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On: 20 December 2011, At: 20:20

Publisher: Routledge

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International Journal of Philosophical Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/riph20>

Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life

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Available online: 14 Dec 2011

To cite this article: Adam Kelly (2011): Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life, International Journal of Philosophical Studies, 19:5, 761-768

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2011.634234>

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Book Reviews

Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life

By Martin Hägglund

Stanford University Press, 2008. Pp. ix + 255. ISBN 978-0-8047-0077-1. £50 (hbk).

Radical Atheism has already received a degree of critical attention that marks out its claim to be the major event in Derrida scholarship since the death of Jacques Derrida himself in 2004. Described by its author as ‘a sustained attempt to reassess the entire trajectory of Derrida’s work’ (p. 1), Martin Hägglund’s revisionary thesis has been the subject not only of copious journal reviews, but of a number of lengthy essays by important Derrida scholars. These high profile responses have been demanded both by the impressive extent to which Hägglund fulfils his stated aims, ‘to always strive for clarity and to philosophize with the hammer’ (p. ix), and by his methods of argumentation, which involve, in Michael Naas’s succinct summation, ‘both a judicious use of Derrida’s own works and a relentless critique of many well-known commentators on Derrida’ (‘An Atheism that (*Dieu Merci!*) Still Leaves Something to be Desired’, *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 9(1) (2009), p. 48). Consequently, some of the scholars in the field most qualified to do so – Naas, Ernesto Laclau, Derek Attridge, John Caputo and Henry Staten, to name but a few – have responded to *Radical Atheism* and addressed the challenges it presents to their own prominent articulations of Derrida’s philosophical project. Hägglund has replied in writing to all of these critical readings without exception, making the discourse around *Radical Atheism* into a fascinating snapshot of the field of Derrida studies as it currently stands. As such, while in what follows I will naturally pay close attention to outlining the key arguments of Hägglund’s book, I will also take into account the debate the book has occasioned, and contextualise my own reading with reference to that debate. And within that frame, my central focus will be on the heavy emphasis Hägglund places on the logic and method of deconstruction, an emphasis which has the cumulative effect of producing a Derrida strikingly different – and, precisely, more *properly philosophical* – to the figure familiar to many proponents and critics of deconstruction.

The principal contention of Häggglund's book is that deconstruction, as articulated in the texts of Derrida, answers to a logic of radical atheism, which extends traditional atheism by denying not only the existence of God and immortality, but also the possibility of desiring God and immortality. We may think we desire infinite being and plenitude, but in fact what we desire is finitude, to live on as mortal, to have more time, where time is always defined by its openness to an undecidable future that may enrich or destroy us. '[T]he so-called desire for immortality', Häggglund declares in his introduction, 'dissimulates a desire for survival that precedes it and contradicts it from within' (p. 1). This claim is reiterated in various (but always consistent) terms in the book's five chapters, which deal in turn with Derrida's relation to Kant, to Husserl, to Levinas, to religion, and to democracy. In each chapter, influential readings of Derrida's *oeuvre* are taken on and critiqued at length for their adherence to a metaphysics of plenitude. Negative theology, Levinasian ethics, and Lacanian desire receive the sharpest treatments and dismissals on logical and ontological grounds, but perhaps because these targets are so overtly and so arrestingly addressed in *Radical Atheism*, the book's commitment to a framework derived from Kantian transcendental philosophy has been understated by many commentators and reviewers thus far.

For Häggglund, Derrida's originality lies primarily in being the first philosopher truly 'to think time as an unconditional condition', while managing to do so 'without renouncing the exigencies of philosophical reason to which Kant responded in the first Critique' (p. 10). Rather than ignore the transcendental demands of Kantianism, Derrida develops what Häggglund calls an 'ultratrascendental' logic, by demonstrating how the spacing of time as *différance* (an idea which Häggglund explains with exemplary clarity) allows one to think 'the necessary synthesis of time without grounding it in a nontemporal unity' (p. 26). To think this synthesis of time without unity involves attacking the principle of non-contradiction, which is for Häggglund the cornerstone of Kant's thought. The position that results from such an attack is variously described by Häggglund as 'a new conception of reason' (p. 24), and 'nothing less than a revision of the logic of identity' (p. 52). One name for this revised logic is autoimmunity: 'Autoimmunity is for me the name of a deconstructive logic that should be measured against the standards of philosophical logic'. This is a logic, developed explicitly in Derrida's late work, that demonstrates that 'nothing can be unscathed [...] that everything is threatened from within itself, since the possibility of living is inseparable from the peril of dying' (p. 9). Yet what may sound initially like a paradox in this latter quotation is in fact nothing of the kind; Häggglund is eager to defend Derrida against 'the suspicion that deconstruction indulges in paradoxes that deliberately scorn the rigor of

argumentation' (p. 52). Implicitly banished from *Radical Atheism*, therefore, are both a Kierkegaardian Derrida who would stress paradoxes of absolute responsibility and the secrecy of God as Other, and a Nietzschean Derrida who would expose philosophical logic as wilful mystification. Yet while neither the names of Kierkegaard or Nietzsche appear in Hägglund's index, more surprising is the omission of Heidegger, who only merits a mention in passing. Given the weight Heidegger placed on time in his phenomenological account of being, some future engagement with his *oeuvre* is surely called for to further establish the originality of Derrida's treatment of time as the fundamental condition of life.

I have stressed Hägglund's Kantian emphasis in the above because the kind of Derrida described by *Radical Atheism* is one devoted to the project of transcendental philosophy, to describing the logical conditions of possibility not only of experience but of 'everything that is temporal' (Hägglund, 'The Challenge of Radical Atheism', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 9(1) (2009), p. 240). Despite its title and subtitle perhaps suggesting otherwise, then, *Radical Atheism* might be the first book about Derrida (or at least the first since Henry Staten's *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (University of Nebraska Press, 1984), which Hägglund acknowledges clear debts to) to have genuine potential appeal for analytic philosophers as well as continental ones (making it precisely the kind of book that *IJPS* exists to consider). This analytic dimension is furthered by Hägglund's refusal of the usual working method of post-Heideggerian continental philosophy, that of textual exegesis. Hägglund sets out his store on this issue early on: 'my main approach is analytical rather than exegetical. I not only seek to explicate what Derrida is saying; I seek to develop his arguments, fortify his logic, and pursue its implications' (p. 11). Such an emphasis on fortified logic – on systematic philosophical consistency above any statements in Derrida's texts that might appear to contradict that systematicity – means that, for Hägglund, any critique made of his own arguments must obey the same dictates of logic: 'in order to turn these inconsistencies into an argument against the logic of radical atheism that I establish, one has to show that they are not in fact inconsistencies but rather testify to the operation in Derrida of a different logic altogether' (p. 12).

Those responding to *Radical Atheism* have mainly stuck to Hägglund's demands here. In their articles for a special issue of *CR: The New Centennial Review* (9.1 [2009]) devoted to *Radical Atheism*, William Eggington ('On Radical Atheism, Chronolibidinal Reading, and Impossible Desires', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 9(1) (2009), pp. 191–208), Adrian Johnston ('Life Terminable and Interminable: The Undead and the Afterlife of the Afterlife – A Friendly Disagreement with Martin Hägglund', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 9(1) (2009), pp. 147–90) and Michael Naas

(‘An Atheism’, pp. 45–68) each take issue with Hägglund’s dictates concerning the logical status of desire, a critique which is likewise offered by Ernesto Laclau (‘Is Radical Atheism a Good Name for Deconstruction?’ *Diacritics* 38(1-2) (2008), pp. 180–89). Also in *The New Centennial Review* issue, Samir Haddad questions the role of value in Hägglund’s account, while Henry Staten critiques Hägglund’s understanding of ultratranscendental inscription (Samir Haddad, ‘Language Remains’, *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 9(1) (2009), pp. 127–46; Henry Staten, ‘Writing: Empirical, Transcendental, Ultratranscendental’, *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 9(1) (2009), pp. 69–86). Derek Attridge devotes a chapter of his *Reading and Responsibility: Deconstruction’s Traces* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010, ch. 10) to an argument with the account Hägglund offers of hospitality in Derrida. And in the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, John Caputo lays out a near-book-length critique of the core claim of Hägglund’s book, namely that Derrida’s writing evinces a logic of radical atheism ‘The Return of Anti-Religion: From Radical Atheism to Radical Theology’, *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 11(2) (2011), pp. 32–125. The usual experience of reading these responses is that they leave the reader (at least this reader) relatively convinced as to the validity of their criticisms, until we read Hägglund’s own replies, which are generally even more convincing in their logical clarity. Michael Naas admiringly refers to this as ‘Hägglund’s ability to turn just about any critique against the one who makes it’ (‘An Atheism’, p. 46). Logic appears to be perennially on his side.

Critical responses to Hägglund are thus most persuasive when they suggest that logic is not all there is to Derrida’s deconstruction. Laclau, for instance, professes to disagree with *Radical Atheism* ‘not where Hägglund tries to differentiate his own understanding of deconstruction from alternative approaches, but where he attempts to formulate that understanding *in positive terms*’ (‘Is Radical Atheism a Good Name’, p. 181). Naas, taking a similar line, claims to offer not a critique but a ‘friendly supplement’ to what he calls ‘Hägglund’s desire to restrict deconstruction to a series of ontological claims about the way things simply are’ (‘An Atheism’, pp. 46, 50). While admitting that ‘on the ontological and epistemological levels Hägglund may well be right’, that it may indeed be true that ‘*autoimmunity is the case*’, Naas questions whether such rightness and truth are enough, and focuses instead on ‘a logic of the phantasm that exceeds a logic of being or truth and requires other forms of analysis, from linguistics to psychoanalysis’ (Ibid., pp. 49, 51, 54). What guides these and other responses to *Radical Atheism* is their sense that deconstruction’s importance lies not (or not only) in its logical or ontological coherence, but in its methodological reliance on singular contexts of intervention. One way to frame this is to revisit Derrida’s relation to Levinas. In his response to Hägglund’s book, Attridge defends

a Levinasian ethics of hospitality against Hägglund's attack. Again, Hägglund's response to Attridge's argument is powerful and persuasive, yet a comment Attridge makes in a different chapter of *Reading and Responsibility*, when he summarises Levinas's position that 'logic belongs to the order of the third' (p. 107), suggests a potentially fruitful reply to Hägglund's position.

This statement reminds us that in his various texts on Levinas and others, Derrida is engaged not only in the project of articulating the conditions of possibility of experience, for example the experience of hospitality, but is also responding to a singular instance. And this, I would suggest, is where Levinas's importance for Derrida really lies: not in the former's phenomenological commitment to a transcendent Other, a position that Hägglund so devastatingly critiques, but in the privilege Levinas's philosophy offers to respond over logic, to singularity over system. For Hägglund, it is the latter pair of terms – logic and system – that most define the work of deconstruction, that are most philosophically proper to it. As he argues in his response to Samir Haddad's essay, 'The role of deconstruction is not to ground anything but to think through the implications of the unconditional exposition to time' ('The Challenge', p. 237). Hägglund's consistent reversion to his argument concerning the ontological consequences of time as spacing means that each Derridean term that comes under his microscope – hospitality, writing, justice, democracy – is shown to follow a similar logic, regardless of the context in which it arises. Put briefly, this logic states that the unconditional exposure of each of these concepts to time, and thus to the possibility of reversal or negation, means that they always remain haunted by what they seek to exclude, and so their borders can never be securely drawn or protected from what might exceed them. But the same is not true of deconstruction itself; as Haddad notes: 'Hägglund abstracts the logic underlying each particular term, and it is on this basis that he secures the borders of deconstruction, keeping evaluation at bay' ('Language Remains', p. 140). Prior even to evaluation, what is kept most at bay here is a singularity that might disrupt, challenge or fundamentally alter the application of deconstructive methods. In Hägglund's presentation, deconstruction has become critique, because Derrida offers a positive ontology that is simply more accurate than any of its competitors. As a result, Hägglund's ontological version of deconstruction, his disciplining of Derrida's texts to promote their maintenance of philosophical discipline, appears to close deconstruction off from contamination by the singular contexts which it addresses.

Yet there is one part of *Radical Atheism* that works somewhat against this central thrust of Hägglund's text, and thus enriches and complicates the picture. This is the section of the chapter on Derrida and religion in which Hägglund offers a close reading of *Circumfession*.

Hägglund powerfully recounts the genesis of this text as a response to Derrida's mother's illness, a reading of Augustine, and a singular reply to Derrida's 'Derridabase', Geoffrey Bennington's (Geoffrey Bennington, 'Derridabase', in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, Trans. Geoffrey Bennington [University of Chicago Press, 1993], pp. 1–316) 'formalization of the logical matrix of deconstruction' (p. 154). These are the passages in *Radical Atheism* where Hägglund registers most fully the singularity of Derrida's prose, and he offers a moving demonstration that 'Derrida is not fighting against Bennington's reading of his work but against the obliteration of his name and unique signature' (p. 155). Yet the rest of *Radical Atheism* tends away from this uniqueness or singularity, and can in fact best be described as an updated version of Bennington's 'formalization of the logical matrix of deconstruction'. Moreover, there is a consistently striking difference in tone between Hägglund and Derrida in dealing with ostensibly similar issues. One could summarise the distinction between the two by saying that for Derrida, the struggle of philosophy as deconstruction appears to lie both in experience and in its articulation, whereas for Hägglund the struggle lies in experience alone, while the articulation, like the logic, is as clear as day. As Attridge remarks, 'Hägglund's formulations make good sense, but they don't sound quite like Derrida's; they don't give the impression of grappling with an unthinkable relation' (*Reading and Responsibility*, p. 145). So while Derrida seemed to want to register the power of singular contexts of experience within the texture of his prose, Hägglund prefers to offer clarificatory descriptions of how such singularity comes about logically. Indeed, for him the key term is never singularity but rather autoimmunity: what matters most is not the contingent appearance of a phenomenon in a particular context, but that phenomenon's infinite self-division, the way it must attack itself from the beginning in order to maintain its structural openness to an undecidable future.

These distinctions in emphasis and in prose style would not matter philosophically, of course, if Derrida had not been so insistent throughout his career on the submerged but crucial importance of writing to the practice of philosophy. One of his most telling comments on this issue comes from a well-known interview with Attridge: 'Sometimes theoretical arguments as such, even if they are in the form of critique, are less "destabilizing", or let's just say alarming, for "metaphysical assumptions" than one or other "way of writing"' (Jacques Derrida and Derek Attridge, "'This Strange Institution Called Literature": An Interview with Jacques Derrida', in Derek Attridge (ed.), *Acts of Literature*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby [Routledge, 1992], p. 50). In responding to Naas's reading of *Radical Atheism*, Hägglund refers to the former's 'characteristic, admirable attention to the rhetorical aspect of

philosophical writing' ('The Challenge', p. 248). We might observe that it is precisely this kind of attention to the rhetoric of philosophy that most characterised Derrida's own work, as well as various forms of deconstructive writing and criticism that he inspired.

And yet Derrida went further than simply identifying a rhetorical aspect to philosophy: he questioned from the beginning whether such rhetoric could simply be considered as an outside to philosophy, whether the graphic and phonic modes of philosophy's manifestation did not have powerful effects on the purity of philosophy's logical aims. Replying to Haddad's paper on *Radical Atheism*, Häggglund denies the former's charge that he shows 'indifference to language' (Haddad, 'Language Remains', p. 139), and it is true that Haddad's emphasis on the values inscribed in language remains challengeable on philosophical grounds, because value remains a philosophical concept. And when it comes to concepts, one can only follow Naas's admiring remark that 'it is difficult not to think that Häggglund has figured out Derrida's logic like no one else really has' ('An Atheism', p. 45). But for Naas, there is still 'something to be desired' in Derrida's philosophy, which he identifies as a 'minimal prescription' to aid in the exposure of phantasms ('An Atheism', pp. 46, 65). Häggglund's response to Naas reiterates his powerful denial of such a prescriptive dimension to Derrida's texts, yet perhaps of more relevance is the challenge of those texts' *inscription*. Despite his lucid discussion of the Derridean radicalisation of Kant's spatial line as inscribing the historical conditions of experience in any given context (pp. 26–9), Häggglund's thematisation of the inscription of his own logic is far less overt than Derrida's was. *Radical Atheism* brilliantly overturns some of the very premises of logical and philosophical thought, but does so in a discourse that is exemplary precisely for its logical rigour and philosophical seriousness. Thus the book cannot fully account for the fact that an undeniable part of Derrida's challenge to philosophy as a discipline, one of the things that made his challenge precisely *radical*, lay not only in his attack on the logic of non-contradiction, or in his affirmation of life as mortality and survival, but also in his stress on the force and singularity of language and writing. While the fact that *Radical Atheism* mostly plays down this aspect of Derrida's work does not constitute a criticism of Häggglund's project in logical terms, the question remains as to what extent Derrida's own methods can be subsumed into Häggglund's, to what extent deconstruction as logic can remain immune to contamination by the contexts of its intervention and the modes of its inscription. By approaching a set of axioms, what Attridge in another context terms 'trans-historical, context-free generalisations' (*Reading and Responsibility*, p. 157), Häggglund's deconstruction begins to look very like *philosophy proper*. Yet philosophy is a discourse which Derrida always insisted should be open to its others, to that which might traverse

it and fundamentally unsettle the sense of propriety that philosophy holds so dear.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2011.634234>

The Cultural Politics of Analytic Philosophy: Britishness and the Spectre of Europe

By T. L. Akehurst

Continuum, 2010. Pp. vi + 211. 978-1-8470-6450-9. £65.00 (pbk).

Since Ernest Gellner published *Words and Things* (Gollancz, 1959) and the ensuing controversy, relatively few attempts have been made at studying the social, political and cultural aspects of Anglo-American philosophy. Akehurst's book partakes in a minor resurgence of a project of this sort. Among the indications of such resurgence one might also include John McCumber's study of the relation between McCarthyism and American analytic philosophy in *Time in the Ditch* (Northwestern University Press, 2001), and perhaps more marginally relevant to the history of analytic philosophy, Martin Kusch's *Psychologism* (Routledge, 1995) and the subsequent edited volume on *The Sociology of Philosophical Knowledge* (Kluwer, 2000). This minor resurgence is to be seen within the context of a major revival of interest in the history of analytic philosophy, coupled with attempts at understanding the relation between analytic and continental philosophy. Akehurst seems to think, following McCumber, that this major revival is guided by a certain limiting ahistoric view of history inherited from the analytics (pp. 6–7). Differentiating his position, Akehurst calls his work a 'cultural history of philosophy' (p. 6), though he notes that in a less strict use of the term a concern with the cultural context of philosophy might itself be considered to be 'philosophy'.

Akehurst's book provides an interesting and informative account of the cultural politics in which a number of analytic luminaries were involved. Chief among these towers the figure of Bertrand Russell, who was one of the few great philosophers of the twentieth century to have been actively involved in public affairs to such great extent. Looming behind is a small army of prominent analytic philosophers such as A. J. Ayer, Gilbert Ryle, and R. M. Hare, who had some sporadic but venomous outbursts of anti-continentalism, and some philosophers, such as Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper, who were more loosely related to the