

Syracuse University

SURFACE

Religion

College of Arts and Sciences

2010

Review of Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*

William Robert
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/rel>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

William Robert. "Review of Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*" *Sophia* 49.1 (2010): 173-175. Available at: http://works.bepress.com/william_robert/1

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts and Sciences at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

Review of Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*

Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2008, ISBN: 9780804700788, pb, 255+xi pp.

William Robert

Published online: 17 November 2009
© Springer Science + Business Media B.V. 2009

Martin Hägglund's *Radical Atheism* is a tour de force. It announces as much in its opening sentence: 'this book presents a sustained attempt to reassess the entire trajectory of Derrida's work' (1). It lives up to this bold claim, offering a remarkable tour of Jacques Derrida's diverse and demanding oeuvre via lucid arguments and clear prose. Hägglund demonstrates an impressive command of Derrida's corpus, marshaling these materials skillfully and effectively in rigorous, firmly grounded textual analyses, and he does so without reducing his text to simply a string of quotations, for which his words provide merely connective tissue. These accomplishments are themselves noteworthy, and they enable his text to achieve a fresh reading of Derrida's work in terms of both form and content.

Much of *Radical Atheism's* success on both fronts are due to a very well-organized tour of Derrida's writings. Hägglund arranges his textual tour by way of encounters, as four of his five chapters stage exchanges with thinkers and disciplines with which Derrida has extended and defining engagements. Articulated in these structural terms, the encounters are with: Immanuel Kant and transcendental philosophy, Edmund Husserl and phenomenology, Emmanuel Levinas and ethics, and Ernesto Laclau and politics. In these chapters, Hägglund presents careful, critical studies of Derrida's respective writings; he presents exegetical explications—and I use this word advisedly, for *Radical Atheism* explicates rather than assumes familiarity with unexamined rhetorical pirouettes (a.k.a. jargon). Rather than offering a laundry list of Derridean keywords (including supplement, *différance*, trace, hymen, *pharmakon*, etc.), Hägglund focuses on four such terms: autoimmunity, *arkhē*, survival, and above all for Hägglund, *espacement*: 'if there were one key word in Derrida's work, it would be *espacement*, which is shorthand for the coimplication of temporalization and spatialization' (72). *Espacement* describes the

W. Robert (✉)
Department of Religion, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244, USA
e-mail: wrobert@syr.edu

becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space that together mobilize arche-writing.

As this emphasis on *espacement* reveals, the tour that *Radical Atheism* takes remains resolutely phenomenological, with particular emphasis on temporality. Even ethics is refigured along these lines: ‘in Derrida “the other” does not primarily designate another human being. On the contrary, alterity is indissociable from the spacing of time. Such spacing is irreducibly violent because it breaches any interiority and exposes everyone—myself as well as any other—to the perils of finitude’ (75). This passage is telling, since by phenomenologically binding alterity to temporal *espacement*, itself grounded in irreducible finitude, alterity is prevented from floating into airy abstraction. Instead, ‘*finitude* entails that the other is infinitely other’ (94), for ‘the other is infinitely other—its alterity cannot be overcome or recuperated by anyone else—because the other is finite’ (110). *Radical Atheism* makes similar moves with respect to transcendental philosophy, politics, and religion, in each case insisting on the inescapability of finitude and of its perils, which (as he repeatedly and rightly reiterates) involve threat as much as chance.

Finitude also provides crucial insight into radical atheism vis-à-vis survival, which defines life (phenomenologically) as fundamentally finite and essentially divided by time. Insofar as survival is synonymous with mortality, human life is survival: ‘living is always a matter of *living on*, of surviving’ (33), in and as an unconditional affirmation of life. Survival is a key to radical atheism, which ‘proceeds from the argument that everything that can be desired is mortal in its essence,’ and ‘since God does not exhibit the mortality that makes something desirable,’ God is undesirable (111). This syllogism apparently depends on a rather impoverished conception of God, who, as immortal, seems to be Aristotelian (as thought thinking itself) or nominalist (as absolutely transcendent) or a similar theological variation. In its explicit analyses of religion, *Radical Atheism* belies the careful, critical, subtle expositions of other chapters and, in so doing, reveals that it is also a tour de *force*. When it comes to religion, radical atheism (which might, perhaps, be nicknamed radical unorthodoxy) tends to strong-arm, with Hägglund asserting that ‘following the logic of radical atheism, I will demonstrate how all attempts to assimilate Derrida’s thinking to a religious framework are wrongheaded’ (116). But such demonstrations tend to subsume treatments of faith (one of Derrida’s ‘two sources of religion’) in arguments against the unscathed (the other of Derrida’s ‘sources’), possibly because *Radical Atheism*’s reading of religion turns on autoimmunity, a term that Derrida aligns with the unscathed rather than faith.

More pointedly, *Radical Atheism* directs much of its force against its ‘religious’ opponents, namely, Hent de Vries, Richard Kearney, and especially John Caputo, who ‘systematically misreads Derrida’ (116). Caputo ‘reads the paradox of impossibility in the wrong direction’ (122), and his ‘reading of the messianic is quite untenable’ (135). Bracketing whether Hägglund’s reading of Caputo is itself tenable, this points to a broader, methodological concern: a strangely selective use of sources. To give only two examples, *Radical Atheism* does not mention Caputo’s most recent book (in which Caputo addresses many of Hägglund’s concerns *avant la lettre*)—nor, more disconcertingly, does it cite Derrida’s essay on survival (‘*Survivre*,’ translated as ‘Living On: Border Lines’) despite its near-dependency on this conceptual figure.

Moreover, *Radical Atheism* never engages in a reflexive examination that would question whether radical atheism is not itself deconstructible.

Regardless, *Radical Atheism*'s tour de force is remarkable and certainly worthy of the attention it continues to receive, both for its own merits and because any discussion of Derrida and religion will now have to attend to and contend with Hägglund's powerful text.