

**martin hägglund, *this life:  
secular faith and spiritual  
freedom***

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Embracing a diverse readership and everywhere seeking to overcome intellectual and ideological divisions, Martin Hägglund's *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* exemplifies what one might call philosophical hospitality.<sup>1</sup> A staunch atheist and anti-capitalist, Hägglund “invite[s]” theologically inclined readers to hear his case for secularism (10) and aims to accommodate a broad range of political worldviews. But far from encouraging compromise or the acceptance of a lukewarm liberalism that could safely house conflicting visions of the personal and political good, Hägglund reveals himself to be the most exacting of authorial hosts. Part of what is so exhilarating about entering his philosophical edifice is this paradoxical sense of divisive graciousness: at once rhetorically welcoming, politically radical, and logically stringent, Hägglund's book courts diverse worldviews but also carefully develops an argument that consistently demands critical self-assessment on the part of the reader. At its core, this argument is simple: because religion and capitalism systematically undermine the value of our free time, we must transition to a form of secular socialism in order to be truly free. But in Hägglund's hands, the implications of this argument are wide-ranging, startling, and unsparing. Readers of all stripes may be welcomed in, but it is unlikely they will leave undisturbed.

While the thesis of *This Life* may seem simple, the book's peculiar power lies in the ecumenical yet uncompromising way in which its argument is pursued. To ful-

ly understand how Hägglund's argument sets itself apart from standard naturalist or materialist critiques of religion and capitalism, one might consider both its logical form and its rhetorical strategy. The *logical form* of Hägglund's argument takes shape as a mode of Hegelian "immanent critique". To understand Hägglund's argumentative technique, one might contrast his version of immanent critique with the strategy that Paul Ricoeur famously diagnosed as the hermeneutics of suspicion, a form of critique supposedly practiced by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, which seeks to reveal an unconscious ideology at work in the object of critique—an ideology that the critic alone can unmask.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, both the hermeneutics of suspicion and immanent critique are associated with the post-Marxist "critical theory" of thinkers such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, which, drawing on Nietzsche as well as Hegel and Marx, aims to critique ideologies and social formations which all too often pass themselves off as "natural". But in Hägglund's work, immanent critique is utterly incompatible with the hermeneutics of suspicion. Whereas the hermeneutics of suspicion seeks to show why the critiqued thinker is under illusions that, due to his psychological or ideological blinders, he could not account for or even access, Hägglund's form of immanent critique takes thinkers at their avowed word, aiming to show that their positions are not simply shortsighted but—more damningly—internally incoherent, logically hypocritical. Thus, unlike the hermeneutics of suspicion, immanent critique seeks not to peddle alien ideas, however alluring, to the reader, but to illustrate that a critiqued viewpoint does not live up to its *self*-imposed requirements.

This form of immanent critique dovetails with Hägglund's *rhetorical strategy*, which synthesizes argumentation and exhortation. Readers are invited not merely to rest assured in prior agreement with the author, or to passively succumb to his persuasive powers, but to disagree with themselves on their own terms. In *This Life*, immanent critique is palpable as a form of demanding rhetorical—and, ultimately, existential and political—*action*. For example, Hägglund addresses religious believers by asking whether their *own* ethical and spiritual commitments necessitate or even comport with a belief in immortal life, which he argues is an incoherent concept. And rather than treating, for instance, liberal proponents of capitalism with disdain, he addresses them on their own terms, arguing that their *own* avowals of freedom and equality are actually incompatible with the capitalist mode of production in which we are all implicated. Furthermore, through a consistent deployment of the first-person plural, Hägglund even recognizes his own implication in the object of his sociopolitical critique; this recognition will likely foster a modicum of goodwill even amongst his most unyielding opponents.

Even if he will not convince his entire audience—I will explore possible sources of disagreement toward the end of this review—Hägglund’s elegant variations on the single theme of finitude’s value will provoke readers to examine their own commitments and ask whether they are justifiable at this point in history.

At first glance, Hägglund’s work appears to be two books bound together—the first an existentialist defense of secular ethics, the second a Marxist political treatise. While capitalism’s original critic, Karl Marx, famously suggested that religion was the opiate of the people, one might still wonder what an extended secular critique of religion has to do with a critique of global capitalism. The beauty of the book’s construction is that, by the end, when the two sections are considered together—especially in light of a mediating interlude, “Natural and Spiritual Freedom”—the relation between the immanent critique of religion on the one hand and capitalism on the other seems thoroughly self-evident. What the mutually clarifying halves end up showing is that religion and capitalism are pernicious in surprisingly similar ways, insofar as their very structures devalue our finite time together. Each of Hägglund’s chapters immanently critiques the social institutions and philosophical positions that threaten our finite time as individual persons on the one hand and as a globalized collective on the other. It may be helpful to consider them one by one.

Beginning with a critical yet sympathetic examination of C.S. Lewis’ account of mourning, Chapter 1 (“Faith”) develops the conceptual distinction between secular and religious faith that grounds the remainder of the book’s argument. Whereas religious faith entails belief in a timeless entity or state of being that could free one from existential risk, secular faith ascribes value to changeable entities or states in spite of—or even *on account of*—their finitude. Hägglund’s critique of religious faith exemplifies his penchant for practicing the very act of faith that he is describing. (Indeed, Hägglund’s entire book is a bracing act of secular faith, keeping faith with those who might seem downright ideological enemies). Instead of dismissing the devoutly religious Lewis as hopeless—or ignoring him altogether, as I suspect many secularists would—Hägglund, precisely through the strategy of immanent critique, *keeps faith*—to cite one of his preferred ordinary-language uses of “faith” as a concept—with Lewis’ own values and desires. For example, when Lewis expresses a desire to *live on* with his wife, rather than repose in a timeless eternity with her, Hägglund sees a properly secular commitment to his wife’s value as a finite being existing within time (42). Unlike the theist who sees a commitment to God as perfectly compatible with a commitment to one’s

sublunary objects of love, Hägglund argues that the theist's own commitment to a singular life that can be lost—attested to in the theist's act of mourning—testifies to a valuation of finite life that religious thought must finally disavow.

Extending this account of secular faith into a conceptualization of secular love, Chapter 2 (“Love”) juxtaposes the theological philosophy of Saint Augustine with the secular novelistic confessions of Karl Ove Knausgaard. Just as Hägglund honors Lewis as a sensitive thinker of secular commitment even as he critiques the latter's avowed faith, he reveals Augustine to be a great philosopher of the very thing that Christianity must finally rebuke—*cupiditas*, or love of worldly things. Here, again in contrast to our culture's most visible boosters for atheism, Hägglund's critique of Augustinian *caritas* (love of timeless divine presence) keeps a kind of faith with Christian philosophy—not as a doctrine, but as an expression of the depth to which we humans *must* be committed to those things that religious principles pronounce vain. Mourning again becomes a site at which secular love affirms itself against the protests of Christian dogma. As is often the case, Hägglund's strategy here superficially resembles the hermeneutics of suspicion. But the strategy of suspicion relies on the unearthing of something concealed. By contrast, Hägglund shows that, if Augustine's secular commitments are hidden, they are hidden on the surface, like an anamorphic distortion that can be clarified by a simple shift in perspective. Thus, these commitments are intelligible not only to the suspicious critic, but to anyone who cares to track the overt forms of valuation at work in Augustine's personal writings. Contrasting Augustine's religious (and disavowed secular) confessions with Knausgaard's serialized mega-novel *My Struggle*, Hägglund proceeds to show how something very similar to the strategy of immanent critique can be taken up as a form of *self*-relation, a kind of existential self-care. Inverting the hierarchy of Augustinian valuation by insisting on the absolute value of the transient, Knausgaard's “struggle” is first of all an internal critique of his own habit of disowning secular commitments; his achievement is to turn himself and us “toward our finite lives as the site where everything is at stake” (98).

While Knausgaard, according to Hägglund, admirably takes on the challenge of remaining responsive to his world, the central figure of Chapter 3 (“Responsibility”), Kierkegaard's figure of Abraham, illustrates that “[h]aving religious faith means *not being responsive* to anything that calls your faith into question [...]” (161, Hägglund's emphasis). Here again, Hägglund locates agential failure the very heart of the agent's own professed values. Kierkegaard's Abraham takes himself to act on

his sense of responsibility, but what can “responsibility” mean if the *responsiveness* at the core of its very concept is disabled? In this section, the themes of the book’s first half—faith, love, and responsibility—are braided together: because Abraham refuses to practice secular faith and love his son *in* his very finitude, he cannot actually be said to take responsibility for him at all. One might point out that this putative failure of responsibility just *is* the tragedy of Abraham’s singular predicament, not entirely unlike more secular tragic dilemmas: he must either betray God *or* his son, the way one might have to betray a parent *or* a political cause. But what Hägglund demonstrates is that Abraham’s predicament clarifies the dilemma of religious responsibility that obtains even in the most banal cases. In a purely structural sense, to be responsible to God is to devalue the very persons and things which depend on our *responsibility*.

The philosophical interlude of Chapter 4 (“Natural and Spiritual Freedom”) picks up on the idea that the philosophical strategy of immanent critique is tethered to a form of existential *self*-critique. This chapter maps out the treacherous conceptual terrain between the rather individualist level of the book’s first half and the overtly political level of the second, at which immanent critique becomes inseparable from societal self-critique. This chapter’s basic argument is that what Hägglund calls “spiritual freedom” (as opposed to “natural freedom”) “requires the ability to ask which imperatives to follow in light of our ends, as well as the ability to call into question, challenge, and transform our ends themselves” (175). Unlike natural freedom, which answers to imperatives supplied by nature, spiritual freedom demands something very much like an immanent critique applied to oneself. Although he explicates this concept on the level of the individual person, it becomes clear that spiritual freedom must function at the level of political life as well. Thus, when Hägglund writes, “It is because our fundamental commitments are not given that we can bind ourselves to an ideal rather than a natural purpose” (202), it is clear that this kind of self-binding, which must be practiced in tandem with existential self-critique, can and must take place at the level of collective as well as individual life. Hägglund’s first-person plural, especially salient in this chapter and throughout the rest of the book, is meant to address not only a plurality of individuals trying to be better persons, but also a globally connected world that must try—even as it is failing miserably—to both clarify and live up to its own ideals.

The persistence of the first-person plural reminds us that Hägglund is doing something much more ambitious than philosophical self-help. Or if one prefers,

he is insisting that self-help become a collective, structurally revolutionary practice that would vastly expand the purview of most therapeutic orientations. And indeed, in Chapter 5 (“The Value of Our Finite Time”), the structural scope of the argument becomes fully explicit: the economy, for Hägglund, is not a sphere cordoned off from our spiritual values, but in fact precisely embodies our own collective spiritual commitments. In this sense, spiritual freedom practiced at the level of social life demands a critique of political economy, which in turn involves a collective, immanent self-critique, insofar as we are all systemically implicated in global capitalism. Here, Hägglund argues that Marx should not be viewed as an ideologue externally critiquing familiar liberal principles; rather, his detailed critique of capitalism should be viewed as a critique of liberalism on liberalism’s own terms. In short, Hägglund argues that capitalism cannot meet liberal demands for freedom and equality, because its measure of value is objectively contradictory: while the value of “socially available free time” is *implicitly* recognized in capitalism’s incipiently liberal idea that anyone (in principle) can sell his or her own time in exchange for a wage, this value is also contradicted, insofar as the dynamic of capitalism must give primacy to the “socially necessary labor time” that increases profits (259). To *explicitly* recognize the value of socially available free time—to make this the measure of the wealth—would necessitate the self-overcoming of capitalism. Hägglund’s call for a “reevaluation of value” (259), that is, a reevaluation of the capitalist standard by which we measure value and wealth, echoes Nietzsche’s imperative, but is importantly distinct. While Nietzsche conceived of “reevaluation” as a critique of life from the perspective of life itself, his primary goal was not to hold priests and other putative enemies of life to their *own* standards, but to call those standards themselves into question. By contrast, Hägglund, through a systematic rereading of Marx, detects the principle of value from within both capitalism’s structure and its philosophical justifications.

Hägglund’s proposed reevaluation culminates in an ambitious articulation of “democratic socialism” (Chapter 6, “Democratic Socialism”), which, unlike social democracy, brooks no compromise with the capitalist mode of production. For Hägglund, democratic socialism is neither an abstract utopian ideal nor a fully fleshed out program, but a set of historically grounded normative principles that can withstand the immanent critiques he has heretofore pursued. Under democratic socialism, technological development would not be put in the service of surplus value, but would allow people to maximize their free time and minimize—or at an ideal limit, eliminate—the alienation resulting from necessary labor. As utopian visions go, democratic socialism seems strikingly realistic, even modest:



the point here is not to do away with suffering or even labor, but to allow individuals ample time to reflect on what makes their lives worth living and to pursue their socially supported yet self-determined goals. In a moving coda (“Conclusion: Our Only Life”), Häggglund argues that the writings and speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr reveal an engaged sociopolitical agent moving toward the cause of democratic socialism. For all his religious devotion, Häggglund claims, King’s value for us lies in his secular vision, in his prescient understanding that oppression can only be overcome if capitalism is replaced with a social structure that keeps faith with both socialism and democracy (346).

With the quasi-utopian vision that Häggglund offers at the climax of *This Life*, do we finally leave the realm of immanent critique? Hardly. Actual democracy demands something like immanent self-critique as one of its integral practices. One might surmise that, in the ideal form of such a society, the responsibility for immanent critique would be absorbed into democratic citizenship itself. For this reason, in contrast to many versions of utopia, a truly democratic socialist one would seem to require a lot of its citizens. While Rousseau’s *Social Contract* makes no appearance in *This Life*, one gets the sense that, for Häggglund as for Rousseau, citizens in a truly democratic world would have to vigilantly attend to the public good precisely because individual and collective flourishing are mutually constitutive. I do not know if Häggglund would endorse Rousseau’s still subversive idea that “the moment a people adopts representatives it is no longer free; it no longer exists”.<sup>3</sup> But although *This Life* remains rather quiet on the problem of political representation, it conjures up a social world in which a kind of general will would affirm itself against the dispiriting logic of bureaucratic delegation. Just as selling out political will to the interests of capital vitiates democracy, allowing the hard work of democracy to devolve to political representatives tends to undermine the people’s participatory capacities and reinforce divisions between the personal, the economic, and the political—divisions that are anathema to Häggglund’s vision.

I suspect, however, that much of Häggglund’s audience, while endorsing “the freedom and equality that we already avow” (269), views “freedom” and “equality” as valuable precisely to the degree that they allow for a *relief* from the political, from the demands of collective self-organization. Invoking liberal principles in support of his position, Häggglund does not account for the appeal of one prominent strain of capitalist liberalism: its promise to “free” individuals from having to be actively concerned with those forces that determine the fate of social life.

On this line of thinking, if some or even most are forced to reckon with problems of collective life, that is an unfortunate but acceptable price to be paid for the pleasures of political oblivion, which—however rare or delusional these pleasures have become—remain integral to a certain liberal version of the good life. With this competing version of liberalism in view, Hägglund’s reliance on conceptual abstractions (notably, freedom, equality, and democracy) to establish a provisional ground of consensus seems at times a bit ambitious. A certain type of liberal might bristle at Hägglund implicitly commandeering them for the democratic socialist cause, possibly countering with such “freedoms” as the freedom to worry only about oneself or one’s family—or, perhaps, the freedom to repress the kinds of existential and political anxieties aroused by reading *This Life*. For this kind of liberal, capitalist alienation might not *feel* like alienation to them, and if it doesn’t, what is the problem? Here, one cannot appeal to an unconscious or repressed alienation without adopting the very strategy of suspicion that Hägglund seems committed to rejecting. It is hard to see how Hägglund’s arguments on their own could defeat this kind of liberal egoism (or put less generously, liberal nihilism). This may be too much to ask, but insofar as Hägglund’s explicit ambition is to save liberalism from itself, these concerns cannot be hastily dismissed.

Consider, for instance, Hägglund’s Hegelian argument that personal freedom entails social recognition and thus the freedom of “others”: “Because everything we do and everything that matters to us is a form of social activity, to will our own freedom we must will the freedom of others. For any one of us to be recognized as free, others must have their own free time to confirm or challenge our self-conception” (322). Hägglund goes on to argue, in a meditation on individual agents with free time such as himself and Adorno, that “[i]f the institutions on which we depend exploit the labor time of others even as they give us free time to lead our lives, then we ourselves fall short of actual freedom” (322). But here, one wonders who of those avowing “freedom” and “equality” (again, in whatever sense) truly *care* about falling short of “actual freedom,” freedom in its ideal form, freedom envisioned at the pinnacle of Hegelian critique. Is it not the case that many liberals will be content with simply being recognized by a small subset of “others”? Moreover, these liberals may very well view this kind of modesty about collective value-laden aspirations as one of liberalism’s greatest achievements. Appeals to such liberal ideals as “the unconditional worth of the individual” do not help here, since these liberals may well decide that pragmatic tradeoffs are unavoidable, that no global system could—or should—be designed to do justice to every actually existing individual.



On the other side of the political spectrum, some readers might get impatient with Hägglund's entire framework. Marxist radicals who view these debates about "values" as so much bourgeois mystification might wonder why Hägglund, a wholehearted Marxist, says so little about the problem of actual revolutionary transition itself. For these readers, the point of anti-capitalist action—which Hägglund presumably takes himself to be engaged in on the level of theoretical praxis—is not to appease liberalism or nudge it toward self-overcoming, but to assemble forces that will ruthlessly abolish the ruling class and its empty rationalizations. These readers might also believe Hägglund is disavowing the necessity of pragmatic tradeoffs: what is an occasional violation of the autonomy of each individual compared to concrete revolutionary change?

Still, our hypothetical liberal egoist and radical Marxist ought to find a lot to value in Hägglund's work. Assuming the liberal egoist is *at all* invested in the collective good—and it scarcely needs mentioning that climate change is making a consideration of the collective good more and more unavoidable, even for the ruling class—she will be thrown back on herself, forced to reckon with the consequences of, say, believing that a freedom from politics is compatible with a meaningful avowal of equality or democracy. The hypothetical Marxist, for her part, will have trouble dismissing Hägglund's argument as complicit with liberal-capitalist ideology, because in stark contrast to the standard critiques of "neoliberalism," *This Life* is unequivocally anti-capitalist—even advancing a new account of what it takes to *be* an anti-capitalist concerned with collective justice. Moreover, she may well find herself wondering whether some unargued-for presupposition of ideals such as freedom, equality, and democracy—perhaps under such guises as "emancipation" and "egalitarianism"—underlies her own revolutionary agenda. In any case, Hägglund cannot be held accountable for persuading every reader, and at some point, political objections become indistinguishable from the rejection of philosophy *per se*. Here we might return to *This Life*'s principal achievement: through a sustained immanent critique, it injects life back into the values we in some sense hold or claim to hold, calling us back to something inherent in these values worth admiring and affirming. *This Life* offers both a cogent case for secular socialism and a rousing call to keep faith with those ideals that, Hägglund shows, lie behind the horrors of capitalism as well as inspiring histories of revolutionary change. Even to follow this spirited argument closely and reflect on its internal logic is a worthwhile act of secular faith; however intractable much of Hägglund's audience may be, it seems to me that the reader willing to exercise her freedom in this manner will be rewarded.

## NOTES

1. Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (Penguin Random House, 2019).
2. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, trans. Denis Savage (Yale University Press, 1970), 28–36.
3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (Penguin, 2006), 115.