different triangles: the first one is most regular (and most perfect), being the equilateral triangle, the second one is quite regular (and quite perfect), being the isosceles triangle, and the third one is most irregular (and most imperfect), being the scalene triangle. First-

ly, we may say that, if we abstract, then we can find one and the same idea they share, namely, the very idea of the triangle, which founds the equilateral triangle, the isosceles triangle and the scalene triangle (and which is ideal, and not real, since it is not characterised as equilateral, isosceles or scalene, being, on the contrary, the matrix of all the possible real triangles, which must be equilateral, isosceles or scalene). Secondly, we may say that, if we reason on the result of our abstraction, then we can find that objects which are hierarchically very different (the first one being most perfect, the second one being quite perfect and the third one being most imperfect) are essentially “equal”, since they share something that is essential for their identities, namely, for their being triangles.

Now, let us vary the elements of the example, but not its mechanism. We may suppose that we have three very different human beings: they may be very different in terms of their religions, they may be very different in terms of their educations, they may be very different in terms of their salaries and so forth. What abstraction trains us to do is precisely to find the reason why they are essentially “equal”, if it is true that we call them all human beings, namely, if it is true that, after having abstracted and reasoned on the result of our abstraction, we can find that they share something that is essential for their identities, namely, for their being human beings.

Thus, what I am trying to argue is that abstraction, which is one of the most typical epistemological mechanisms of the European thought, may be considered the theoretical condition of hospitality itself, since it may be considered the theoretical condition of what founds hospitality, namely, of equity (and I may add that this is one of the most important results of the European thought, and one of its most important cornerstones we should work on as one of the most essential values of the Europe we want).

Now, let us consider the second main root of the mechanism of passing from many to one, namely, religious thinking as what, together with logical and philosophical thinking, strengthens the theoretical condition of hospitality itself. The first thing to consider is that what characterises the European religious thinking is the passage from polytheisms to monotheisms, namely, and again, from many to one. The Abrahamic religions, which are Hebraism, Christianity and Islam, and which genetically characterise the European religious thinking (especially Hebraism and Christianity), are founded on what both Abraham in particular and the *Old Testament* in general mean: the passage from many gods (who are more immanent, characterised by somewhat human features and, moreover, not dualistically divided from human beings) to one God (who is more

transcendent, not characterised by somewhat human features and, moreover, dualistically divided from human beings). I may argue that the European God is analogous to the “unit” we find in Plato’s *Republic*: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God” (*De* 5: 6-9). Again, “You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no saviour” (*Is* 43:10-11).

There are meaningful theoretical analogies between what we find in Plato’s philosophy and what we find in the *Old Testament*:

1. The passage from many to one.

2. The dualism between the ultimate one and reality: in Plato’s philosophy, the ultimate one is the idea (which is transcendent, perfect, immortal, universal and “equal, invariable, indivisible») and reality especially means real objects (which are immanent, imperfect, mortal, particular and not “equal, invariable, indivisible”) and, in the *Old Testament*, the ultimate one is God (who is transcendent, perfect, immortal, universal) and reality especially means human beings (who are immanent, imperfect, mortal, particular). This dualism outwardly means something far from hospitality because of its fundamental dividing structure. On the contrary, it inwardly means something close to hospitality because of its fundamental dividing structure: it is precisely because of the ontological division between the ultimate one and reality that the former can be the God of the latter, namely, of all the human beings. Let us go back to the example of the triangles: it is precisely because of the ontological division between the very idea of the triangle and all the possible real triangles (equilateral, isosceles and scalene) that the former can be the matrix of the latter, namely, that the very idea of the triangle can unite all the possible real triangles (equilateral, isosceles and scalene). Analogously, it is precisely because of their ontological division that God can unite all the human beings. I may argue that this is one of the essential theoretical cornerstones which found hospitality, since it means that God, namely, the monotheistic God, can be the God of all the human beings, and all the human beings can be united by God: the monotheistic God can found, firstly, an idea of equity and, secondly, an idea of hospitality because of the capacity of being, at least theoretically, the God of any human being,

who, thus, can be, firstly, “equal” to any other human being and, secondly, worth getting hospitality.

3. The difficulty in representing the ultimate one through images. As for the idea, it can be contemplated “in thought”. As for God, all the Abrahamic religions are characterised, at least partially, and at least sometimes in their histories, by forms of iconoclasm, which are strong in Hebraism, sometimes strong in Christianity and quite strong in Islam. This difficulty in representing the ultimate one through images strengthens the power of abstraction: if we do not have at our disposal an image which represents the idea, in the first case, and God, in the second case, then we are brought not to think that a particular (an image) is the universal (the idea and God), excluding, thus, all the other particulars from a possible relationship with the universal. On the contrary, we are brought to think that all the particulars are somewhat making reference to the universal, including, thus, all the particulars in a possible relationship with the universal. Again, the analogy between the theoretical mechanism we find in Plato’s philosophy and the theoretical mechanism we find in the *Old Testament* brings us to theoretically found, firstly, equity and, secondly, hospitality: if we think that one particular real thing cannot be the idea or God, then we find the reason why this one particular real thing is “equal” to all the others, including all the others (and why all the others are worth getting hospitality). On the contrary, if we think that one particular real thing can be the idea or God, then we find the reason why this one particular real thing is not “equal” to all the others, excluding all the others (and why all the others are not worth getting hospitality).

4. At last, we explicitly get to hospitality, which is a distinguishing character of both the logical and philosophical thinking and the religious thinking which found the European thought. As for the logical and philosophical thinking, the ancient Greek culture is characterised by the word *xenia*, which reinforces the value of hospitality by making it even a duty: any foreigner may be a god in disguise, thus, any citizen must give him hospitality. It is clear that the relationship between the issue of the divine and the issue of hospitality gives the latter the importance of the former, namely, reinforces the value of hospitality. As for the religious thinking, Abraham himself, who is the founder of the monotheisms which characterise the European thought, leads a clearest example of hospitality, which is written in *Genesis*: “The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, “My Lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a

little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant”. So they said, “Do as you have said”. And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes”. Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate” (*Ge* 18: 1-8). Interestingly enough, there is an analogy between this clearest example of hospitality and that of the ancient Greek culture, since both in the former and in the latter there is a relationship between the foreigner and the divine: the result is that, again, hospitality is a value, and even one of the most distinguishing values of both the two main roots of the European thought.

I tried to argue that these two roots strengthen one and the same thing, namely, the theoretical condition of hospitality itself. More precisely, I tried to argue that the theoretical condition of hospitality itself has to do with abstraction, which is one of the most typical epistemological mechanisms of the European thought in particular, and of the Western thought in general, both in our past and in our present. We use the most powerful tool of abstraction almost everywhere, from the development of our sciences to the development of our arts. Maybe, we need to remember that abstraction, which I do think that may be considered our most distinguishing character, founds our ethics even more than our sciences and our arts: I do think that both the inclusivity of equity and the inclusivity of hospitality may be considered the highest result of abstraction, which is the epistemological mechanism through which we learn how to find what unites many different things. If this is true, then we should theoretically work on it again and again, since our Europe is experiencing a particularly critical time, when we, because of being scared, are forgetting that it is one and the same epistemological mechanism what makes us both develop our best science and art and develop our best ethics, all being characterised by the capacity of theoretically recognising the one in the many. I may argue that this capacity of theoretically recognising the one in the many founds, at last, democracy itself, and, not by chance, our democracies are experiencing a particularly critical time: we should never forget that if both the inclusivity of equity and the inclusivity of hospitality experience a crisis, then the inclusivity of democracy experiences a crisis too.

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