



# What Does a Radical Atheist Desire?

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A philosophical comparison of Martin Hägglund with Derrida regarding their  
perspective on religion

By Nora Lutine Luning



# **What Does a Radical Atheist Desire?**

*A Philosophical Comparison of Martin Hägglund with Derrida  
regarding their perspective on religion*

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# INTRODUCTION

Several years ago I commenced my studies in theology because of a fascination with religion, Christianity in particular. I wanted to understand and learn all about this strange and complex phenomenon. After years of study and now looking for a challenging research topic for my Master's thesis, I wandered around in literature about the French philosopher Derrida. I was particularly interested in his influence on hermeneutics. In the end, however, my attention was seized by a book on deconstruction (as Derrida's philosophy is generally called) by the Swedish author Martin Hägglund.<sup>1</sup> I was triggered by his extreme argument and the fierce stance he took on all scholarship about Derrida so far. I chose to make this the subject of my thesis. At the start of my research, my focus was primarily on whether Hägglund's thesis about deconstruction as a radically atheist philosophy would hold up when compared to a text by Derrida himself. However, during the process it became clear to me that this was not only a discussion about a 'correct' interpretation or systematization of Derrida's philosophy. What is at stake here, is the question: how to think of religion? What is religion, how should we understand and approach it?

Of course it is no coincidence that I wondered about this question, as it is also the question that prompted Derrida to write his main text on religion, *Faith and Knowledge*, which I was studying.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, it is almost hard not to ask this question when one reads the daily news. Whereas religion might have been expected to slowly leave the global stage in a post-Enlightenment age, in the past decades we have witnessed something completely different. While incomprehension towards Muslims, Christians and people of other faiths grows on the secular side, many religious groups turn to more rigid systems of faith and behavior, even to the point of violent extremism. An extreme but recent example of this culture gap is the war the Islamic State is waging on 'the West'. However, it is not only the divide between religious and secular cultures that provokes unrest: religion-related violence also occurs between religious groups, such as the Roman Catholics and Protestants in Northern-Ireland since 1969 or Christians and Muslims on the Indonesian island of Maluku since 1999. This is not only a phenomenon on a global and political level; also during my student life in Groningen I have experienced how the religious and the secular are like two separate worlds that do not mingle, but just mainly clash when they meet. How are we to think about this tension between religion and atheism or non-religion?

Within this context of religion and secularism in today's world, both Hägglund and Derrida give their account of what religion is. What is striking though, is that Hägglund introduces the term radical atheism as the best way to describe the underlying logic of deconstruction. By describing deconstruction in atheist terms he differs greatly from many other interpreters who have written about Derrida, such as John D. Caputo. By using religion-related terms as atheism, Hägglund places himself and deconstruction in the realm of philosophy of religion. But does his radical argument hold up? Is Hägglund right in claiming that deconstruction is radically atheist? In this thesis I will

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism. Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford University Press, Stanford 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge. The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone' in: Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, *Religion* (Polity Press Cambridge, 1998) 1-78.

present the research I have done regarding both Hägglund's and Derrida's view on religion, or in other words: their philosophy of religion. The research question will be: to what extent does Hägglund's idea of religion correspond to that of Derrida? In order to answer this question, we first need to understand Derrida's philosophy (chapter one), and understand and critically analyse Hägglund's thesis (chapters two and three). In the fourth chapter we will put Hägglund to the test, bringing in Derrida's main text on religion and comparing this to Hägglund's work. In the conclusion I will formulate an answer to the research question, and correlate this answer to the bigger question that lies underneath this thesis and both Hägglund's and Derrida's philosophy of religion: how to think of religion? I will formulate my own answer to this question, informed by the research I have done. In this world where religion has become something that divides people and alienates them from each other, it is necessary to begin to understand what it is that inspires so many people and incites so much hate speech, that brings out the beauty and vulnerability of people and that abuses vulnerable souls, that connects and divides people. There are many different ways to approach this subject: psychology, sociology, history and other academic disciplines. My orientation in this thesis is philosophy of religion, comparing also two philosophers.

As said before, Hägglund introduces the term radical atheism as the previously unnoticed, but basic logic that informs deconstruction. He claims that with radical atheism, he offers an interpretation of Derrida's deconstruction that is a better fit than any other scholarship on Derrida. By introducing radical atheism as *the* deconstructive logic, Hägglund makes religion a pivotal point in the discussion about Derrida, and also positions himself against the common opinion about Derrida. So what does this logic entail and why is it called radical atheism?

This has to do with Hägglund's idea of what is at stake in deconstruction. Hägglund claims that any desire for immunity is undermined by deconstruction. According to Hägglund, this desire for immunity can be found in metaphysical and religious ways of thinking. He contrasts this religious and metaphysical conception of what is desirable with deconstructive logic, characterized as autoimmunity. As deconstructive logic is irreconcilable with the religious and metaphysical desire for immunity according to Hägglund, he calls this logic radical atheism. According to Hägglund, this underlying structure or logic of deconstruction has gone mostly unobserved during the past decades. It is even the cause of much confusion and misunderstanding in Hägglund's eyes, looking at the ways deconstruction has been 'appropriated' for religious purposes.<sup>3</sup> For Hägglund, radical atheism is why deconstruction is incompatible with both religion and metaphysics. Note well that Hägglund grabs metaphysics and religion together. The reason for this is that according to Hägglund *différance* (or spacing, in his own terminology), the cornerstone of deconstruction, has radical consequences. He bases himself on a passage by Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (first published in French as *De la grammatologie* in 1967):

*All dualisms, all theories of the immortality of the soul or of the spirit, as well as all monisms, spiritualist or materialist, dialectical or vulgar, are the unique theme of a metaphysics whose entire history was compelled to strive toward the reduction of the trace... [which is] required by an onto-theology determining the archeological and eschatological meaning of being as presence, as parousia, as life without différance: another name for death, historical metonymy*

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<sup>3</sup> Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 4.

*where God's name holds death in check. That is why, if this movement begins its era in the form of Platonism, it ends in infinitist metaphysics. Only infinite being can reduce the difference in presence. In that sense, the name of God... is the name of indifference itself.*<sup>4</sup> as quoted by Hägglund.<sup>5</sup>

Hägglund concludes that not only are these movements that 'strive toward the reduction of the trace' unable to exist in a world where *différance* is the condition for anything to exist, they also turn out to be undesirable and unthinkable. This is the complex argument Hägglund makes in his work. We will elaborate on this argument in the pages that follow, especially chapter two, and from there on we will be able to analyze his view on religion. However, before focusing on Hägglund's argument and considering if his interpretation of Derrida's philosophy holds up, it is important to know more about deconstruction. As the relation to metaphysics is an important factor in Hägglund's argument, in the first chapter of this thesis we will take a look at Derrida's philosophy, with a particular interest in his relation to metaphysics. The second chapter is concerned with understanding Hägglund's argumentation and the third consists of a critical analysis and evaluation of Hägglund's work. In the fourth chapter, we will put together what we now know about both Hägglund and Derrida and compare this to Derrida's main text on religion, *Faith and Knowledge* (first published in French in 1996). In the conclusion I will give a summary of the chapters before, answer the research question and put this answer into relation with the broader question of how to think of religion.

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida (trans. G. Spivak), *Of Grammatology* (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1976), 104. Original: Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Minuit, Paris 1967), 71.

<sup>5</sup> Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 28.



# CHAPTER 1: DECONSTRUCTION IN A PHILOSOPHICAL LANDSCAPE

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

This first chapter is meant to get a good view on what Derrida's philosophy entails in relation to the philosophical debates and movements Derrida takes part in, so that we can understand and place Hägglund's argument in the second chapter.

I place Derrida in the philosophical context of the debate around metaphysics. I will explain this debate as informed by an underlying epistemological question of how a finite human being can obtain knowledge in his or her historical context that transcends his or her own finite existence. After sketching this philosophical debate, I will introduce Derrida as a philosopher who is critical towards metaphysical ways of thinking and instead argues that it is impossible to think beyond our historical situatedness. Both the contextualization and the explanation of Derrida's philosophy will take place in the second paragraph of this chapter.

After having thus gained some insight in what Derrida's philosophy is about and what is at stake with Derrida, I will introduce two more perspectives on his work. The authors discussed here, Simon Critchley and John D. Caputo, have been selected for this chapter because of Hägglund's explicit disagreement with them, and because of their authority on the subject. The focus of their discussion here will be their view on Derrida's relation to metaphysics.

The fourth paragraph of this chapter functions as an illustration of what has been discussed before. In this part, I will discuss one of Derrida's key works, called *Voice and Phenomenon*. This early work, published in 1967, does not only shed light on the way Derrida works as a philosopher, but also on Derrida's relation to metaphysics in the context of his criticism of phenomenology. It is important to get insight into this work since Hägglund's discusses this work of Derrida at length and uses it for his argumentation. It also shows how Derrida's style and method are characterized by closely following and commenting on previous thinkers.

All of these subjects are informed by the research question 'How is Derrida's deconstruction understood and to which views does Hägglund react?'. This question will be answered in the conclusion of this chapter and the answer will also be brought into relation with the main research question of this thesis. In this chapter, I will introduce deconstruction in the context of larger philosophical debates. It is important to get a good view on these debates as Derrida's texts are complex and drenched in philosophical history.

A few comments should be made regarding the use of terms in this chapter and the rest of this thesis. Many a reader may trip over my careless use of big terms that have an enormous history, like metaphysics. My usage of the term does indeed fall short to all the meanings and nuances it evokes, but in the context of this thesis it is important to put a ceiling to what should be discussed. I

do not pretend to understand or use all of the philosophical richness and history of the term, but in order to tell a story it is sometimes necessary to use the term whatsoever. In this case, it is used to sketch the philosophical debate we can place Derrida in. As Hägglund and Derrida both use this term, it is legit to use it in this context. Another point on which I lose richness, depth and nuance in favor of slightly easier story-telling, is my use of the term deconstruction. This term is often used to designate Derrida's philosophy, despite Derrida's own hesitation to use the word as an overarching and all-encompassing name. Here again I have to defer necessary critical reflections.

## 1.2 PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT

### *Metaphysics*

Before giving an idea of what Derrida's philosophy entails, it is important to understand what philosophical debates Derrida answers to. In other words: what Derrida's philosophy is about and what is at stake.

Derrida is concerned with how we can think of the world and its reality after metaphysics. Metaphysics is here used to designate a way of thinking that supposes human beings can get to know a truth that exists independently of this human being. This is not the only possible meaning of the word metaphysics: as the term metaphysics is more than 2000 years old, it holds many meanings and nuances. However, the above explanation is the idea Derrida works with. Another way of portraying this can be found with Lucy, who states that Derrida reacts to metaphysics as a way of thinking about the truth in terms of essences and exteriority.<sup>6</sup> Exteriority here refers to the view that truth exists outside of and independently of human being. An example of this view can be found in the idea of Plato's cave, in which the human being experiences the shadows of essential ideas that exist independently of man. In this way of thinking, it is assumed a human being can strive for the truth about the world that transcends one's normal day-to-day experience. Seen this way, metaphysics is founded upon the idea that a finite human being can obtain knowledge in his or her historical context that transcends his or her finite existence.

Derrida reacts to this idea of metaphysics, and thus his philosophy is informed by the epistemological question of how a finite human being can obtain knowledge in his or her historical context. His stance on the subject is that there is no way of thinking out of or beyond our historical situatedness. He can therefore be placed in a long tradition of skepticism towards the human ability to know Truth with a capital T. In the history of philosophy, there are numerous examples of this skepticism, and especially during the last two centuries this realization has had its effects on many areas of science and philosophy. In many ways, philosophers have tried to think sensibly about the world without the presumption to think beyond their historical reality, without this metaphysical idea about Truth. It is Derrida's way of working as a philosopher to show how many of these

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<sup>6</sup> Niall Lucy, *A Derrida Dictionary* (Blackwell Publishing, Malden/Oxford/Carlton 2004) 76-79.

philosophers and philosophies even then still subscribe to this metaphysical idea. One example of this is phenomenology: a philosophical school from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the 20<sup>th</sup> century that Derrida is heavily indebted to. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is the most important phenomenologist and the one Derrida is most in discussion with. Phenomenology wants to base itself in what it sees as the absolute foundation of human knowledge; consciousness. Through consciousness we experience all phenomena; a phenomenologist tries to distill the essences of these phenomena through the reduction of all presuppositions one holds about these phenomena.<sup>7</sup> Phenomenology is heavily influenced by Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism, which holds the principle that philosophy ought to start from the way objects appear to us. Another example of a philosophical movement Derrida is in discussion with, is structuralism. In structuralism it is assumed that everything in the world exists according to general pre-human structures. In order to understand the world, one must understand these structures. One could think of social structures when it comes to anthropology, or general structures in language when it comes to linguistics. Derrida is mainly in discussion with structuralist linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1906), who held that a distinction should be made between the general system of language and the particular use of language. He also argued that words only get their meaning because of their difference with other words, not because they signify something 'in themselves'.<sup>8</sup> In his own philosophical work, Derrida demonstrates how these movements adhere to metaphysical ideas and presuppositions, even though they try to avoid this. Derrida does this by closely following and commenting on previous thinkers, and critically analyzing the presuppositions of their texts.

### *Derrida*

According to the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, the goal of Derrida's basic argumentation is to prove that repeatability and singularity cannot be separated.<sup>9</sup> In order to demonstrate this, he follows the method of transcendental idealism, which means he tries to trace the conditions for experience. Derrida's first observation is that experience always takes place in time. He finds that in experience it becomes clear that repeatability and unicity are at work simultaneously; the present is always unique, but it can only be experienced in relation to the memory of the immediate past and the anticipation of the future, which are characterized by repeatability of the present. Derrida's conclusion is that there can be no experience without this simultaneous repeatability and singularity. According to the *Encyclopaedia*, this insight has considerable consequences. As a first, it follows that any experience of something is never an experience of something that exists purely in itself, without non-presence. Because of the repeatability of the present, there will always be the trace of the past, which Derrida calls *arche-writing*. A second consequence is that the relation between experience and the conditions for experience needs to be rethought. In traditional

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<sup>7</sup> Stanley E. Porter and Jason C. Robinson, *Hermeneutics. An Introduction to Interpretive Theory* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids 2011), 49-56.

<sup>8</sup> Jim Powell, *Derrida for Beginners* (For Beginners LLC, Danbury 1997) 17-21.

<sup>9</sup> Leonard Lawlor, "Jacques Derrida", in: *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Spring Edition 2014), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), (Stanford, 2014). URL: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/derrida/>>.

transcendental philosophy, experience was to be derived from non-empirical foundational structures, or seen as an accident that happens to the essential conditional structures. This is tied up with the common idea in traditional philosophy that there has to be an origin that is completely identical to itself, according to the *Encyclopaedia*. However, in Derrida's logic it becomes clear that this is impossible, and that every origin or structure is already inseparably entangled with its empirical 'accidents'. Any origin, for Derrida, is already heterogeneous. This heterogeneity of origin points to the third consequence, which is that nothing can be given completely as itself; there is always a relation to what is other than itself. An important point of this basic argumentation is that the experience of the same, is always also the experience of the other. It is this basic argumentation that Derrida builds upon throughout his work, according to the *Encyclopaedia*. Also his elaboration of what is 'the worst' is founded upon this argumentation; the worst would be if the same would appropriate the other completely.

One of the ways to describe deconstruction is to separate it in two phases. The first phase of deconstruction consists in observing how existence is thought to be structured by oppositions that are completely separate from each other and reversing this structure. Examples of these oppositions are the above mentioned essential structures and empirical facts, nature and culture or inside and outside. In Western (metaphysical) thinking, one side of the opposition is usually preferred over the other. Derrida however shows how in fact the other side could be placed on top of the usual hierarchy, which results in the demonstration of the arbitrariness of the decision to prefer one side of the opposition over the other. This is the second phase of deconstruction.

Derrida tries to demonstrate this philosophical preference for either side of binary oppositions by reading philosophical and literary texts in a critical manner and to question their presuppositions. One of the most famous examples in this respect is the hierarchical opposition between speech and writing. Speaking is often preferred in philosophy as it would give immediate access to meaning. Writing however is supposed to be derived from speaking, and because of the distance to pure meaning, not as trustworthy as speech. Writing would be more impure and more corruptible. Derrida however, shows that in speech the same mechanisms are at work as in writing, so that it becomes clear that not even speech gives access to any absolute meaning that is fully present to itself. Both concepts are thus equally 'impure'. The fact that there is a preference for that which is associated with direct presence is what Derrida calls the metaphysics of presence.

This is where we come back to the relation of deconstruction to metaphysics: Derrida characterizes metaphysics as a way of thinking that tries to categorize and comprehend the world by using binary oppositions that are separated from each other.<sup>10</sup> One side of these oppositions is viewed as more original, pure, and present to itself, while the other side is associated with absence, decay and incompleteness.<sup>11</sup> The idea of presence-in-itself, which has no relation to absence, is why Derrida refers to the metaphysics of presence. Derrida's idea however is that either side of the opposition can never be thought without the other side; none of either sides can be experienced as pure presence-in-itself. There has to be a relation of what is present to that which is absent. Derrida calls

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<sup>10</sup> Barry Stocker, *The Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Derrida on Deconstruction* (Routledge, New York 2006), 43-44.

<sup>11</sup> Lucy, *A Derrida Dictionary*, 77.

this *différance*, by which he means that there is always difference; nothing can be experienced that is completely present to itself, because our experience always takes place in time. Deconstruction can be understood as a criticism to this metaphysics of presence.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.3 WHAT IS DECONSTRUCTION? ACCORDING TO...

In this paragraph I will introduce two authors who have had a big impact on Derrida scholarship. In the last two decades, they have played important roles in discussions about Derrida, especially in the context of the study of religion and in theology. These authors are Simon Critchley, who relates deconstruction to Levinas' ethics, and John D. Caputo who argues that deconstruction and theology share a passion for the impossible. These authors are discussed here because of Hägglund's disagreement with both of these influential scholars.

The perspective of their discussion here will be the way Critchley and Caputo place Derrida within the history of philosophy. In what tradition do they place him, and in which philosophical discussions do they see him engaging? This perspective is useful not only because the contextualization of Derrida's work influences one's understanding of deconstruction, but mainly because Hägglund's idea about this contextualization may differ.

Deconstruction as *clôtural* reading: Simon Critchley

In *The Ethics of Deconstruction*<sup>13</sup>, Critchley lays a connection between Derrida and another big name of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy: Emmanuel Levinas. Critchley is one of the first to highlight Derrida's ethical dimension in a particular manner, which Hägglund criticizes strongly. Critchley places Derrida in a frame or tradition which had hardly been in the picture before the publication of his book. He contributed to the rise of attention to Derrida's ethical horizon. It must be noted that 'ethical' in this context should not be understood as referring to the subcategory of philosophy called ethics, but ethics in Levinian sense, meaning the confrontation or meeting of the self with the Other, through the face of the other. Critchley's aim in this book seems to be to imbue deconstruction with a certain ethical or political energy by establishing a stronger link between Levinas and Derrida.

Critchley claims that Derrida and Levinas are more related to each other as one would think. Derrida's essay on Levinas, called *Violence and Metaphysics* (first published in the French journal *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* (vol. 3 &4) in 1964 and again in Derrida's monograph *L'écriture et la différence* in 1967) is in Critchley's opinion not as much a criticism of Levinas'

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<sup>12</sup> Lucy, *A Derrida Dictionary*, 103.

<sup>13</sup> Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction. Derrida and Levinas* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014. 1st edition: 1992).

philosophy in the normal sense of the word, but a deconstructive reading of Levinas. While both philosophers definitely differ in certain respects, it is as if they question each other continuously on a deeper level about alterity – which is a key theme for both philosophers.

Critchley views deconstruction as a double reading. The first reading is meant to follow the intention of the text as precisely as possible. The second reading is the *clôtural* reading, which focuses on the destabilizing side of the text. In this second reading one seeks alterity; it questions the apparent comprehensible unity that the text proposes or wants the reader to read. It is in this second reading that the ethical moment becomes clear; the categorical imperative of deconstruction, which is to pay heed to the transcendence of the other. Here is the affirmation of the other, of *différance*, and the crossing-paths with Levinas.

Critchley calls the second reading in deconstruction a *clôtural* reading because of Derrida's idea and use of closure. This idea can be traced back to Derrida's take on Husserl. Husserl criticizes the supposed goal of Western philosophy to 'close' philosophy; the desire to reduce existence to a finite totality that can be grasped in its entirety. Husserl's stance on this is that philosophy should in fact be the opening towards infinity. Derrida detects in Husserl some ambiguity of both finding himself in the closed circle of totality as also wanting to break out from it. Showing this ambiguity is one of the tasks of deconstruction. Deconstruction is therefore an undecidable reading; it is a philosophy of hesitation. The ethical moment consists of the fact that even before hesitation arises, it is already clear that a choice has to be made. Deconstruction is also ambiguous because it finds itself both within the closed circle of metaphysics as well as breaking out of it.<sup>14</sup>

Derrida and theology: John D. Caputo<sup>15</sup>

Caputo has grown to be one of the big names when it comes to deconstructive scholarship. He is a well-known philosopher especially in faculties of theology or religious studies. He is famous for explaining what deconstruction is all about but also for his own theology, which seems to be heavily inspired by deconstruction. In this paragraph, I will draw upon two of his works on Derrida: *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* and *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*. *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* was published following the inauguration of a Master's program on continental philosophy at the Jesuit University of Villanova in the USA, to which Derrida was invited for a table conversation with the professors. The book is divided in two parts: the first one is the transcription of this table conversation, the second is Caputo's elaboration of themes that came up during that conversation. Caputo's discourse is quite imaginative, and he uses sometimes almost poetic language to describe Derrida's philosophy. This has both negative and positive consequences. Like Powell's illustrated introduction, imaginative language can create more understanding because of the greater freedom it gives. However, sometimes nuance is lost. Caputo often seems to speak in Derrida's defense: against some silly analytic philosophers' opinion, Caputo describes Derrida's

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<sup>14</sup> Critchley, *Deconstruction and Ethics*, 145-187.

<sup>15</sup> John Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell. A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (Fordham University Press, New York 1997) and John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*. Religion without Religion (Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis 1997).

philosophy as affirmative and 'in-ventionalist'; it welcomes what comes in. An important point for Caputo is that deconstruction is committed and responsible, not aiming towards destruction but to transformation instead. Caputo takes the same stance in *Prayers and Tears*: one of its most prominent ideas is that deconstruction can help to save religion from its negative or bad components. In this work Caputo explains how deconstruction can be understood as following the same structure as religion, but without the content of a specific religion. However, deconstruction does share something with religion and specifically with negative theology: a passion for the impossible. The difference between *différance* and the God of negative theology however is that *différance* is a quasi-transcendental anteriority (meaning it goes before anything else, making everything possible without being constitutive) whereas God in negative theology remains a transcendental ulteriority. This is where deconstruction criticizes the hyperessential, metaphysical side of theology in general and of negative theology in particular. In his chapter on apocalypticism, Caputo shows how Derrida's philosophy relates to apocalypticism: we expect something, and pray for something, but we know not what. There is not even a sharp distinction anymore between sender and receiver; all messages become destinerrant, meaning they are both lost (from *errer*, to wander) and on their way to a destination (*destin*, meaning destiny in French). As we don't know what is coming, we live in a structure of faith. Caputo also connects this to Derrida's idea of the messianic, which is to be distinguished from any particular messianism like a religion. The messianic is a formal structure of time, always out of joint, and open to singularity. It is an effect of *différance*, and the structure of experience in time. Another big theme that Caputo wants to discuss in light of deconstruction and religion is the gift, a recurrent theme in his writings. It is here that we can catch a glimpse of what the impossible means, according to Caputo. It would be impossible to give a gift without entering into an economy of gifts. However, it is exactly this impossibility of giving a true or pure gift (one without economy) that makes any gift-giving possible; it gives the closed circle of the economy its passion. This kind of passion for the impossible could be called a passion for God, God being understood as a name for the impossible, beyond anything we can imagine. It is trans-ascendent, without having a fixed goal.

The most important claim Caputo makes is that deconstruction follows the same structures as religion.<sup>16</sup> It has to be noted that this is only a structural and not a substantial similarity. Religion as Caputo understands it has a structural opening and even commitment to the coming of the future, in the same way as he claims deconstruction does. It should also be noted that the image of God in the light of deconstruction that Caputo develops throughout the book is not a theistic God; instead, it is a vulnerable and weak God but still committed to and passionate for justice. In the works discussed here, Caputo does not link Derrida strongly to philosophical movements like structuralism, phenomenology or even metaphysics.

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<sup>16</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, xxi.

## 1.4 VOICE AND PHENOMENON

In 1967, three works by Jacques Derrida were published. *La Voix et le Phénomène*<sup>17</sup> is one of them, and is still regarded as one of his most important texts. After years of study into the works of Husserl, Derrida wrote this text on Husserl's phenomenology. In the introduction he states that phenomenological criticism of metaphysics in fact turns out to be a moment of this metaphysical tradition.<sup>18</sup> Husserl in the end does expect an ideality that does not change but remains present. He finds this ideality in the living present. He seeks a silent layer in consciousness that is completely present to itself, without any absence and without any relation to indication and exteriority. Derrida however suspects that consciousness and language cannot be separated, and that this means that absence and difference already exist in this basic layer. Derrida wants to that Husserl trips over his own argumentation when it comes to this basic layer. By doing so Derrida demonstrates phenomenology is occupied with a metaphysical objective, as it seeks presence.

When writing about the sign, Husserl wants to make a sharp distinction between expression (*Ausdruck*) and indication (*Anzeigen*), but what he achieves is showing how expression depends upon indication. Here Derrida discovers a problem in Husserl's argumentation: expression itself is always aimed at someone else (in communication), but the meaning (*vouloir-dire*) of expression must also be able to exist independently for Husserl, in the absence of someone to express it to. The solution that Husserl brings to this problem is the internal monologue, or soliloquy. It is here that pure expression can take place, as no indication is needed because everything is already known to the subject. In order to explain how one can still 'hear' one's internal monologue, Husserl introduces fictive language. Here Derrida points once again to a problem in Husserl's argumentation: in order to save expression as pure expression, without the exteriority of indication, Husserl in fact needs exteriorization. Husserl wants consciousness to be indivisible. In order to hold on to the view that the self does not have to make known anything to itself, Husserl also needs the present moment to be indivisible. However, he concludes in his analysis of time that the present can only be experienced in relation to what it is not; non-presence. Future and past are both absent in the present moment, but at the same time one needs to be able to anticipate onto the next moment (Husserl calls this protention), and to remember the past moment (retention). From this line of thought, Derrida infers that repetition and trace must constitute the present. There is an irreducible *différance* in the present.<sup>19</sup> This relation of the present to absence undermines Husserl's idea of consciousness. As Husserl wants to hold on to the idea of indivisible presence, he has to introduce another layer in consciousness: a pre-expressive, 'phenomenologically silent' layer. This is where true meaning is found according to Husserl. Derrida however questions how the word 'I' functions, which gets its meaning only from solitary discourse but ends up functioning as indicative.

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<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, *La Voix et le Phénomène* (Presses universitaires de France, Paris 1967). First published in English as *Speech and Phenomena: and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* in 1973.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida and Leonord Lawlor, *Voice and Phenomenon. Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl's phenomenology* (Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2011), 3-14.

<sup>19</sup> *Différance* is one of the neologisms Derrida has introduced in philosophy. In French, it would be pronounced the same way as *différence*, which is the correct spelling of the French term for difference. Derrida spells it *différance* to emphasize the artificial hierarchy of speech over writing.



This is a question about the voice, as the voice functions as the medium that mediates meaning from the pre-expressive layer to expression. By means of the voice, the meaning has to be made present. The voice has a unique role in this, because it is the most interior of all media, according to Husserl. However, this is again something where Husserl trips over his own argumentation, as he again brings language and exteriority where he does not want it to be: in consciousness.

From this point we can see how Derrida brings up his own philosophy. Derrida argues that there seems to be a hierarchical distinction between writing as the exteriority of meaning and speech as the immediate, present and interior form of meaning. But in Husserl's argumentation it becomes clear how exteriority and absence time and again seem to be present where Husserl does not want them to be. In consciousness, one hears oneself speak. Derrida calls this auto-affection and it undermines Husserl's entire trajectory. *Différance* (and with *différance* the opening to exteriority) turns out to be 'at the base' of even that which seemed to be indivisible in Husserl's eyes. Despite Husserl's idea, expression implies a non-fulness. Husserl makes his distinctions with the aim of preserving being as presence and therefore Derrida claims that Husserl adheres to a metaphysical way of thinking. But *différance* is, in a way, older than origin; it is the supplement that has always been necessary.

This work is one of the most important works by Derrida. Despite the complexity of the text, it may function as introduction to deconstruction. It shows how Derrida works as a philosopher, commenting and criticizing and reading carefully the authors he is indebted to, but it also shows how his own thought springs from this tradition. It is a very basic text that discusses the nature of experience and time.

## 1.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, Derrida's philosophy has been put into the context of the philosophical debate around metaphysics. In this perspective, Derrida is interested in the epistemological question how a historical human being can obtain knowledge that goes beyond his or her own historical reality. Derrida builds his philosophy, which is often labelled as deconstruction, as commentary to earlier philosophers. Deconstruction can in that way be seen as a way of reading that is critical towards the metaphysical presuppositions of a text. Whereas in metaphysics it is not doubted that a finite human being can obtain knowledge that transcends his or her historic situatedness, Derrida questions this human ability and instead argues for the impossibility of thinking beyond one's historical situation. However, it is still the question what this questioning means and where it leads. Does Derrida want to abolish this tradition of metaphysics or does he want to stay within it, or are both of these answers wrong?

In this chapter, we have seen slightly different answers to these questions. Caputo observes a structure of expectation in deconstruction. He describes this structure as a passion for the impossible. Caputo seems to view deconstruction as a guardian against dogmatic and violent

religion.<sup>20</sup> Critchley proposes we should view deconstruction as both belonging in the 'metaphysical closed circle' as well as breaking out from it. In other words, deconstruction does not accept metaphysics wholeheartedly but does also not pretend to leave it behind once and for all.<sup>21</sup> So even though deconstruction is seen as critical towards the metaphysical tradition, it is not against it. Instead, it deconstructs the metaphysics of presence. In the chapters that follow, it will become clear how Hägglund forms his argument against both authors and views the relation between Derrida and metaphysics differently.

In the fourth part of this chapter we have not only witnessed how Derrida works as a philosopher, precisely commenting on and criticizing his predecessors, but also how he criticizes Husserl's search for absolute presence whilst trying to avoid a metaphysical way of thinking.

It is important to understand how Derrida's work interrelates with other philosophical movements like phenomenology, as this makes it possible to value Hägglund's thesis. In order to judge Hägglund's thesis, one must understand Derrida well in his philosophical context and the philosophical questions he answers to. In this chapter, it has been shown how Derrida's relation to the philosophical debate around metaphysics could be imagined; reacting to the tendency to emphasize historical situatedness, Derrida points out how many authors do adhere to a metaphysical way of thinking despite their desire to avoid this.

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<sup>20</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, xxi.

<sup>21</sup> Critchley, *Ethics of Deconstruction*, 59-106.

## CHAPTER 2: HÄGGLUND'S RADICAL ATHEISM

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

In 2008, a book was published with the aim of reassessing the entire trajectory of Derrida's work. The main thesis of this work by the Swedish Martin Hägglund is that there is a radical atheism underlying all of Derrida's philosophical work. Hägglund tries to develop and fortify this argument, as he claims it is not clear from the surface of Derrida's texts but does lie below all of his work and thought. However, Derrida's work has often been misunderstood since this radical atheism has not been grasped by most scholars. The framework that Hägglund proposes for reading Derrida is, supposedly, a better fit. These bold claims cannot but be met with suspicion and healthy skepticism. However, the thoroughness of his book and the connections he makes with the philosophers Derrida is indebted to do call for a serious inquiry into Hägglund's claims. This chapter is first of all concerned with understanding Hägglund's argumentation; the next chapter of this thesis will contain a critical thematization and analysis of the moves that he makes in order to get to his argument.

Hägglund presents his thesis as a polemic against many interpreters of Derrida who have not understood how this structure of radical atheism underlies Derrida's work and what consequences this has. The fact that most scholars have not yet observed this radical atheism, is due to the fact that Derrida himself has not developed it explicitly, according to Hägglund. Therefore, Hägglund has taken it upon himself to develop this structure, following Derrida's own texts but also handling his legacy creatively and fortifying his arguments. One could view Hägglund's theory as the building structure of a house that one does not see in a quick glance, but once observed, turns out hard not to see.

So what is this framework that Hägglund proposes for understanding Derrida? That is the leading question for this chapter of this thesis. Hägglund's way of thinking may be difficult to grasp at first, but it is necessary to understand his argumentation well before we are able to answer the main research question. Hägglund's entire work revolves around the contrast and incompatibility of religion and deconstruction. Said a bit more precisely: the religious conception of what is desirable is contrasted with what is desirable according to the deconstructive logic characterized as autoimmunity. Hägglund claims that Derrida sees religion as holding out certain 'immune' ideas (which is to say they are inviolable and pure) that are put forward as desirable. He claims that this immunity is incompatible with a deconstructive logic in which everything is autoimmune, which is to say that everything is threatened from within itself. Following this logic, immunity is undesirable and therefore deconstruction is radically atheist. Radical atheism not only denies the existence of but also the desire for immunity. Instead, it holds that desire for immunity is always a desire for temporal survival.

The above is a complicated text which is not very understandable at first reading. Also the argumentation of the claims that are made here, is not simple. Hägglund's book serves as the elaboration of the above statements and is made up of five chapters.

In Hägglund's first chapter, he rethinks the conditions for identity, departing from Derrida's thoughts on the trace structure of time. The thesis of this chapter is that time (and the spacing of time) functions for Derrida as the ultratranscendental condition for everything to be experienced, to exist, and to be thought.<sup>22</sup> This is another way to say that everything only exists in space and time and is therefore constituted by *différance*. According to Hägglund, this leads to a deconstructive logic of identity in which synthesis (the experience of identity) is not guaranteed in a non-temporal unity as usually in philosophy. In this deconstructive logic of identity, it is necessary for anything to contain the possibility of its own non-being. Everything is thus threatened internally by what is other than itself; this is what he calls autoimmunity. In the second chapter, the next step in rethinking identity from the trace structure of time is made. Here, Hägglund develops the deconstructive notion of synthesis of time and identity through what Derrida calls *arche-writing*. He does this based on Derrida's reading of Husserl. In this chapter it becomes clear how life is always a case of survival and living on, as life is autoimmune: it is threatened by what is internal to it, which is death. The third chapter of Hägglund's book is an elaboration of how time and violence (*arche-writing* and *arche-violence*) are linked, and how Derrida's thinking about alterity should not be brought into line with that of Levinas, even though many authors do this. The fourth chapter is the main chapter about Derrida's relation to religion and the authors who find a certain theological layer in Derrida. Here, Hägglund claims that Derrida always has his starting point in the desire for mortal life, and that he, from that position, reads religious concepts 'against themselves'. His philosophy is always characterized by finiteness and survival, and this is irreconcilable with religious readings of his work. In the final chapter, the logic of radical atheism and autoimmunity is related to politics, democracy and ethics. Hägglund's thesis in this chapter is that Derrida's logic entails a reconfiguration of the goals and motivations of political struggle and ethics. This leads to his conclusion, being that deconstruction causes a change in our thinking about life and desire. In the following rendition of Hägglund's work, the first and the fourth chapter will be given most attention, as they are most important in answering the main research question of this thesis. In the first chapter, Hägglund sets up his main framework, and in the fourth chapter he focuses most on the relation of deconstruction with religion.

This short intro may serve as a concise roadmap, after which the reader will not be wholly unfamiliar with the terms used in Hägglund's work. This chapter will follow the structure of Hägglund's work as introduced above.

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<sup>22</sup> Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 10.

## 2.2 THE FIRST CHAPTER. AUTOIMMUNITY OF TIME: DERRIDA AND KANT

In the first chapter, Hägglund elaborates on the concept of autoimmunity. He starts by illustrating the meaning of autoimmunity, describing how democracy is not only threatened by external factors, but also by its internal forces that for example may obstruct democratic elections so as to prevent the election of a dictatorial regime. Hägglund's main thesis in this chapter is that autoimmunity is the condition for life in general. This may be hard to grasp, Hägglund warns, as autoimmunity goes against the traditional logic of identity. Hägglund relates this logic to the philosophical principle of non-contradiction, in which it is held impossible for an object to have contradictory attributes at the same time.

Hägglund shows how Derrida deconstructs the logic of identity using notions of temporality. In *Ousia et Gramme* (1972), Derrida uncovers the problems that arise when temporality and the logic of identity are related to each other. In this text it becomes clear that time, as the present, is always experienced as divisible, while pure presence (being as coinciding with itself) should be indivisible. This has shown to be a philosophical problem through the ages, and most answers to this problem rely on a grounding presence that can warrant the synthesis of time. However, for Derrida, also this grounding self-presence is impossible. So how does Derrida solve the problem of the synthesis of time? He proposes the trace as an answer, which he defines as spacing (also: *arche-writing* or *différance*). Spacing is the becoming space of time and the becoming time of space: without leaving a trace and being a trace itself, the experience of the synthesis of time is not possible.<sup>23</sup>

According to Hägglund, the trace or *différance* is the condition for life in general for Derrida. He calls this the ultratranscendental condition, and contrasts this with Kant's transcendental conditions of space and time that only apply to mortal consciousness. According to Hägglund, Derrida demonstrates how Kant needs time to be only transcendental, because otherwise he would get into trouble with the logic of identity. He wants to hold on to traditional logic of identity in which an object cannot have contradictory attributes at the same time. In the history of philosophy, it has always been difficult to ascribe an ontological status to time, as the divisibility of the present inhibits time from 'being', as 'being' is understood as coinciding with oneself.<sup>24</sup> Even though Kant criticizes the idea of being as presence-in-itself and finds his philosophical point of departure in human's finite consciousness, Derrida takes this criticism a little further. Derrida deconstructs the traditional logic of identity which is founded on the principle of non-contradiction. In this logic, identity is indivisible and therefore sovereign or unconditional: the identity of X is not dependent on something else. Derrida deconstructs this logic by delinking sovereignty and unconditionality: instead, he claims that spacing is unconditional, as spacing ensures that each moment is divisible and thereby dependent on what is different from itself. Of course, this is no sovereign identity. For Derrida, there is always divisibility, and that may be the most important thing in deconstruction: *différance*.

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<sup>23</sup> Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 18.

<sup>24</sup> Idem, 20-21.

But if everything is divisible because of the constitution of time, then how is identity still possible? Hägglund argues that Derrida has found an answer to this question in *arche-writing*, or inscription. Hägglund uses the familiar image of drawing a line, which takes time but also takes space, and only because of the trace it leaves behind we can see how it exists. However, for Derrida these conditions for experiencing the drawn line as a synthesis, as spread out in time, are not transcendental, but ultratranscendental. This ultratranscendental condition of spacing does not only constitute the human experience, but also everything that can be thought.<sup>25</sup> If anything could be thought without the spacing of time, that idea would entail the extinction of everything, as it would not support the trace structure of everything that exists: "absolute sovereignty is unattainable, unthinkable and undesirable because it would extinguish every trace of life."<sup>26</sup> In the deconstructive logic of identity, an object or anything that exists, does not coincide with itself. It cannot even be thought as coinciding with itself, as that would extinguish the object itself. This can be described as autoimmunity: "inscribed within the condition for X is the unconditional coming of time that attacks the integrity of X a priori."<sup>27</sup> Another way of saying this is that what is must have the possibility of its own non-being always already inscribed in itself. This trace structure of existence also means that there must be an opening to the future, and that there is always a threat (of destruction) but also a chance (of living on). In other words: in this trace structure, there is always something happening, it cannot remain 'in itself'.

This is where Hägglund gets to Derrida's conception of desire: he does not desire immunity, because then nothing would happen. Hägglund contrasts this with his notion of religion, as immunity is what is seen as desirable in religion.<sup>28</sup> Hägglund takes it upon himself to elaborate Derrida's conception of desire, as his commentators have not grasped it to the full, and as Derrida has not developed it to the full. Hägglund argues that the issue of mortality is decisive in Derrida's idea of desirability. He views mortality and finiteness as the condition for anything to happen, both negative and positive. Immortality (an immune idea) would of course annihilate all mortal life, as there would be no space for spacing.<sup>29</sup> Hägglund states that in deconstruction, life is always a mortal life, a question of living on, of survival. The fact that it ends makes its enjoyment possible. This autoimmunity of life, the fact that life is only possible through its relation to death, implies a double bind. In other words, one desires what one cannot keep: "whatever one wants to affirm is constituted by the fact that it will be negated."<sup>30</sup>

In the next part of this chapter, Hägglund takes the relation of Derrida to Kant back up. He argues that Derrida's writing about the unconditional has often been misunderstood because the discourse is easily linked to Kant's thinking about ideas. However, Hägglund argues that Derrida analyzes the ideal purity of a concept (like the gift, justice or hospitality) to show that the necessity of contamination is inscribed in the ideal purity of the concept itself. Contamination is not something that happens to the pure gift because it has to realize itself in the world. On the contrary, the very

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<sup>25</sup> Idem, 28-29.

<sup>26</sup> Idem, 30.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>28</sup> Idem, 32.

<sup>29</sup> Idem, 33.

<sup>30</sup> Idem, 34.

concept of the gift requires that it be contaminated by what is other than itself.<sup>31</sup> In other words: Hägglund shows how Derrida views these concepts as autoimmune. Another concept that easily invites for misreading according to Hägglund, is justice. It is his aim to explain these terms like the gift and justice correctly: even though it may look like Derrida speaks about absolute justice, it is in fact the coming of time and thus undecidability why absolute justice is not possible. What Hägglund does here, is to warn against an idealist interpretation of 'the impossible' with Derrida.

Hägglund states that it is easy to misread Derrida's deconstruction of these concepts, because in our way of thinking immune ideas are still preferred even though they are deemed impossible. But in deconstruction it becomes clear that these ideas are not desirable but also not thinkable, as only autoimmune ideas are thinkable.<sup>32</sup> Absolute or immune ideas are ideas in which time is cut off, and with time all existence would be extinguished. The reason why there cannot be an absolute instance is not because it is an inaccessible idea (as in Kant), but because it is self-refuting as such. Derrida demonstrates this in his treatment of Kant's essay 'The End of all Things', in which Kant seems to have to conclude that something absolutely good would entail the end of everything. To Hägglund, this is the same apocalyptic idea that is shared with religion.<sup>33</sup> Deconstruction, however, follows an opposed logic and proposes an infinite finitude, meaning that there can be nothing that has no end or boundaries. Deconstruction always starts from the idea that life is mortal, as the possibility of its own non-being is internal to it. In other words: life is essentially autoimmune. This also means that mortality is not seen as a lack of being that is desirable to overcome. This is where traditional atheism and radical atheism are distinguished: in radical atheism, immortality is undesirable, because immortality would mean that life as survival would stop.

In this chapter Hägglund has made clear that life as survival and immortality are irreconcilable. The next chapter is set on arguing how life is indeed a question of survival, following from the structure of the trace.

## 2.3 THE SECOND CHAPTER. ARCHE-WRITING: DERRIDA AND HUSSERL

In this second chapter, Hägglund elaborates Derrida's relation to Husserl's phenomenology, and demonstrates how his deconstruction of Husserl's phenomenology entails a change in the logic of identity. Hägglund's point is that this change is revolutionary, and he laments the fact that this is often not recognized enough as many academics seem to merely repeat Derrida's statements on the divisibility of the present without realizing the radical consequences of this statement. Derrida builds on the thought that the past needs to be 'inscribed' in order to exist. He uses the concept of 'inscription' because of the general function of writing: representing something, giving signs to something so that it can be repeated. Very often, however, the moment in which this past was 'original' and completely present to itself, was privileged, even though the need for inscription was

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<sup>31</sup> Idem, 36.

<sup>32</sup> Idem, 43.

<sup>33</sup> Idem, 47.

recognized. This is the case for example with Freud or Plato. Derrida however, holds that the movement of inscription, which is usually regarded as derived from the pure, originary moment is in fact originary. This is what he calls 'arche-writing'. This chapter is the explanation of why *arche-writing* is originary and how it should be understood. Hägglund's thesis is that *arche-writing* shows how life is a question of survival, as it always has the possibility of being erased.

Hägglund argues that Husserl endorses the metaphysics of presence by holding on to the logic of identity, meaning that what is must be identical to itself. In Husserl's case this is applied to the conscious subject, that is completely present to itself. According to Hägglund, the basic problem is that self-presence and temporal extension are mutually exclusive. Everything that exists in time, is divided in itself into past and future.<sup>34</sup> When Husserl claims a subjectivity that is given to itself immediately, he claims that it does not take time. The infinite regress that Husserl stumbles upon is proof for Hägglund that absolute subjectivity is a projection and that every form of auto-affection is in fact hetero-affection.<sup>35</sup> Auto-affection has been viewed traditionally as the deepest form of interiority, in which no exteriority is needed. According to Hägglund, Derrida posits a form of hetero-affection in which exteriority is always already present in interiority; there is thus no pre-reflexive state in which only interiority exists. Husserl is aware of the function of representation for all experience, but does not want to give up on the privilege of absolute presence when it comes to consciousness itself. Derrida however makes a different move: he demonstrates how the structure of representation is the condition for any identity. Hägglund argues that this holds true not only for subjectivity (the identity of one's own subject), but for identity of anything in general. To him, this is the necessary conclusion of holding dyadic time as constitutive. He goes on to explain why:

*Différance* is constitutive, and according to Hägglund this is shown by Derrida's reading of Husserl. With Husserl, any subject is divided a priori; it cannot be conscious of itself at the same moment, because consciousness is always already divided in retention and protention. There is always a difference in time. That is why the subject does not constitute time, but is being constituted by the movement of temporalization; the *différance* of time is constitutive. The subject never coincides with itself. This is unacceptable for Husserl, because it does not answer to the logic of identity. Hägglund poses the question of how we can then still talk of identity, if identity is always already divided in itself? The answer to that question is what Derrida calls *arche-writing*. The present needs to be inscribed, so that it can be represented. Otherwise one could not think of oneself or could consciousness not be conscious of itself. Through inscription past and present are mediated. Writing leaves a trace, and is in that sense spacious. The trace, in return, temporalizes space because it remains in the same space over time, which makes identifying it possible.<sup>36</sup> Arche-writing thus makes identity possible, bringing interiority and exteriority together.

Through the deconstruction of Husserl, one can conclude that *arche-writing* is the transcendental condition for self-consciousness, which means consciousness at its most basic level. Hägglund's thesis however is that Derrida does not only hold *arche-writing* as a transcendental, but as an ultratranscendental condition. At this point, Hägglund makes big steps in a very limited space. He

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<sup>34</sup> Idem, 61.

<sup>35</sup> Idem, 59.

<sup>36</sup> Idem, 72.



argues that for Derrida, the structure of representation (*arche-writing*) is a condition for identity as such. That is what he appears to call ultratranscendental.<sup>37</sup> Life therefore always a matter of survival, surviving one trace to the next. As the structure of representation always contains exteriority, it also is always open to what may erase it. This is what Hägglund calls *arche-violence*, and will be developed in the next chapter.

## 2.4 THE THIRD CHAPTER. ARCHE-VIOLENCE: DERRIDA AND LEVINAS

In the third chapter, Hägglund argues that Derrida's thinking about the other and alterity has been reconciled too much with that of Levinas. But whereas Levinas relates the other to goodness and infinity, with Derrida we can speak of constitutive violence when it comes to the other – even though this violence does not necessarily entail a negative or positive judgment. Hägglund names this idea *arche-violence*, meaning that violence is always present and that there is no peaceful state of being prior to violence. Following the exposure of the difference between Derrida and Levinas, in this chapter Hägglund goes into what he views as the contribution of deconstruction to ethics and politics, in order elaborate this further in the fifth chapter.

According to Hägglund, Derrida's contribution to ethics is that he incites a reassessment of the common assumptions about the goals of ethics and politics. Derrida accomplishes this by questioning the idea or ideal state of being.<sup>38</sup> Hägglund observes, as many others do, that this line of thought by Derrida has been developed through a reading of Levinas' ethics even though their ideas of alterity function in a very different way. Hägglund holds that because Derrida and Levinas use similar terminology, writers such as Bernasconi, Cornell and Critchley do not understand Derrida correctly. The main difference between Derrida and Levinas and also the point on which Derrida criticizes Levinas sharply, is about alterity as infinity. Hägglund holds that Levinas regards the other as a positive infinity, which means an infinity that is completely in itself, without beginning and end.<sup>39</sup> According to Hägglund, this infinity would be non-temporal, it would not exist in time. Derrida's idea of alterity however is founded upon negative infinity, which is intrinsic to temporality. This means that every finitude is always transcended by another finitude; nothing ever stays 'forever' because it is superseded by another finitude. According to Hägglund, Derrida's criticism towards Levinas is that in thinking about alterity as a positive infinity, he brings back in the totality of the same that he had so wanted to remove from philosophy.<sup>40</sup>

In the first chapter Hägglund has tried to show how time is always divided within itself; in turn, the existence of time makes it impossible for anything to exist 'in itself'.<sup>41</sup> In the second chapter he has

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<sup>37</sup> Idem, 73-75.

<sup>38</sup> Idem, 78.

<sup>39</sup> It is generally acknowledged that Levinas did at least seem to promote this idea of the other as positive infinity in his first work, *Totalité et Infini* (1961) but after criticism of Derrida has changed his views, which can be read in *Autrement qu'être* (1974). Hägglund seems unaware of this development.

<sup>40</sup> Idem, 92-93.

<sup>41</sup> Idem, 79.

shown that following this constitution of time, it is impossible for anything to exist in time without the trace, or *arche-writing*. But a trace only exists with the possibility of it being erased; we can thus speak of a constitutive finitude. For anything to exist, it needs the possibility of being lost. "To think the tracing of time as the condition for life in general is to think a constitutive finitude, which from the very beginning exposes life to death, memory to forgetting, identity to alterity, and so on."<sup>42</sup> This also means that there is no state of absolute peace imaginable where peace is not threatened by the possibility of its non-being – in other words, violence, war, everything non-peace. For Derrida, this impossibility of pure peace is the possibility for any ethics or politics to exist according to Hägglund. Pure peace which coincides completely with itself would close off the possibility for any future to come, and for anything else to exist or to happen. The impossibility for any pure and absolute peace to exist in time, is the reason for essential corruptibility of everything; everything is necessarily compromised and threatened by its other.<sup>43</sup> In the case of peace: war. In the case of justice: injustice. This essential corruptibility and the impossibility of absoluteness (e.g. absolute peace) has consequences for ethics and politics: decisions should not be made in view of an ideal world. Working towards absolute peace is not desirable, because absolute peace closes off the opening to the future and is in this way in fact absolute violence. Because of the undecidable coming of the future, decisions and their consequences cannot be totalized, and that is the reason why they are possible. If these could be totalized, they would not be decisions anymore. We are necessarily caught up in an economy of violence, and this makes us able to choose between more and lesser violence; this is the condition for any ethics and politics to exist.<sup>44</sup> The coming of time also provides for the necessity of any ethics and politics. The corruptibility of everything that exists is also the condition for taking on responsibility, since one has to guard something for its non-being.<sup>45</sup> The coming of time contains always a chance and a threat. As the future is unforeseeable, one has to make decisions which always consist of boundary making – and that makes them inherently violent. This is why there is only a choice between the lesser and the greater violence.

Hägglund remarks how Derrida has often been misunderstood when he employs terms as 'hospitality', which he blames on our generally positive assessment of these terms. However, Hägglund argues that Derrida does not read these terms as inherently positive or negative. For example, there is no inherent value in unconditional hospitality. It is not an ideal one strives towards, but what Derrida tries to show by unconditional hospitality is the unconditional fact that one does not know what will come. One is always susceptible to violent visitations. Unconditionality here is understood as not dependent on anything else; it has no conditions. In that way, conditional hospitality and unconditional hospitality go hand in hand and are not each other's enemies.

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<sup>42</sup> Idem, 79.

<sup>43</sup> Idem, 81.

<sup>44</sup> Idem, 84.

<sup>45</sup> Idem, 106.

## 2.5 THE FOURTH CHAPTER. AUTOIMMUNITY OF LIFE: DERRIDA'S RADICAL ATHEISM

The fourth chapter in Häggglund's book may be the most interesting one in light of philosophy of religion: this is where Häggglund looks closely at the relation between deconstruction and religion, focusing on authors such as Caputo and Kearney. This chapter, and the whole idea of radical atheism, hinges on the idea that it is only possible to desire something that can also be lost.<sup>46</sup> Häggglund states that he follows Derrida in subscribing to this idea. In this line of thought, desire is always a double bind: whatever is desirable, has the undesirable quality of being lost. When it comes to mortal life, this means one desires to hold on to a mortal life, and despises death. The desire for mortal life is a constitutive force in Häggglund's interpretation of Derrida: because everything we can desire is mortal and finite, we can act in order to save them as long as possible. Without the threat of losing the things and people we love, including ourselves, nothing would happen and we would do nothing.

This conception of desire, in which mortality or finiteness is a necessary condition for anything to be desired, is the most important argument for radical atheism.<sup>47</sup> Already in the first chapter of Häggglund's work, it was shown how immune ideas (as they are projected in religious or metaphysical traditions) are not desirable as they would not support the coming of time. According to Häggglund, for Derrida it is inherently valuable that something happens or changes. Häggglund's point regarding desire is thus twofold: first of all, one would not desire something that is immune as it would annihilate time and with time, *différance*. Secondly, every desire that seems to be a desire for immunity, is in fact desire for temporary survival. In classical atheism, it is generally held that there can still be a desire for immortality, God, or the absolute good. Häggglund contrasts this classical atheism with his own radical atheism, which denies not only the existence of immune ideas, but also the desire for this immunity. This does not necessarily mean Häggglund wants to tell everyone what to desire and what not, but he wants to point out what desire actually is: not the desire for immunity, but for survival. It is not the case that one should not desire immunity, but as we live in a structure of survival and the only thing we can desire is what we could also lose; it is always autoimmune. Häggglund calls this radical atheism because it goes a step further than classical atheism, but maybe also because this 'radicality' rings with his idea of autoimmunity: everything that exists already contains the possibility of its own non-existence in its roots - in other words, autoimmunity is radical.

This idea of radical atheism is already set up in the first chapter. The rest of this fourth chapter is therefore not so much concerned with atheism per se, but with authors who have made a connection between Derrida and religion in a particular way. In this chapter, Häggglund wants to demonstrate how any attempt to view Derrida as a religious thinker in any way is flawed as religion and deconstruction depart from incompatible premises.

John D. Caputo is one of the most prominent authors who, according to Häggglund, try to make deconstruction compatible with religion. Caputo claims that deconstruction and religion (especially

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<sup>46</sup> Idem, 111.

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem.

negative theology) share the same passion for the impossible. Hägglund on the other hand claims that deconstruction and religion are incompatible. Religion holds out an ideal of immunity. Desire for mortal life, on the other hand, undercuts this ideal: if one can only desire what is mortal and finite, one cannot desire immunity, as it would eliminate the mortal as mortal, since anything mortal can only exist in time and anything immune presupposes a positive infinity (which would mean the exclusion of time).<sup>48</sup> For Derrida, there is no such thing as the desire for immortality, but only for temporal survival. Hägglund's thesis is that this desire for survival underlies all the readings Derrida does of religious terms, like messianic hope, faith, and desire for God.<sup>49</sup> Caputo's thesis is about the desire for the impossible. Hägglund argues that Caputo reads Derrida's idea of the impossible in a wrong way. Whereas Caputo, in Hägglund's eyes, holds that the impossible is only possible for God,<sup>50</sup> Derrida views the impossible (which is, for anything to be in itself) as that which makes everything else possible. Because it is impossible for anything to be in itself, it is possible for things to be at all. But this means that the impossible remains impossible: if anything would become being in itself, nothing could happen anymore since there would be no time. The same goes for justice: the coming of time makes justice possible because it challenges the totality and generalizability of the law, while at the same time it makes absolute justice impossible as the time that comes may show that some laws or decisions were not just. Absolute justice (like the kingdom of God that Caputo hopes for) cannot become possible because it would remove the condition for the existence of justice which is time, according to Hägglund.<sup>51</sup>

Another point on which Hägglund disagrees with the way Caputo understands Derrida is that there must be an unconditional opening to the other. According to Hägglund, Caputo takes this to be an normative statement, whereas Hägglund sees it as a logical conclusion to the spacing of time. Caputo then is inclined to associate this coming of the other with the good, according to Hägglund, but another theologian who mostly remains on a par with Caputo, Richard Kearney, does wonder how to distinguish between the good and the bad coming of the other. To Derrida, the answer does not lie in any definitive answer to this question like Caputo or Kearney desire (according to Hägglund), but in the changeability or undecidability. This does not have to do with a limitation in our faculties or possibilities of knowing, but in the structure of being in which all being contains its own non-being. In other words: auto-immunity. Also the good is inseparable from evil and evil from good. This structural undecidability is also why Derrida uses the word 'faith' (e.g. in the context of having faith in the time to come): not as faith in something good, but to have faith in something of which one does not know if it is to be trusted or not.<sup>52</sup>

The criticism Hägglund directs towards Caputo and Kearney boils down to this: Kearney and Caputo both claim they think beyond the metaphysics of presence, but according to Hägglund, they do still base their arguments in absolute presence. Kearney finally hopes for someone who is undeniably good and will bring salvation, and Caputo directs himself to a God for whom everything

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<sup>48</sup> Idem, 120.

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>50</sup> Hägglund claims this in *Radical Atheism*, page 120. He cites some passages from Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, for example from pages 114 and 133. He also cites a Bible passage Caputo quotes in this context, Mark 10:27.

<sup>51</sup> Idem, 123.

<sup>52</sup> Idem, 126.

is possible and with whom absolute justice exists. Häggglund sees in both thinkers how they pursue a religious ideal of immunity, which is completely incompatible with deconstructive thinking to him since deconstructive thinking always undermines (the ideal of) immunity.

Häggglund claims that Derrida deconstructs a number of religious notions and then keeps using them in their deconstructed sense, and this has often led authors to place Derrida's philosophy in a religious framework. However, Häggglund claims Derrida reads these concepts against themselves. Häggglund gives a few examples of this method of Derrida, and explains how Derrida's expositions on 'salut', the messianic and justice in fact demonstrate how in these concepts desire turns out to be not a desire for salvation, but a desire for temporal survival. But why does Derrida keep using these religious terms when they seem to invite so much misreading? Häggglund's answer to this is that through using these concepts in their deconstructed sense, Derrida can demonstrate how desire, which he does not just want to denounce, turns out to be a desire survival instead of a desire for immunity.<sup>53</sup> For Häggglund, this is an exemplary moment of Derrida's radical atheism.

Next, Häggglund turns to the image of God that springs from Derrida's texts. In the text it has already become clear that when Häggglund thinks about God, he thinks only of an immune deity. He now demonstrates how in Derrida's text also emerges a different image of God; one who is himself subjected to temporality, the undecidable coming of future, divided in itself, and necessarily mortal. For Häggglund, this is obviously not good enough for a god, and he thus labels these texts of Derrida as clearly signifying radical atheism.<sup>54</sup> According to Häggglund, it is demonstrated in deconstruction how nothing can be safe and sound with deconstructive logic. A theologian who claims that Derrida leaves the name of God intact like Hent de Vries is therefore wrong, according to Häggglund. Naming God is an indication of God's mortality, as giving a name to anything is an expression of the desire to keep what can be lost, in other words, an expression of the desire for survival.<sup>55</sup>

In the final part of this chapter, Häggglund comes back to what he started this chapter with: Derrida's personal work *Circonfession* (1991), which is a reference to Augustine's *Confessions*. He claims that in this work Derrida deconstructs the desire for God and demonstrates how in Augustine's own text the radical atheist desire for survival is already present. Augustine directs his desire towards the immortal and away from the mortal, but Derrida can be seen to invert this hierarchy. The prayer from Derrida's mouth is always directed towards someone mortal, and does not ask for immortality.<sup>56</sup> Even from the structure and composition *Circonfession* can be seen to express the desire for survival, and in various ways Derrida's desire for survival is intensified during the moment of writing.<sup>57</sup> He recognizes the same desire for survival in the example of the 'memory machine'; in an interview with Derrida from 1989, Derrida expresses how his urge for writing comes from a desire to keep everything that happens. A memory machine that would keep all his memories as soon as they come to exist would be the solution to this craving. However, such idiomatic memory machine is impossible; in writing, in keeping record of something, there is

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<sup>53</sup> Idem, 136.

<sup>54</sup> Idem, 143.

<sup>55</sup> Idem, 145.

<sup>56</sup> Idem, 151.

<sup>57</sup> Idem, 152.

always delay, or *différance*. Also, there is always the possibility of losing, but this is also the condition for us to enjoy.

*Circonfession* then does not express an acceptance of finitude, since to accept finitude would in fact mean a denial of finitude.<sup>58</sup> *Circonfession* expresses the desire for survival, a desire to keep what can be lost – since everything we can desire necessarily has the possibility to be lost. This is also the case for the people we love; because we are mortal and finite, we can be in relation with others. An infinity does not require anything but itself or want anything or care for anything. That is why ‘a man cannot want God for a friend’, as we read in this chapter’s motto. As mortal beings, we always find ourselves in a double bind, because “to mourn the beloved is precisely to experience how the source of precious happiness always was to become the source of radical loss.”<sup>59</sup>

## 2.6 THE FIFTH CHAPTER. AUTOIMMUNITY OF DEMOCRACY: DERRIDA AND LACLAU

This last chapter is Hägglund’s reaction to a few authors who have read Derrida in a certain ethical way. One of the main authors Hägglund reacts to, is Simon Critchley. Hägglund argues that Derrida’s philosophy does indeed contain an ethical dimension, but that his contribution to ethics mainly consists in a reconfiguration of the goals and functions of ethics. Derrida’s philosophy does not help us to make better ethical decisions according to Hägglund.<sup>60</sup> He derives this stance on Derrida’s ethics ultimately from the spacing of time. As Hägglund sees finitude, which follows from the spacing of time, as the condition for anything to be desired (one cannot desire something that cannot be lost) but also for anything to be feared (e.g. one would not fear anything if we would not be threatened by finitude), we want to keep what we can lose; both our own life as the lives of the ones we love. Any system of values, any political struggle, any responsibility, any system of ethics, stems from this desire for survival. If something would not answer to temporal finitude, nothing would happen to it, so there would be nothing to be responsible for or to seek justice for. We strive for the survival of finite singularities, which will always already mean the end to other finite singularities. This is why all choices that are made eventually are violent to some degree, as any choice always interferes with the survival of something else. Derrida seems to call this the economy of violence, which will never be resolved. Also, any final resolution to this imbalanced economy of violence is not desirable because it will put an end to desire and anything that can be desired. In other words: absolute justice is not possible nor desirable, because it would annihilate time. In a timeless world there would be no possibility of criticism to any decision, because any decision could only be just, which would make justice impossible.<sup>61</sup> Corruptibility is the essential condition for any ethics, politics or responsibility.

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<sup>58</sup> Idem, 159.

<sup>59</sup> Idem, 161.

<sup>60</sup> Idem, 165, 204.

<sup>61</sup> Idem, 166.

## 2.7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have seen how Hägglund's argument of radical atheism is built up. Hägglund holds deconstruction and religion as incompatible, as they are opposed to each other when it comes to their view on immunity. Hägglund contrasts the religious conception of what is desirable with what is desirable according to deconstructive logic. In this logic, everything that exists in time is necessarily autoimmune, which means that everything that exists already contains the possibility of its own non-being; it is already threatened by what is other from within. Religion on the other hand, promotes immunity in the form of 'immune' ideas and concepts, which are pure and inviolable. In deconstruction, however, immunity is undesirable and therefore deconstruction is radically atheist. Radical atheism does not only deny the existence of immunity, but also the desire for immunity. Instead, radical atheism holds that desire for immunity is always desire for temporal survival.

This is a very short rendition of Hägglund's thesis in *Radical Atheism. Derrida and the Time of Life*, or rather a summary. In the chapter that follows, I intend to digest this raw material into a thematization of Hägglund's work with regard to philosophy of religion and a critical analysis of his argumentation.

## CHAPTER 3: HÄGGLUND'S ATHEISM OBSERVED

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

After the introduction into Derrida's philosophy in chapter one and the introduction to Hägglund's thesis in chapter two, this chapter is concerned with the evaluation and reception of Hägglund's work. Whereas the second chapter is a precise rendition of Hägglund's argumentation, the first part of this chapter is a thematization of Hägglund's work in which I will offer a comprehensible perspective on the religious themes in his work. After this thematization, a critical analysis of Hägglund's work will follow. My own critical notes with Hägglund's work are fortified by reviews of and reactions to *Radical Atheism*. In 2009, an issue of the *New Centennial Review* was released that was completely dedicated to Hägglund's work, with an emphasis on his newest work *Radical Atheism*.<sup>62</sup> The *New Centennial Review* is a journal focused on the Americas, and many of its editors and contributors have a background in comparative literature. A few of the contributors to this issue are of special interest to me at this point as they fit in with the disciplinary background of this thesis, which is philosophy of religion. Another important reply to *Radical Atheism* when it comes to the philosophy of religion, is the one by John Caputo, which was published in the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* in 2011. Also this article is discussed below.

The research question that informs this chapter, is 'How has *Radical Atheism* been received?'. The answer to this question is formulated as a critical thematization and critical analysis of Hägglund's work and a concise answer will be formulated in the conclusion of this chapter.

### 3.2 THEMATIZATION

Let us first take a step back and look at the bigger themes Hägglund touches upon. Why does Hägglund take this extreme and polemical stance on deconstruction? Why does he call it radical atheism? Why does he show such a strong reaction to anything religious in relation to Derrida?

#### *Religion and metaphysics*

In order to answer these questions, it is important to first understand what Hägglund means when he writes about religious interpretations. Hägglund does not give an elaborate account as to what religion is or how religion functions. In the few passages where he does give an indication, his views are expressed very briefly. His take on religion is quite one-dimensional and simple, and seems

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<sup>62</sup> *New Centennial Review. Special Issue. Living On: Of Martin Hägglund* (Vol. 9 n. 1, spring 2009).



guided by a text by Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (1967), in which religion and metaphysics are grabbed together:

*All dualisms, all theories of the immortality of the soul or of the spirit, as well as all monisms, spiritualist or materialist, dialectical or vulgar, are the unique theme of a metaphysics whose entire history was compelled to strive toward the reduction of the trace... [which is] required by an onto-theology determining the archeological and eschatological meaning of being as presence, as parousia, as life without différance: another name for death, historical metonymy where God's name holds death in check. That is why, if this movement begins its era in the form of Platonism, it ends in infinitist metaphysics. Only infinite being can reduce the difference in presence. In that sense, the name of God... is the name of indifference itself.<sup>63</sup> - as quoted by Hägglund.<sup>64</sup>*

Put very simply, any way of thinking that leaves room for absoluteness, as any religion does in Hägglund's point of view, can be classified as metaphysics. This is Hägglund's idea about religion. Then the next step: how does this relate to deconstruction exactly? In Hägglund's thinking about deconstruction, the principle of autoimmunity is key; because spacing or *différance* is the condition for anything to exist, anything can only exist if it is autoimmune. As everything is thus autoimmune, there is nothing that can exist as just itself, as not threatened by its own non-being. In other words: absoluteness or immunity is impossible in a world where *différance* is the condition for everything to exist. Hägglund thus excludes the possibility of absoluteness in the philosophical logic of deconstruction. But he goes a step further along this line than many other authors who have written on deconstruction. Hägglund does not only make statements about the existence of absoluteness or immunity, but he also denies the desire for immune ideas like immortality, God or pure knowledge. This differs from for example Caputo, as he does give space to this desire.

### *Desirability*

Hägglund wants to point out that any desire for immunity is not what it seems to be. This does not necessarily entail that Hägglund tries to act as a 'thought police' who tells us what we can and cannot think. In Hägglund's logic, immunity cannot exist in a temporal world, as the existence of time produces the condition of *différance*, and therefore autoimmunity. Immunity would mean that nothing happens, because there would be no time in which anything could happen. That is, according to Hägglund, what Derrida calls 'the worst'; that nothing would happen. Apparently, Derrida seems to prefer that something happens over that nothing happens. This personal preference, however, is not really convincing as a reason why one does not desire immunity. On the contrary, does not the realization that everything that exists in time is necessarily finite lead to a greater desire for immunity than ever? To Hägglund, the answer is no. He has two reasons for this. The first is the above mentioned, that the worst is that nothing happens; ergo, immunity is not something desirable. The second reason is Hägglund's conception of desire. He claims that one can only desire something if that something can be lost. There would be no reason for desiring something if it could not be lost. In Hägglund's logic, it is thus not possible to desire something

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<sup>63</sup> Jacques Derrida (trans. G. Spivak), *Of Grammatology* (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1976), 104. Original: Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Minuit, Paris 1967), 71.

<sup>64</sup> Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 28.

immune, since there would be no incentive to keep it; it is already safe and sound. There are thus two reasons for not desiring immunity: immunity is undesirable because it should not be desired and immunity is undesirable because it cannot be desired.<sup>65</sup> Here it becomes clear that Hägglund uses two meanings of the word 'undesirable' in his work; one in which undesirable means that something is not 'able' to be desired, and one in which something is undesirable because one does not want it. Hägglund does not elaborate on this distinction, which makes his discourse fuzzy and difficult to grasp.

### *Desire and radical atheism*

So why does it still seem like we desire immunity, like God or immortality? Hägglund's answer to this question lies in the structure of survival, which he sees supported in Derrida's writings. Hägglund claims that we live in a double-bind, in which we hold on to what we know can and will be lost: our lives, the lives of others, and in fact everything that exists in time. We hold on to life because we know we will lose it someday. However, we do desire to keep it for as long as possible. Any desire for immunity is in fact a disguised desire for life, which is always mortal. Hägglund illustrates this with passages from Derrida's text *Circonfession*, in which he recognizes this ambiguous desire; the desire of keeping that which will be lost, because the quality of being lost is internal to it.

But what does this philosophy about desire and survival have to do with atheism or religion? Hägglund contrasts his radical atheism with traditional atheism. He defines traditional atheism as a way to deny the existence of God, immortality etc. without denying the desire for such immune ideas. It is not exactly clear how he has come to this definition of traditional atheism. Also, it seems a bit imprecise to gather all these 'immune' ideas into one category, without any regard to distinctions between religious and secular immune ideas. This way of grabbing everything together is in line with how Hägglund uses the above-mentioned quotation of Derrida. In Hägglund's thinking, religion and metaphysics are identical in their projection of ideals: both metaphysical and religious traditions project 'immune' ideals, that are exempt from time and thus exempt from the threat of their non-being.<sup>66</sup> So, Hägglund contrasts this traditional atheism, that still leaves room for desiring immunity, with his radical atheism. In radical atheism, this desire is negated, which is not to say that one should not desire immune ideas, but that the desire for immune ideas has never been a desire for immunity, but a desire for survival instead.

It is Hägglund's thesis that this radical atheism, even though Derrida himself has not used the term, lies underneath the whole of Derrida's work. He thus takes a stance in the debate about how Derrida should be understood in the broader philosophical debate about metaphysics. In contrast with many other authors, his point of view is that not only is there no room for metaphysics in deconstruction, even the desire for metaphysics is not what it has always seemed to be.

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<sup>65</sup> *Idem*, 55.

<sup>66</sup> This does not only refer to states of being, but can also refer to something as absolute goodness; absolute goodness would not have the possibility of its own non-being (non-goodness, evil) internal to it.

### *Metaphysics and deconstruction*

Let us go back to the questions that were asked at the beginning of this paragraph. Why did Hägglund write this book, that takes a stance against many other Derridean interpreters? The answer lies in this: Hägglund detects in Derrida's texts a strong antipathy against 'immunity', which means, ideas that are not internally threatened by what is other than themselves. He holds this as very fundamental in Derrida's philosophy, and reacts to all the other Derridean scholars who do not detect this foundation and have a different point of view on deconstruction and immune ideas. According to Hägglund, there is no space anymore for immunity after Derrida; immunity turns out to be undesirable because it should not and cannot be desired.

It is important to recognize that Hägglund sets up two ways of thinking opposite each other: on the one side there is the metaphysical way of thinking, which also includes any religious way of thinking. Regardless the existence of anything immune like absolute goodness, God or immortality, in this metaphysical way of thinking these immune ideas are still preferred over anything that is not immune, which is to say, anything that exists in time and is thus threatened by its own non-being. On the other hand, there is Hägglund's interpretation of Derrida's deconstruction. In this way of thinking, autoimmunity plays a key role. According to Hägglund, in deconstruction the traditional logic of identity (in which what is must be identical to itself) is overruled by this autoimmunity; in deconstruction it becomes clear that nothing can exist in time that is not threatened by its own non-being. Instead, everything that exists in time always already contains the possibility of its non-being; everything is autoimmune. These two ways of thinking are incompatible, according to Hägglund.

Hägglund's book can be seen as a reaction to all authors on Derrida who do not share Hägglund's sharp distinction and incompatibility of these two ways of thinking. Examples of these authors that Hägglund refers to are John Caputo, Richard Kearney and Simon Critchley. With every one of them, Hägglund's criticism is that they still hope for something that is absolutely good. According to Hägglund, this goes against the logic of deconstruction, in which goodness is always already radically evil. To him, there is no such thing as pure goodness, because that would be an immune idea. There is nothing we can rely on to be absolutely good; there is a structural undecidability at hand because of the coming of time and the autoimmunity of everything.

## 3.3 EVALUATION

### *Autoimmunity*

Even though Hägglund's work projects to make visible a certain structure that underlies deconstruction from the earliest of Derrida's writings till the end, he introduces a few new terms that do not necessarily ring a bell for Derridean scholars. One of these terms is of course radical atheism, the use of which I will come back to shortly. Another one is autoimmunity. Derrida appears to have used this term himself, but in this book Hägglund of course takes it to another level. He sees autoimmunity as a pillar of deconstruction and one of the best ways to describe deconstruction. As Derrida himself was resistant to pointing out one single word to describe his philosophy, it seems

not such a bad idea to add another term to the array of designations that have been used to describe deconstruction. Autoimmunity may be a good way to verbalize how for example the center cannot exist without the margins.

#### *The agenda of the philosopher*

Another merit of Hägglund's work is the way he analyzes and criticizes the agenda of his fellow philosophers. I think this is a very important method in Derrida's own thinking and writing, even though he does it in a somewhat subtler way than Hägglund. Hägglund follows Derrida's good example in his first chapter, where he demonstrates how Derrida shows how Kant is intent on safeguarding his sovereign ideas. Hägglund in turn tries to expose how several authors in some way want to hold on to immune ideas like God or absolute goodness. In Hägglund's eyes, authors like Caputo want to 'keep God safe' in a post-metaphysical world. However much there can be said against this criticism (which I will do later), Hägglund's sharp eye for what a philosopher wants to achieve is a merit of this book whatsoever.

#### *Guard against idealism*

Related to the point made above, I would also like to point out that Hägglund is a very fierce guard against any too idealist interpretation of Derrida. Hägglund's exposition of how the impossible does not function as something we cannot reach because of our own finitude and not as something we should still hope for despite our limitations is valuable and brings a healthy counterbalance to for example Caputo's hopeful and expecting discourse.

#### *Ultratranscendental: escaping the cave*

Apart from this appraisal, Hägglund also misses the point in some important respects. In the first chapter of this thesis, deconstruction was placed in a philosophical context that has its roots in the skeptical tradition starting with Kant. In the first chapter I demonstrated how Derrida also works in this tradition and how he is also concerned with the epistemological question underlying this tradition. I have also demonstrated how Derrida exposes philosophers who try to evade a metaphysical way of thinking, like Husserl with his phenomenology. Hägglund also places Derrida in this philosophical debate. He seems to argue that Derrida gives an answer to the epistemological question that has been raised since Kant. Hägglund states that for Derrida, spacing is the ultratranscendental condition for life in general. What he means by this statement is that spacing bridges the traditional divide between transcendental (referring to the conditions for experience) and empirical.<sup>67</sup> In other words: spacing is not only the condition for human experience, it is also the condition for existence in general. Hägglund's argumentation is at this point airborne, soaring into great heights. He paraphrases Derrida when he claims that spacing is the condition for all life, from its most basic forms as cells all the way up to ideas and worldviews.<sup>68</sup> For Hägglund, spacing is the becoming space of time and the becoming time of space; in order for a moment to exist, it must be spatially inscribed. Spacing is thus the general condition for anything to exist in time.<sup>69</sup> In a way, this is Hägglund's way of saying that there is nothing outside the text, and that *différance* is constitutive. He views spacing as the solution that Derrida offers to the infinite regress that Kant

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<sup>67</sup> Idem, 27.

<sup>68</sup> Idem, 19.

<sup>69</sup> Idem, 27.

and Husserl stumble upon, without grounding it in a sort of presence or a non-temporal unity. Even though Hägglund's line of thought does seem to hold up for its bigger part, as it is not much different from saying 'there is nothing outside the text', I still have my doubts as it seems illicit to draw conclusions about the conditions for existence and life in general through a transcendental method. I strongly question if Derrida's texts give occasion to this move, and wonder if Derrida has any ambition to give such a 'god's eye-view' on the general conditions for existence. In *Voice and Phenomenon* Derrida seems to speak of the experience of identity, and not necessarily identity itself, in general. Derrida observes how Husserl trips over the relation between self-presence and temporal extension,<sup>70</sup> but in my opinion neither Husserl nor Derrida give rise to extending this problem to everything that exists. Hägglund on the other hand does draw such conclusions and calls this ultratranscendental, but in doing so he might forget the object of phenomenology. By using the word 'ultratranscendental', Hägglund seems to suggest it is possible to adopt a God's eye view and speak objectively about what exists and how it exists. In a way then, Hägglund withdraws from the postmodern philosophical climate where the human being is no longer seen as an objectively knowing being, and goes back to a Platonist anthropology where the philosopher is truly able to escape the cave. William Eggington, a long-time teacher of Hägglund, also expresses this criticism when he ultimately questions Hägglund's ambitions to claim knowledge and to "grant ultratranscendental status to a concept of any kind."<sup>71</sup>

### *Radical atheism*

Another point of criticism concerns Hägglund's introduction of the term radical atheism. He claims that a certain radical atheism informs all of Derrida's work. One of the easiest ways to refute this claim is to point to the fact that Derrida himself has never used this term, leave alone he used it to designate the whole of his philosophy. However, Hägglund was ahead of this criticism and strategically placed a disclaimer in the introduction to his work, saying that the inheritance of Derrida asks for reaffirmation of the legacy through critical discrimination.<sup>72</sup> He adds to this that even if there are passages in Derrida's work that would speak against his own interpretation, it would not necessarily mean that the framework of radical atheism that he proposes does not hold up. Even Derrida can be inconsistent.<sup>73</sup> However, apart from the fact that Derrida himself does not have an explicit radically atheist agenda, it also seems a little far-fetched as an implicit agenda. Because: why does Hägglund want so much to see a logic of radical atheism *in* Derrida? Why is he not content using Derrida's philosophy for underpinning his own position? As was mentioned above, Hägglund lumps together all immune ideas into one heap of metaphysical and religious ideas. His idea of radical atheism goes against all these ideas, whether they are religious or not. Therefore, the decision to call his logic radically atheist seems more like a publicity stunt than the most appropriate way to designate this logic. In a way, he shoots himself in the foot because he refers to the broad array of all absolute or immune ideas, but uses a narrower term like atheism. By

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<sup>70</sup> Idem, 57-61.

<sup>71</sup> William Eggington, 'On Radical Atheism, Chronolibidinal Reading, and Impossible Desires' in: *New Centennial Review* (Vol. 9, n. 1, spring 2009) 191-208, 206.

<sup>72</sup> Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 12.

<sup>73</sup> Ibidem.

using this term, he places his work in a religious context, while his thesis is in fact broader. However, this could also work in his favor: it does give his endeavor a bite, and his work may attract more attention with this polemical stance. He makes his work interesting to all academics in religion without leaving the secular academic milieu.

### *Religion, atheism and religion*

However much Hägglund may have thought about the strategic qualities of a term like radical atheism, he does not seem to have thought much about the enormous history of the word. It has already been noted that he does not give an explanation for his definition of traditional atheism. Radical atheism then is chosen not only because it goes further than this so-called 'traditional atheism', but mainly because it refers to his idea of autoimmunity as that anything already has the 'root' of what it is not internal to itself. Following this logic, he claims that the desire for immunity is not what it seems to be, but turns out to be a desire for survival instead. The desire for survival is always temporary because life always already implies death. In the same way as he does not really care for the content of the concept of atheism, Hägglund also does not seem to be aware of what has been going on in recent decades under and after the classification 'theism' in theology. His criticism of religion only seems to refer to theistic religions, in which God is always a god of absolutes: immortal, omnipotent and omniscient. He does not seem to be aware of any developments in theology that work with post-theist images of God. In the Western history of theology there have at times been movements that did not adhere to what we can call the metaphysics of presence. But especially in these postmodern times it is almost impossible not to at least relate to other than theist concepts of God. A key element in contemporary theology is post-metaphysical theology; how can one still talk about a God in the context of philosophical post-metaphysics? How is it theologically possible to speak about a post-theist God? Hägglund does not seem to be updated about these developments in theology, and the only religion he can envision is one with a theist God. This becomes especially clear when he quotes Derrida about the mortal God.<sup>74</sup> After repeating Derrida's statement, he seems to conclude: if it is a mortal God, it is no God. Ergo: atheism. For Hägglund, there are only two possible options: one either believes in a theist god, or one is atheist. Hägglund subscribes to the image of the naïve atheist who has a rigid conception of what religion is or should be. In that way, he is more conservative than many religious people and/or Christians. Two theologians he writes about, Caputo and Kearney, are not as rigid in their conception of God as Hägglund himself seems to be. Both of these writers would surely not classify as theist thinkers, but rather post-theist – which still is a very broad classification. Unfortunately, Hägglund seems unaware of these nuances in contemporary theology. However, it is my guess that if he would be confronted with these nuances that he seems to have missed, he would argue that his criticism still holds up for post-theist conceptions of God. In the fourth chapter of his book, Hägglund tries to demonstrate that for example Kearney still hopes for an absolutely good God. Anything absolute, without the possibility of being bad already internal to itself, is impossible in Hägglund's logic of autoimmunity. Also in Caputo; even though the Kingdom of God is not regarded as a certain heavenly and eternal place, it is still regarded as good whatsoever – it does not come into question that it might not be good, as it is related to God. Hägglund would thus answer to this criticism that although post-theist theologians claim to think beyond the metaphysics of presence, they still

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<sup>74</sup> Idem, 142-143.

search for something to hold on to that is absolutely good. And according to him, this way of thinking is incompatible with deconstruction.

### *Caputo's reply*

The discussion between Hägglund and Caputo has continued after *Radical Atheism*, in the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* in 2011. Caputo's lengthy response to *Radical Atheism* is made up of three parts.<sup>75</sup> In the first, Caputo explains how and why Hägglund has understood him wrong. The second and biggest part is the explanation of why Hägglund's 'renarration' of deconstruction is opposed to what Derrida wants to say according to Caputo. In the last part, Caputo makes his point about religious materialism. Of course, the second part is most relevant to us at this time. One of Caputo's main points is that Derrida's philosophy is not so much intent on rendering an account of how time and space are constituted, but the effects of time on us. Instead, Hägglund gives time a certain ontological or metaphysical status, which according to Caputo is at odds with the writing of a new transcendental aesthetic.<sup>76</sup> This is on a par with what has been said before in this chapter. Caputo views Hägglund's radical atheism as opposed not only to the contents of Derrida's deconstruction, but also to its style.<sup>77</sup> Whereas Hägglund tries to find a governing and overarching or fundamental logic to deconstruction, it is Caputo's opinion that deconstruction is the reason why there cannot be a governing logic. Caputo also criticizes Hägglund's tendency to correct Derrida on his own 'inconsistencies'.<sup>78</sup> A large part of this reply to Hägglund is dedicated to demonstrating how Hägglund uses 'abridged' versions of what Derrida means by the unconditional and by the undeconstructable. Caputo tries to show that his own writing on Derrida's unconditional and undeconstructable should not be confused with the Kantian idealism Hägglund accuses him of: Caputo does not speak about ideal meanings but about the "history of composition that is still unfolding".<sup>79</sup> Another point on which Hägglund has gotten Derrida wrong, is the impossible. Caputo replies here that Derrida deconstructs 'concepts' as forgiveness and the gift and then demonstrates how Derrida shows that these are not concepts that 'are', but rather 'a force, a desire, an impetus, a movement, an appeal'.<sup>80</sup>

### *Phantasms and metaphysics in Naas*

This last point of Caputo can also be found in a reaction to Hägglund in an issue of the *New Centennial Review* that was dedicated to the work of Hägglund. In this issue, Michael Naas is the first in line to offer his reaction. Naas claims that even though Hägglund's analysis is very strong, he misses out on why the phantasms (as Derrida calls them) of anything absolute (immune and unscathed ideas like nation-state identity, purity, salvation) exert such a force on human desire. He shows how in Derrida's own texts there does seem to be an answer to this question, namely that a phantasm has such an effect precisely because it is impossible.<sup>81</sup> As an example: the sovereign has

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<sup>75</sup> John D. Caputo 'The Return of Anti-Religion: From Radical Atheism to Radical Theology' in: *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* (Vol. 11 n. 2, 2011) 32-122.

<sup>76</sup> Caputo, 'Return of Anti-Religion', 63.

<sup>77</sup> Idem, 49

<sup>78</sup> Idem, 92.

<sup>79</sup> Idem, 86.

<sup>80</sup> Idem, 81.

<sup>81</sup> Michael Naas 'An Atheism that "(Dieu Merci!)" Still Leaves Something to be Desired' in: *New Centennial Review* (Vol. 9 n. 1, spring 2009) 45-68, 54.

power because of the fictive character of that power. Another point on which Naas applauds Hägglund's work but also criticizes it strongly, is deconstruction's descriptivity or prescriptivity. Naas praises Hägglund for keeping deconstruction safe from ethical prescriptions, but points out how Hägglund cannot escape the minimal prescriptive dimension in deconstruction. Hägglund makes a distinction between desirable in its usual meaning (what is wanted) and desirable as what is able to be desired, and also between what we seem to desire (immunity) and what we really desire (survival). Naas calls this distinction between appearance and essence metaphysical, and argues that because of Hägglund's aversion towards any prescription in deconstruction, his argument is focused on the second meaning of desirable, as what is able to be desired and what in fact we really desire. However, he does not get to this second meaning without also going through the first, which has an evaluative character. This evaluation is to be found in his writing about Derrida's 'the worst', which is to be avoided: a state in which nothing happens.<sup>82</sup> Naas claims that deconstruction is an exhortation to deconstruct the phantasms of immunity or absoluteness, but not with showing what things in fact 'are'. In the first chapter, we have seen that Derrida is concerned with pointing out how philosophers subscribe to a metaphysical way of thinking even though they want to avoid this. Naas does roughly the same when he criticizes Hägglund for his metaphysical way of thinking about what we appear to desire and what we *really* desire.

### 3.4 CONCLUSION

In the first part of this chapter we have seen how Hägglund argues that metaphysical ways of thinking, which also include religious ways of thinking, are irreconcilable with deconstruction. This is because they idealize immunity, whereas in deconstructive logic any desire is desire for the finite and autoimmune. There can thus be no desire for immortality, but only for temporary survival of mortal life. This is what Hägglund calls radical atheism: that the desire for immunity has in fact always been a desire for survival.

It is to be doubted if Derrida's texts give occasion to hold spacing as the ultimate, ultratranscendental condition in the way that Hägglund does. Another big point of criticism is that Hägglund has a one-dimensional and shallow understanding of both religion and atheism. Furthermore there are several points of criticism regarding the function of desire and the desirability of immunity.

I would like to point out how many of these criticisms could be brought under one heading. This is that Hägglund's work could be seen as an example of a metaphysical way of thinking. This becomes clear not only when we regard Hägglund as a philosopher who wants to say something about existence, independently of one's historical situation, but also when scrutinizing Hägglund's idea

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<sup>82</sup> Naas, 'An Atheism', 63.



about desire. In the above analysis it has been demonstrated how he makes a distinction between what we seem to desire and what in fact we turn out to desire after analyzing spacing as the condition for existence. The fact that Hägglund subscribes to a metaphysical way of thinking is ironic, as one of his main arguments is that deconstruction and metaphysics are incompatible.

This evaluation of Hägglund's work shall be kept in mind in the next chapter, in which I will put his thesis to the test on a text by Derrida on religion. This evaluation also adds to the answering of the main research question in the conclusion.

## CHAPTER 4: RELIGION WITH DERRIDA AND HÄGGLUND

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter serves as the sampling of what we have learned in the previous chapter. Here we will take a close look at one of Derrida's own texts: the enigmatic, rich and complex text he wrote about religion in 1994 and 1995 called *Faith and Knowledge*.<sup>83</sup> After diving into this text and drawing up a comparison between the way Derrida and Hägglund speak about religion, we will be able to formulate an answer to the main research question in the conclusion of this thesis. This chapter is informed by the sub question: how does Derrida speak about religion in *Faith and Knowledge* in comparison to Hägglund? After giving an introduction to *Faith and Knowledge* and the themes that are discussed within it, we will take a closer look at how the text is made up and how Derrida arrives at his theses. This then leads to the comparison with Hägglund.

For the informed reader of philosophy, already the title of this text by Derrida evokes a richness of thought, since it refers to at least four other texts on religion. The title also could be seen to function as a reader's guide to Derrida's text, as the themes that are present in the title pervade the entire text. 'Faith and Knowledge' is a text by Hegel from 1802-3, and Derrida in his own text uses this opposition in order to rethink religion; it is his thesis that even though faith or religion and knowledge or science are seen as opposed to each other, the two in fact spring from the same source and subsequently relate to each other in an autoimmune relationship. 'Two Sources' refers to a text by Bergson, a French philosopher who wrote 'The Two Sources of Morality and Religion' in 1932, stating that there are two sources of religion that overlap and mingle. The first source is dogmatic, the second is creative. Derrida also refers to Kant's text 'Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone' (1793), in which Kant makes a distinction between two sorts or two sources of religion; there is cult on the one hand, and moral religion on the other.<sup>84</sup> Derrida uses these two philosophies that both divide religion into two in order to create his own view on the two sources of religion. The reference to Kant's work 'Religion within the limits of Reason Alone' is also a statement about the aim and function of philosophy: Derrida, as did Kant, wants to think religion for the public, for society. Lastly, Derrida places the word religion within parentheses in order to emphasize how this word is the product of a Latinized or Western history with religion that spreads around the world. Derrida warns for the temptation to think to know for sure and finally what the word religion means. He does this by describing how the influential etymologist Benveniste has written about the two different sources of the word religion, one pointing at a meaning like 'linking up' and the other to 'scruple'; also here occurs a duplicity. Benveniste however does prefer one possibility over the other. In the text, Derrida uses this example to emphasize how it is impossible

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<sup>83</sup> Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge', 1-79.

<sup>84</sup> Here it already becomes clear how the number two plays a lead role in this text. Michael Naas dives deeper into this subject, showing how this theme comes back in both the style and the content of the text: Michael Naas, 'Miracle and Machine: The Two Sources of Religion and Science in Derrida's Faith and Knowledge' in: *Research in Phenomenology* (vol. 39 n. 2, 2009) 184-203.

to think outside of one's own culture and language, and how religion is always interwoven in these two.

Derrida's text is thus structured around the opposition between faith and knowledge, religion and science. In the course of the text, he shows how this opposition, prevalent as it is in Western discourse, could be thought differently. His idea about religion is that it has two sources, that overlap and mingle but never coincide. These two sources are faith and the experience of the unscathed. The latter is the hope of salvation, or indemnification. According to Derrida, there is no religion without such a soteriological discourse. The other source of religion is faith. In a beautiful but difficult part of the text, Derrida tells of how faith comes before every particular, historical religion. Faith is here understood as the requirement for any linking up to another, be it another human or a god. However, faith is not only the condition for religion. As faith is required in all communication, it is also the source of both science and philosophy. Derrida thus shows how religion and science, faith and knowledge are in need of the same act of faith in communication.

Derrida deconstructs the opposition between faith and knowledge. He also shows how it is often tried to isolate religion, both in the public domain as in the academic study of it. However, religion cannot be separated and as soon as only one discipline is allowed to speak about religion, something goes wrong. Another point he wants to make is that religion is in an autoimmune relation with science; religion depends upon science in order to exist (Derrida illustrates this by the image of the pope, flying around the globe and sending out encyclicals to the ends of the world), but it also fights against this same science. Religion is thus dependent on what it fights in order to remain 'unscathed'.

What follows is a more detailed account of Derrida's text, without any pretension to explain this rich and complex text to the full. Many lines of thought worthwhile to pursue are not pursued here because of the limited scope not only of a Master's thesis but also of a Master's understanding. My text follows the structure of the original text roughly.

## 4.2 FAITH AND KNOWLEDGE

*Faith and Knowledge* was conceived in the context of a seminar on religion that took place at Capri, organized by Gianni Vattimo and Jacques Derrida. Throughout the text, it becomes clear that this volume has come about in the context of the so-called 'return of religion'; whereas some of us had expected religion to slowly fade out and disappear, the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had in fact seen the rise of many religious movements, both old and new, both violent and nonviolent. It is this return of religion that prompted the choice for this subject, in order to think through what this return means, and what religion means. That is the objective of Derrida's text. The secularist expectation that religion would eventually disappear, is informed by the opposition between knowledge and faith which forms the aporetic theme of this text. Derrida shows how this expectation finds its beginnings in Enlightenment philosophy, in which Kant had tried to distill a certain universal core of religion. He found this universal core in ethical religion. Kant's expectation

was that this core would outlive actual religion, that he classified as 'cult'. Derrida in this text however shows that it is not possible to distill a universal and normative core of religion. However, he also shows that there is a certain structure underlying both religion and science, faith and knowledge.

Derrida's first reflections concern the limitations of his endeavor to think religion. He poses the question whether it is possible to think about religion outside of one's own tradition, language, nation and culture. He also points out how homogenous this group of philosophers is, not only for their philosophical, religious or cultural background, but also for their gender. Also when discussing other philosophers, these limitations are a theme for Derrida. What the philosophers present at Capri want to avoid, however, is to hope that 'another religion' like an ideology would replace religion. Derrida does not count his colleagues among those who argue either against religion as allegedly some Enlightenment philosophers do, or for religion, as representatives from a specific faith. However, they do share a commitment to the public case of philosophy, meaning they want to philosophize in order to serve the public, serve society. In this case, that would mean to think reasonably about religion.

But how to think reasonably about religion? What is the relation between religion in its generality, in its universality, and its historicity as particular religion? How to speak abstractly, that is, universally, away from the historical religions, about religion? Is it even possible to do so? These skeptical questions point to another limitation. Derrida suggests we first have to get a hold on the history of the concept religion. Before diving into the semantics of this word, Derrida discusses how the Abrahamic, specifically, Christian, religion puts forward a certain view on history as a history of salvation, but also a sense of eternity. Here Derrida takes a jump to Kant's writing on moral religion in 'Religion within the Limits of Reason alone'. For Kant, there are two sources/sorts of religion. The first is cult, and the second is moral religion. Cult is only concerned with 'favours of God', but moral religion on the other hand promotes ethical conduct whether or not God exists. For Kant, only Christianity is a moral religion and moral religion only opens the way to a 'reflecting faith'. Derrida observes how Christianity and morality are thus indissociable for Kant. It seems this is a general idea in Western culture, spread out over the world in what Derrida calls a process of 'globalatinization'. This idea has two possible consequences: firstly, in Nietzsche's vein, it means that in Christianity, God is dead. Secondly, more in Heidegger's vein, it would mean that morality is something pre-Christian. In this passage it becomes clear how it has often been tried to distill a universal and normative core of religion in Western philosophy, and how this is often tied up with a Christian idea of the good.

However, it has also been tried to think outside of the Christian or Abrahamic religious paradigm. Next on, Derrida discusses two attempts. The first is to hope for a kind of absolute knowledge, a sort of ontotheology, as Hegel did. The second is to hope for the divine to become possible in *Offenbarkeit* (to be distinguished from *Offenbarung*, which Derrida associates with specific religions), which Derrida calls Heideggerian. From here Derrida wonders: is there something that precedes historical religion? Derrida introduces the abstract image of the desert, as a place of scruple (*relegere*) and of interiority, before it is possible to link up to the other (*relegare*) as another

human, or a god.<sup>85</sup> This desert, as source/origin, is named the messianic and *chora* by Derrida. By 'the messianic', he refers to the opening to the future, without any horizon (opposed to the horizons proposed by historic religions); without knowing that who will come is bad or good. Here we get to a core passage in this text.<sup>86</sup> Derrida states that the messianic has to do with a desire for justice; in this relation to the other, faith is required. It is performative: in speaking or hearing, faith is always required. This faith is the origin (one of the origins) of not only religion, but science also. Derrida will come back to this point later. It goes before mysticism and reason, before any institution. However, this faith or credit or trustworthiness 'loses the very trace of itself' and therefore it is unavoidable that religion begins over and over again. The second name for this desert is *chora*, the place of *différance* and absolute exteriority. Derrida asks if this *chora* could or should maybe be respected when it comes to the question of originarity of *Offenbarung* and *Offenbarkeit*. This is linked to tolerance, as respect for the "distance of infinite alterity as singularity" – and in that way, it is religious when religious means so much as scruple.

However difficult this text may seem, what Derrida is saying is that we live in a general structure of faith, in which we do not know what to expect: "the universalizable culture of this faith, and not of another or before all others, alone permits a 'rational' and universal discourse on the subject of 'religion'..."<sup>87</sup> However, in this place of messianicity, we do reach out and assume in a manner of faith. We confide in the other, as a singularity, as a miracle, in what we believe this other is telling us. This faith is necessary for any sort of communication, and therefore also for science, or philosophy. "The chance of this desert in the desert is that in uprooting the tradition that bears it, in a-theologizing it, this abstraction, without denying faith, liberates a universal rationality and the political democracy that cannot be dissociated from it."<sup>88</sup> Derrida thus shows how the opposition between religion and science is not an opposition in which both poles could be separated completely as they both suppose faith.

In this second part of the text, Derrida picks back up on a few themes that he touched upon already in the first part. He builds further upon the distinction between religion as faith, credit, trustworthiness and religion as the experience of the unscathed. He sketches how these two overlap without merging, and emphasizes how religion cannot be separated from non-religion. Religion and globalization have gone and still go hand in hand, and it is impossible to think of globalization without the Western history in the world, which is also the history of religion as we know it. An example of the interwovenness of religion is our form of state, democracy, which is not just a secular idea but also proceeds from theological ideas and arguments. Even though Western culture seems secularized and God seems to be absent from society, this absence still has a function as the present is the product of a religious history. Derrida shows this by recounting interpretations of the word 'religion' and its etymology, a Latin word. It is through this word that we understand a global phenomenon, but the word itself is a product of the Western history with religion and

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<sup>85</sup> By using these two origins of the word religion, Derrida refers to the linguist Benveniste. Later on in the text, Derrida exposes not only how he needs faith in order to do his science, but also how his view on the origin of the word religion presupposes a certain attitude towards religion.

<sup>86</sup> Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge', 18-19.

<sup>87</sup> Idem, 18.

<sup>88</sup> Idem, 19.

colonization. Derrida therefore states that the question of religion could be the question of latinization, which seems to refer to Western (which proceeds from Latin culture) cultural and political domination. This latinization at a global level is what Derrida calls *globalatinization*. Derrida further argues this by showing how Benveniste, a French etymologist who has had much influence on the study of the word religion, relates to Christianity even though he does not want to, and how faith plays a big role in his discourse even though he wants to isolate religious discourse. Derrida shows how Benveniste fails in his attempt to isolate religion, and how faith is always the source. This is also a clear example for Derrida of how it is often tried to separate and even oppose faith and knowledge, science and belief, and how this again and again does not work. This is due to the two sources of religion, which are faith and the experience of the unscathed, of which the first one is shared as the source of science and knowledge as well. It also shows how the debate about religion is in fact always a Latin, (and thus Christian) debate. Then again, religion can never be pinned down to a single explanation or discipline to be studied in.

Derrida continues to describe how science and religion, faith and knowledge, are in an autoimmune relationship: religion today, in the world, is made possible by teletechnology, or science. However, it also fights against this science. It thus threatens what makes it possible. The other side of the coin is that science springs from the same source as religion, which is faith. Near the end of the text, Derrida shows how the two sources of religion (faith and the experience of the unscathed) converge in the experience of witnessing. However, witnessing (asking for faith) does not only play a role in religion: it is also necessary for science, philosophy, and indeed, all communication.

As stated before, this text was created in the context of the unexpected 'return' of religion. We have seen that for Derrida it seems naïve to have expected religion to slowly disappear; this expectation was linked to the opposition between knowledge and faith, but Derrida demonstrates that these cannot be strictly separated so that one side of the pole can be done away with. Instead, Derrida shows how faith, which is one of the ingredients of religion, is needed for all communication, including science. Religion cannot be defined easily; its borders and boundaries are not clear.

#### 4.3 COMPARISON: THINKING RELIGION WITH DERRIDA AND HÄGGLUND

After diving into Derrida's text, let us go back and recall what Hägglund meant by religion. He views religion as what holds out immunity as ideal. By this immunity he means unscathedness; when something is not threatened by what is other than itself. However, as he holds spacing as the ultratranscendental condition for anything to exist and to be thought, he concludes that the desire for immunity has never really been a desire for immunity, but for survival. When he writes about religion, Hägglund does not write about the two sources that Derrida designates: faith on the one hand, and the promise or experience of immunity on the other. He only links religion to immunity. He also does not mention faith as the common source of both religion and science. Even though his thesis that the desire for the unscathed and immune has in fact always been a desire for survival may still hold up, his treatment of Derrida's thoughts in *Faith and Knowledge* seems at first hand very incomplete. In this paragraph we will investigate if this is indeed so.

Both Hägglund and Derrida observe how the promise of immunity is not particular to historical religions, but can also be found in ideas that seem secular, like Marxism, psychoanalysis or many ideologies. These ideas share with religion their promise of unscathedness: Derrida uses the word 'indemnification' here to refer to not only an ideal pure and original state of being, but also the reaction in order to restore this original state.<sup>89</sup> This twofold meaning is associated with unscathedness, and Derrida observes this longing for an original and ideal state of purity in both secular and religious ideas. However, whereas in Derrida this leads to a more dynamic view on religion and what religion *is*, for Hägglund this amounts to a more rigid distinction between religion and non-religion. Whereas Derrida warns not to think one knows what religion is and what it always has been, for Hägglund religion has always been and will always be the same: a desire for survival in disguise of a desire for immunity. Hägglund thus tries to 'explain away' the question of religion once and for all, whereas Derrida argues that no discipline should ever have the final word over religion. In many ways then, Hägglund's idea about religion is much more static than Derrida's. Derrida's emphasis on the history and function of the word religion as a Latin word, as a word used primarily from a Western culture, shows how he does not try to designate a singular essence to the phenomenon. He argues against this sort of essentialism by speaking of the two sources of religion, and how these two always mingle without merging. Hägglund, on the other hand, only focuses on one of these sources and thus arrives back into this singular essentialism. Hägglund wants to drag the concept of religion out of its historical context so that we can know something about religion 'in general', or universally, whereas it is exactly Derrida's method and style to get a grip on the genealogy of the word and the phenomenon of religion 'in the world', today, with all the cultural practices (e.g. cultural domination) that are related to this word.

One of these related cultural practices is to think religion and science, faith and knowledge, as opposed to each other. Derrida organizes his text around this opposition, but it is not his aim to hyperbolize this opposition and to pull both sides apart. However, in his text he shows how both these sides of faith and knowledge in fact share the same source as they both need faith and witnessing. In this way, Derrida deconstructs the traditional opposition between faith and knowledge, science and religion. He even goes as far as saying that science and religion stand in an autoimmune relation to each other. This is very different from the way that Hägglund speaks about religion. Implicitly, his work is structured around the opposition of *différance*, or spacing, and religion. These two are wholly incompatible with each other in deconstruction, according to Hägglund. Despite his thesis that autoimmunity is the condition for anything to exist, is it not in fact he who wants to keep religion safe, unscathed, isolated?

Hägglund argues that anything that exists and can be thought, is autoimmune. This means that for anything to exist, it needs the possibility of its own non-being already inscribed in itself. Derrida also speaks of autoimmunity in *Faith and Knowledge*, and he argues that religion stands in an autoimmune relation with science. However Hägglund, even though he views autoimmunity as such a fundamental condition, does not apply this to religion; in fact, he contrasts religion as a desire for immunity with autoimmunity and states that everything that can be desired is autoimmune. It seems like Derrida does not speak about the idea of religion that is autoimmune, but about the

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<sup>89</sup> Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge', 28, 69-70.

worldly phenomenon called religion that stands in an autoimmune relation to the worldly phenomenon of science. Whereas Hägglund speaks about the idea of religion, which in its essence always is concerned with immunity, Derrida observes how religion, which always has two sources, today in the world fights that which makes it possible, which is science. Even though both authors write about autoimmunity, they do so on different levels.

#### 4.4 CONCLUSION

A chapter in a Master's thesis does not contain enough space to fully appreciate a text like *Faith and Knowledge*. In the context of this thesis, it is only possible to outline a few ideas. This was done in the first part of this chapter, in which it became clear how Derrida wrote this text in the context of the 'return' of religion. Throughout *Faith and Knowledge*, Derrida demonstrates how religion shares a common source with science: faith.

In the second part of this chapter, we took a closer look at both authors' perspective on religion. When comparing Derrida and Hägglund, it becomes clear that Hägglund shares only certain aspects of Derrida's idea about religion. However, on the whole Hägglund's singular essentialism can be contrasted sharply with Derrida's rich text, his cultural sensitivity, dynamism and fluidity.

A recurring theme in all the differences between Derrida's idea of religion and Hägglund's can be led back to the philosophical debate that was discussed in the first chapter. We called this debate the debate around metaphysics and post-metaphysics, and the underlying question in this debate is whether or not it is possible for a finite human being to obtain knowledge that transcended his or her own historical context. It seems Derrida and Hägglund formulate different answers to that question. Whereas Derrida keeps emphasizing how it is impossible to think outside of one's own language, culture or nation, Hägglund wants to make statements about the conditions for existence and thought in general. He does this by developing a 'deconstructive logic' that supposedly lies beneath the whole of Derrida's work. However, not only in his statements about historicity and contextuality, but also in his style of writing does Derrida evade the perspective of the all-knowing philosopher. Whereas Derrida evokes other texts and images and stories, Hägglund focuses on argumentation. Whereas Hägglund wants to soar out above all this history and context and say something about religion and atheism in general, forever the same, Derrida holds his feet steady on the ground and tries to capture how we can understand this world that we live in through language and through history. Even though Derrida's texts are difficult to understand and very complex with all his explicit and implicit references, Derrida never pretends to escape this day-to-day world and say something about the Truth. He criticizes whoever wants to pin religion down to one essence, and instead writes about the two sources of religion, of which one always already is divided in two.



## CONCLUSION & EVALUATION

Throughout this thesis, the underlying research question has been: to what extent does Hägglund's idea of religion correspond to that of Derrida? After having become acquainted with Derrida's philosophy and his relation to metaphysics in chapter one, chapter two and three were concerned with understanding, analyzing and evaluating Hägglund's work. The fourth chapter treated Derrida's text on religion *Faith and Knowledge* and functioned as a test of Hägglund's thesis to Derrida's own text. In this conclusion I will summarize the most important findings of the previous chapters. Arriving at the end of this thesis, I will formulate an answer to the main research question by comparing Hägglund's view on religion with Derrida's and evaluating this outcome. From there on, I will also reflect upon the bigger question that has been the motivation and relevance of this thesis: what to think of religion?

In the first chapter of this thesis, I have introduced deconstruction in the context of a philosophical history that is concerned with the question of how we can think the world after metaphysics. I have placed deconstruction in a tradition of skepticism regarding human abilities to know a truth that exists independently of human beings. Consequently, I have sketched deconstruction as a way of reading that exposes metaphysical presuppositions of philosophical or literary texts and illustrated this with one of Derrida's texts on the phenomenologist Husserl. The authors discussed in this chapter, Critchley and Caputo, do not view deconstruction as the abolishing of metaphysics or of a metaphysical way of thinking. In the second chapter, we dived into the work of Martin Hägglund, who argued against any ethical or religious turn in Derrida's work and against any religious 'appropriation' of Derrida's thought. He claims that religion and deconstruction are incompatible. He grounds this view on his idea of 'deconstructive logic', which entails that everything that exists and can be thought or desired, is autoimmune because of the spacing of time. Autoimmunity means that something is threatened from within itself. Following this logic, immunity is undesirable because existence, which is always finite, would cease to exist. Hägglund contrasts this deconstructive logic with religion, in which 'immune' ideas (which is to say they are inviolable and pure) are put forward as desirable. Deconstruction is thus opposed to what religion holds out as ideal, and therefore deconstruction is radically atheist, according to Hägglund. In the third chapter, I have thematized Hägglund's work and gathered together the criticism he received. There are many points of criticism that can be raised against Hägglund's work, and I have gathered most under the heading that Hägglund himself works within an uncritical metaphysical paradigm. Another important point is that Hägglund's view on religion is limited in various respects: he is unaware of any developments in theology that work outside of the theist paradigm, and holds a minimal and essentialist definition of religion.<sup>90</sup> Many of these points of criticism of the third chapter are reflected in the fourth, where Hägglund's work is compared to Derrida's main text on religion. Here again it becomes clear how Hägglund and Derrida differ on not only their idea on religion, but also or especially their idea on what a philosopher can say about the world we live in:

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<sup>90</sup> Especially when compared to *Faith and Knowledge* this is problematic: whereas Derrida looks at the whole of history and the intertwinedness of religion with culture (and the binarity of religion's sources), Hägglund supposes one can find a never changing single essence of religion in general.

whereas Hägglund wants to say something about religion and atheism that would be valid once and for all, Derrida wants to say something about our ever-changing world that we can only understand through our particular language, culture and history.

Let us now look at whether Hägglund's claim that he has found a better framework for understanding Derrida holds up. As has become clear in the first chapter of this thesis, deconstruction can be seen in the philosophical context of metaphysics and post-metaphysics. Whereas the authors in chapter one do not see deconstruction as the abolishing of metaphysics, Hägglund argues that in deconstruction, there is no room for metaphysics or religion as they both idealize immunity. He thus grabs metaphysics and religion together without engaging with these concepts critically, and declares them incompatible with deconstruction. His text does not witness to any insight in the many uses of a word like metaphysics and the history of criticism of metaphysics, nor does he demonstrate in-depth knowledge about the many different forms and functions of religion.

When reading Derrida's text on religion, it becomes clear that Hägglund's concept of religion is rather one-dimensional. But their ideas are also alike: Derrida does indeed link religion to a promise of immunity, and observes how religion also occurs outside of where it is expected. Hägglund shares this broad idea of religion. However, they do diverge with respect to their attention to the interrelatedness of religion with culture and historicity. Whereas Hägglund seems to depart from a certain never changing notion called 'religion', Derrida thinks about religion as a cultural phenomenon that changes over time and that we can only observe through our own names for this phenomenon; and this name is already a cultural instrument and product.<sup>91</sup> He argues that there is no way we can talk about religion without our own cultural heritage speaking. This is something Hägglund does not even seem to consider. From the start of his argumentation, he has a fixed idea about what religion is, and his philosophy of religion does not seem challenged or supported by empirical facts.

Apart from their difference in cultural sensitivity, the biggest difference between Hägglund and Derrida when it comes to metaphysics and religion, is the evaluation they give to the desire for immunity. In Derrida, I do not detect any particularly positive or negative value ascribed to this desire or promise. In Hägglund, however, even though he rejects the desire for immunity on the basis that it *is* not what we desire and not primarily on the basis that it *ought* not to be desired, I do detect this negative evaluation. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to draw a conclusion about the general role of metaphysics in Derrida, but about religion and the desire for immunity we can say that Derrida is less judgmental than Hägglund: his tone is observing and descriptive, not siding for or against. He does not seem to arrive at a definitive statement about religion, whereas Hägglund wants to settle once and for all with religion and metaphysics and anything vaguely familiar to it.

How can these two differing attitudes toward religion be interpreted? Let us take a look at the context in which both authors write. Social theorists and philosophers (e.g. Karl Marx, Max Weber,

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<sup>91</sup> As we are making the comparison this sharply, we can say Hägglund is more of a metaphysical realist, believing reality exists independently of our consciousness and cognition, Derrida presents to us a critical or skeptical nominalist, who doubts the use or existence of universals / universal categories.

Sigmund Freud) have postulated theories of secularization, in which religion was expected to disappear along with the modernization and rationalization of society. Part of this secularization theory is that religion and science are opposed to each other and that science will eventually triumph over superstition and belief. The roots of many secularization theories can be found in the Enlightenment Age, sometimes called the Age of Reason. In today's Western society we can observe both discourses that endorse as well as criticize secularization theory.

Hägglund is situated in the side that expects religion to leave the world stage. Or, as Adrian Johnston puts it: Hägglund claims that in fact everyone always has unknowingly been atheist all along.<sup>92</sup> (p150) He tries to distill a universal core from religion that would be the same for any religion any time without actually looking at lived religion across the globe. If Hägglund is right about desire actually being radically atheist, then what to think of today's religious wars for example? Derrida also makes statements about what all religions seem to share, and Hägglund is on the same page here, but the difference is that for Derrida this should never be something to reduce religion to. Even though he observes a universal structure (which consists not of one, but of two sources), he does not stop looking there. Instead, he states that one should never look at religion from only one perspective.

Derrida points at the fact that religion is not disappearing (on the contrary!), and considering the current state of affairs in the world he deconstructs the opposition of religion and science, faith and knowledge. By doing this, he aspires to arrive at a more fruitful way of relating to religion, as the secularization project has evidently failed. He does not want to keep religion 'unscathed', safe from harm, or want to do away with religion. Instead, he proposes a third way, in which religion should never be analyzed using one perspective only.

That is why I want to make a plea for a multi-perspective, multi-discipline study of religion. One perspective does in fact never give us enough information to look at any phenomenon in the world, and this holds true for religion as well. I argue for a study of religion in which both the inside perspective (theology) and the outside perspective (religious studies) enter into dialogue. Different disciplines shed different light on one object. During my academic career, which consisted of a Bachelor in theology from a religious studies perspective and a Master at a protestant university, I have learned that religion is so multi-faceted it should be approached from as many angles as possible. I like this diversity in my education, and maybe that is also why I was interested in Hägglund's *Radical Atheism*: his diverging argument and his rejection of consensus regarding deconstruction made him interesting to me. Often the outsiders can teach us most about the world the majority lives in. Hägglund did not conform to the consensus I knew, and that triggered me. And in the end, it has to be said that despite all criticism, Hägglund's thesis does have its merits. It is a grand systematization of Derrida's work and it is analytically strong. And even though Hägglund only thinks about religion in one way, he does present a valid point when he questions not only the existence but also the desirability of immunity that we find in religion. To me, he questioned most urgently what it is we look for in religion and made me look at the answer most critically: is this

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<sup>92</sup> Adrian Johnston, 'Life Terminable and Interminable: The Undead and the Afterlife of the Afterlife – A Friendly Disagreement with Martin Hägglund' in: *New Centennial Review*, (Vol. 9 n. 1, spring 2009) 147-189, 150.

something we should desire? This validation and consolation, is that something we really want or need? Hägglund's one-dimensional but critical stance on religion was a valuable addition to my long and multi-perspective studies, that have all along been informed by the question: how to think of religion?

## NAWOORD

Ik heb me vaak afgevraagd wat de zin is van het schrijven van deze scriptie – en dan heb ik het niet over alle vaardigheden die ik op heb gedaan en het uithoudingsvermogen dat nodig is voor zo'n langdurig creatief proces. Ik bedoel de inhoud. Wat is de relevantie van deze scriptie? Wat is het nut van filosofie?

Deze vraag is als een bom die alles ontregelt, want elke vraag naar nut of zin wordt opgevolgd door een volgende, en zo is elke vraag naar zin uiteindelijk een vraag naar de zin van het leven. 'De zin van het leven' heeft twee betekenissen. De ene is een vraag naar het doel van het leven. Waartoe zijn we hier op aarde? Als deze vraag gesteld wordt, wordt er vaak vanuit gegaan dat je het antwoord erop kunt achterhalen of ontdekken of beredeneren. Het is een vraag waar vaak antwoorden op worden gegeven, maar die altijd zullen blijven voelen als een stoplap, als een kunstmatige stop op het denkproces omdat je na een antwoord altijd weer de vraag kunt stellen wat dáár dan weer de zin van is. Is filosofie bij deze 'zin van het leven' niet gewoon maar hersengymnastiek?

De andere betekenis gaat over de zin die je ervaart. Dat gaat over zin hebben in iets: je vrienden en familie, iets doen waar je hart ligt. Dat is zin in het leven. Ook bij deze zin van het leven is filosofie hersengymnastiek, al zou je het dan misschien beter *mental masturbation* kunnen noemen – dat klinkt in ieder geval meer alsof je er zin en plezier in kunt hebben.

Je kunt zo ver denken als je wilt, de mogelijkheden zijn vrijwel eindeloos. Maar of je nou filosofie (of theologie, of bedrijfskunde, of psychologie, of geschiedenis, of scheikunde, of sterrenkunde) wilt bedrijven voor de zin van het leven of voor de zin in het leven, uiteindelijk kun je er niet omheen dat je op een picknickkleedje ligt in het gras van een park.

De volgende mensen wil ik graag bedanken omdat ik hou van samen met hen op een picknickkleedje liggen, en omdat ze me enorm geholpen hebben op verschillende momenten in dit scriptieproces: Hendrik en Dicky Luning, Titia Struik, Larissa Schut, Jacoline Batenburg, Gerjan Piksen, Mladen Popović, Vicente do Prado Tolezano.

*Powers of ten*  
<https://youtu.be/0fKBhvDjuy0>

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