

REVIEW ARTICLE

Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*
Stanford University Press, 2008

Danielle Sands

Martin Hägglund's *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* retains a focus on *différance* throughout, offering a commanding and refreshing interpretation of Derrida which promises to be a crucial intervention in critical disagreements over Derrida's legacy. Hägglund's emphasis on *différance* is employed to support the claims about time which form his theory of Derrida's 'radical atheism', thereby representing Derrida as a 'philosopher of life'. This echoes a certain vitalist trend in continental philosophy and aims to reject the repetitive and restrictive terms of the ethical debate. Nearly five years after Derrida's death, critics remain divided both by the question of an ethical or religious 'turn' in his later work and by its implications. Slavoj Žižek argues that now is the time "to draw an even stronger line of demarcation from the usual gang of democracy-to-come-deconstructionist-postsecular-Levinasian-respect-for-Otherness suspects".¹ This is typically contentious yet testifies to the intensity of feeling between positions. Žižek both perceives and rejects a 'turn' in Derrida's work, instead advocating a return to an "earlier Derrida of *différance*".² As I have argued elsewhere, Žižek's own endorsement of *différance* is compromised by a misreading which favours his own political objectives.³ Nevertheless, the emphasis on *différance*, so central in Derrida's work, provides grounds both for assessing current readings of Derrida's work and for generating new ones.

Hägglund's brand of 'radical atheism' is an ambitious and polemical attempt to reclaim Derrida's work from religious scholarship. The term 'radical atheism' denotes an atheism which unlike traditional atheism, is no longer restricted by a theistic framework, as it rejects not only a belief in God and immortality, but furthermore, any desire for these things. Hägglund reinscribes desire for survival through *différance*. The structure of the trace renders self presence impossible as everything is divided by time, differing from itself. Hägglund asserts that in order to live on, we engage with and affirm this mode of living. Consequently, the desire for immortality is logically impossible as it would contradict our desire for mortal survival. Therefore, 'radical atheism' is motivated by an unconditional affirmation of mortal survival rather than accepting, as traditional atheism does, that God's absence signifies an originary lack. For Hägglund, this "logic of life" (9) is inherent throughout Derrida's work and safeguards its consistency, a structure he tracks through Derrida's engagements with Kant, Husserl and Levinas.

Two potential problems with this approach suggest themselves in the book's introduction. First, Hägglund promotes his work as a reclamation of Derrida, adopting an almost evangelical tone which contains notes

of desperation as he refers to “passages in Derrida that cannot be salvaged by the logic of radical atheism” (12). The critiques of Derrida’s commentators tend to be overlong, frustratingly limiting full expression of Hägglund’s own argument or concealing potential obstacles. His dismissal of other critical positions and urge to ‘salvage’ Derrida incline towards the elevation of his own argument as definitive or even ‘sovereign’ which not only conflicts with the deconstructive logic he propounds but also tends to suppress the tensions and contradictions which are implicit in Derrida’s work. Secondly, and again at odds with his denouncement of sovereignty, Hägglund’s approach is ‘purely’ philosophical, “analytical rather than exegetical” (11), and as a result, tends to overlook the contamination of deconstruction by other discourses and genres, thus restricting his interpretation, particularly its textual analyses.

The argument progresses with Hägglund’s refutation of ethical and religious readings of Derrida. These orient *Radical Atheism*, while surrounding chapters reinforce this through an exposition of *différance* and spacing. Through Kant, Hägglund enacts Derrida’s redefinition of the ‘unconditional’ as “negative infinitude” (3), the limitless effects of *différance* rather than “the Idea of a sovereign instance that is not subjected to time and space (e.g. God)” (19). The ultratranscendental nature of *différance* means that nothing can escape its remit, thus undermining the possibility of a sovereign instance. Similarly, through Derrida’s critique of Husserl, Hägglund asserts the contaminatory effects of *différance*, undermining the possibility of the pure and originary auto-affection which grounds Husserl’s thought.

Rejecting the idea of an ‘ethical turn’, Hägglund demonstrates the importance of *différance* and its consistency throughout Derrida’s thought, and suggests that one can be an approving reader of both early and late works. In declining the ‘ethical’ narrative, Hägglund incisively demonstrates why the conflation of late Derrida and Levinas, on which such a ‘turn’ depends, is misleading. According to Hägglund, the umbrella phrase ‘ethics of alterity’ often used to describe the two thinkers, overlooks their insuperable differences: first, that the concept of the ‘other’ in Levinas can always be traced back to a transcendent Other or God, and secondly, that Levinas’ ethical ideal is anchored in peace or absolute non-violence, an idea which conflicts with *différential* temporality. Repeating gestures familiar to readers of early Derrida, Hägglund suggests that both of these differences result from contrasting understandings of the structure of the trace. The trace as signifier of a transcendent Other in Levinas is rewritten as the marker of time, finitude and the impossibility of purity in Derrida. Similarly, Levinas’ concept of ‘pure non-violence’ misunderstands alterity itself which corrupts all pure identities, necessitating that “all decisions of justice are implicated in the logic of violence” (83).

Hägglund’s analysis, here predominantly derived from ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ could be more comprehensive were it to track Levinas’ influence throughout Derrida’s work. Rather, he chooses to critique the critics, here the “influential misreadings” (31) of Critchley and Bernasconi. He does reserve some space to consider *Specters of Marx* but offers no sustained consideration of other later texts. According to Hägglund, these ethical ‘misreadings’ are united by the mistaken belief that openness to the other is ethically prescriptive rather than descriptive regarding the ultratranscendental status of *différance*: such critics perceive alterity as ethical *as such* and “ascribe a normative dimension to Derrida’s argument” (31). Instead, Hägglund argues that alterity is ethically neutral and cannot be appropriated by any ethical schema. Therefore, he claims that that any confusion arises due to Derrida’s use of “‘positively’ valorized” (105) terms such as ‘justice’ and ‘hospitality’. Such terms present a considerable challenge to Hägglund’s argument, and foreground real tension in Derrida’s work; both the choice and use of terms such as ‘justice’ are not easily dismissed as being without ethical import, nor can one ignore Derrida’s insistence regarding democracy, that its impossibility means that “one ought” to “force oneself to achieve it.”⁴ Without doubt, these ethical, metaethical and political questions and inconsistencies are not satisfactorily resolved in Derrida’s work. Yet Hägglund’s desire to overlook them, while skillfully undermining the conflation of Levinas and Derrida, means that deconstruction’s complex relation to ethics remains somewhat unexpressed.

Hägglund's rejection of religious readings of Derrida in light of the affirmation of mortality entailed in 'radical atheism' again highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of his position. The chapter comprises critiques of religious commentators John Caputo, Richard Kearney and Hent de Vries and an extended reading of the text 'Circumfession'. Hägglund dismisses all religious readings of Derrida as "wrongheaded" (116), focusing mainly on Caputo, who, despite being the most influential and evangelical advocate of a 'religious' Derrida, is also the most infamous and open to critique. Caputo is chosen in order that Hägglund may retain the focus on desire, forwarding his own theory through the critique, yet Caputo remains something of an easy target. Nevertheless, the analysis is astute and convincing as Hägglund undermines Caputo's claim that deconstruction and religion are united by a desire for the impossible. This, as Hägglund argues, conflates two types of impossibility: on the one hand Caputo's scripturally informed reading of the impossible as that which is made possible by God, and on the other, Derrida's 'impossible', the way in which the spacing of time renders being in itself impossible. These definitions are incompatible as the first assumes something, here God, which is exempt from *différance*. This is unfeasible given its ultratranscendental status. Even the desire for Caputo's 'impossible', as a desire for totalization, would be contradictory as it conflicts with the desire for the temporal spacing which sustains our mortal survival. This much is persuasive and yet Hägglund assumes that this criticism is more widely applicable, arguing that "Religious readers necessarily fail to assess this logic of desire" (123). Not only is this conflation unconvincing, operating within an unworkably narrow (and arguably unDerridean) understanding of the 'religious', it also draws attention to the limitations of Hägglund's own conception of desire. Having acknowledged Derrida's denunciation of lack-based desire, he fails to fully pursue both the psychoanalytic implications and alternative theories of desire.

In the second half of the chapter, Hägglund reads 'Circumfession'. This is one of the key texts for religious readings which focus on the implied tensions between Judaism and Christianity, the repeated references to God and the adoption of Augustine's *Confessions* as textual model. Instead, Hägglund reiterates the claim that in the text Derrida stages a radically atheist desire for mortal survival and thereby mobilizes elements of this desire already at work in the *Confessions*. Therefore, according to Hägglund, the Christian reading is blind to Derrida's deconstruction in which key modes of Augustine's text such as the opposition between mortal and immortal and the role of woman are inverted.

Hägglund risks oversimplifying Derrida's deconstruction is combined with a confession. Hägglund's purely philosophical approach is unable to accommodate or examine the latter. Consequently, this limits its understanding of the textual nature of deconstruction and renders its argument comparatively shallow, depicting *différance* as restrictive rather than generative. Derrida and Hägglund diverge at the point where deconstructive thinking disrupts the idea of God as 'positive infinity'. Whereas for Hägglund, this marks a certain endpoint for religious thinking and endorses a sharpened focus on and celebration of the desire for mortal survival, for Derrida this signifies an opening or intensifying of religious thinking for deconstruction. In his attempt to 'salvage' Derrida's work Hägglund argues that his- and here it seems unavoidably reductive- approach to religion and 'God' is led by Derrida himself, who, Hägglund says, "glosses 'God' as the idea that death cannot put an end to *the* world- to the true and ultimate world- even if it puts an end to the mortal world of a singular living being" (111). Having demonstrated that this is incompatible with the ultratranscendental nature of *différance*, Hägglund's Derrida rejects God as non-existent and therefore of little interest to deconstruction and philosophy. In this respect, the argument contrasts Derrida with theologians such as Jean-Luc Marion for whom "it is not a question of renouncing God; it is only a matter of denouncing 'idolatrous' concepts of God that reduce him to human measures" (6). However, Derrida's approach to 'God' is more scrupulously deconstructive than Hägglund allows, as he explores the question of 'a god without sovereignty'.⁵ He also directly contradicts Hägglund's strict contrast with Marion by his call in *The Gift of Death* that "We should stop thinking about God as someone, over there, way up there, transcendent... It is perhaps necessary, if we are to follow the traditional Judaeo-Christian-Islamic injunction, but also at the risk of turning it against that tradition, to think of God and of the name of God without such idolatrous stereotyping or representation."⁶ Derrida is interested in the deconstructive possibilities of religious traditions in addition to what happens when we exceed them and yet Hägglund's approach here seems to be dismissive rather than deconstructive. Hägglund's discussion of negative theology

suffers from a similar oversimplification as he argues that Derrida consistently rejects comparisons between deconstruction and negative theology whereas Derrida's approach to this question is in fact characteristically dynamic.

Radical Atheism is an important and prescient volume which is not however, immune from certain problems surrounding current philosophical thinking. It re-assesses Derrida's work and its philosophical futures with care, vision, and scholarly rigour, serving to regenerate interest in Derrida for a generation of philosophers for whom his name has fallen out of fashion. It certainly dispels some myths surrounding Derrida's later work as well as undermining the unconsidered use of 'deconstruction' to endorse scholarship which is far from Derridean. Hägglund's text is a fine and exciting work despite its limitations. At the same time, Nathan Brown argues that "the admirable clarity of Hägglund's book makes all too glaring how little remains when Derrida's sprawling oeuvre is pared down to the core."⁷ Brown does not consider that this paucity may have its origins in Hägglund rather than Derrida. At work both in Hägglund's book and Brown's review—despite both in some ways being highly Derridean—is a concept of philosophy which remains narrow and untouched by Derrida's writing. Despite endorsing Derrida's rebuttal of sovereignty, Hägglund is either neglectful of or hostile towards the contamination of philosophy by other discourses and the ways in which this is examined and incorporated in varying ways throughout Derrida's work. The effect, despite Hägglund's expertise and clarity, is a rather fleshless Derrida and moreover, a limitation on the possibilities he inscribed for philosophy.

Danielle Sands is completing a PhD on Derrida at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her publications include an article in *Textual Practice*.

NOTES

1. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2006, 11.
2. Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2003, 141.
3. Danielle Sands, "Thinking Through *Différance*: Derrida, Žižek and Religious Engagement" *Textual Practice*, 22:3 (September 2008) 529-546.
4. Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, 74.
5. Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, 114.
6. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*. Trans. David Wills. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995, 108.
7. Nathan Brown, "To live without an idea" *Radical Philosophy* 154 (March/April 2009) 53.