

Radical Atheism and “The Arche-Materiality of Time”

(Robert King interviewed Martin Hägglund. Dr. King focused his questions on the impact of Radical Atheism and the “arche-materiality” of time).



R.K.: *Did the reception of Radical Atheism push your research in any surprising directions?*

M.H.: The most surprising thing, at least for me, is first of all how much response the book has generated. The reception of *Radical Atheism* has gone far beyond anything I expected and I am deeply grateful for the ways in which it has challenged me to refine my thinking and develop my arguments. Thanks to careful and demanding respondents, I have not only been given the chance to press home the stakes of my intervention; I have also been pushed to pursue issues that were either underdeveloped or inadequately addressed in my previous work. Beginning with *The Challenge of Radical Atheism* conference at Cornell and continuing with the colloquium on *Ethics, Hospitality and Radical Atheism* at Oxford as well as the *Derrida and Religion* conference at Harvard, I have had the good fortune to engage in direct debate with central interlocutors of the book. These debates have in turn informed the written exchanges about the book, which continue to inspire my current work.

Leaving aside the specific polemics about Derrida scholarship, I would emphasize two strands of questioning that have been both the most difficult and the most productive to address. The first strand concerns the status of the structure of *the trace* in my argument, while the second concerns the conception of *desire* that informs what I call radical atheism.

R.K.: *Could you say more about these two strands of questioning? And how do you see them intersecting with other developments in Continental Philosophy?*

M.H.: The first strand of questioning can be situated in relation to a trend that is increasingly visible in Continental Philosophy, namely, a turn away from the focus on questions of language and discourse in favor of a renewed interest in questions of the real, the material, and the biological. If Saussure and linguistics once were an obligatory reference point, Darwin and evolutionary theory have increasingly come to occupy a similar position. In the wake of this development, Derrida’s work is largely seen as mired in the linguistic turn or as mortgaged to an ethical and religious piety that leaves it without resources to engage the sciences and the question of material being. As I argue in *Radical Atheism*, however, such an assessment of deconstruction is deeply misleading. Already in *Of Grammatology* Derrida articulates his key notion of “the trace” in terms of not only linguistics and phenomenology but also natural science.

My crucial point here is that Derrida defines the trace in terms of a general co-implication of time and space: it designates the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space, which Derrida abbreviates as spacing (*espacement*). Spacing is according to Derrida the condition for both the animate and the inanimate, both the ideal and the material. The question, then, is how one can legitimize such a generalization of the structure of the trace. What is the methodological justification for speaking of the trace as a condition for not only language and experience but also processes that extend beyond the human and even the living? With his characteristic incisiveness, Henry Staten was the first to put pressure on this question at *The Challenge of Radical Atheism* conference and I have spent much of the past two years seeking to work out a precise answer.

R.K.: *So how have you responded to this question of methodological justification in your work?*

M.H.: The distinction that is needed, I have come to contend, is one between *the logical* and *the ontological* (and here I am also influenced by Rocío Zambrana's work on Hegel). The trace is not an ontological stipulation but rather a *logical structure* that makes explicit what is implicit in the concept of succession. Succession should here *not* be conflated with the chronology of linear time (which is a recurrent misunderstanding of my argument). Rather, succession accounts for a constitutive delay and a deferral that is inherent in any temporal event. Anything that will have happened implies succession, whether retrospectively or prospectively, and it is this structure of the event that Derrida analyzes in terms of a necessary spacing or tracing of time.

R.K.: *Indeed, many reviewers of Radical Atheism have been greatly impressed by your capacity to draw out and illuminate these details of Derrida's analyses. Can you say more about your approach in clarifying the logic of the trace?*

M.H.: To account for the logic of the trace I set out to demonstrate how the necessity of spacing can be deduced from the philosophical problem of succession. This deduction concerns the *concept* of time, showing that you cannot think any concept of time without presupposing the co-implication of time and space that Derrida articulates in terms of the structure of the trace. To insist on the logical status of this structure is not to oppose it to ontology, phenomenology, or science, but to insist that the trace is a metatheoretical notion that elucidates what is entailed by a commitment to succession in either of these registers. The logical structure of the trace is expressive of *any* notion of succession—whether ontological, phenomenological, or scientific—and it is by virtue of this logical/expressive status that the structure of the trace can be generalized. Such generalization, then, does not assume the form of an ontological assertion (“being is spacing”) but rather the form of a metatheoretical claim, namely, that any discourse that depends on a notion of succession necessarily depends on a notion of spacing. Deconstruction, on my account, is dedicated to making explicit what is implicit in this condition of spacing.

To be clear, I think such expressive work is what I actually *do* in *Radical Atheism*, but since I do not clearly distinguish between the logical and the ontological I fail to give the requisite methodological account of my own argumentative procedure. Providing such a methodological account has, moreover, allowed me to answer another central question posed to *Radical Atheism*. Several respondents pointed out that I equivocate between describing the structure of the trace as a general condition for everything that is temporal and as a general condition for *the living*. The precise relation between the temporality of the living and the temporality of nonliving matter is thus left unclear in *Radical Atheism*. Responding to this concern I have worked out a notion of what I call the “arche-materiality” of time, which articulates how the relation between life and nonliving matter should be understood in terms of the logic of the trace.

R.K.: *This is a fascinating development in your argument. Would you mind saying a bit more about this notion of the “arche-materiality” of time?*

M.H.: Let me first say that the notion of arche-materiality follows from the structure of the trace that I derive from the logical implications of succession. For one moment to be succeeded by another, it cannot *first* be present in itself and *then* be affected by its own disappearance. The succession of time entails that every moment negates itself—that it ceases to be as soon as it comes to be—and therefore must be inscribed as trace in order to be at all. The trace is necessarily spatial, since spatiality is characterized by the ability to persist in spite of temporal succession. Every temporal moment therefore depends on the material support of spatial inscription, since the latter enables the past to be retained for the future. The material support of the trace, however, is itself temporal. Without temporalization a trace could not persist across time and relate the past to the future. Accordingly, the persistence of the trace cannot be the

persistence of something that is exempt from the negativity of time. Rather, the trace is always left for an unpredictable future that gives it both the chance to remain and to be effaced.

This notion of arche-materiality can accommodate the asymmetry between the living and the nonliving that is integral to Darwinian materialism (the animate depends on the inanimate but not the other way around). Indeed, the notion of arche-materiality allows one to account for the minimal synthesis of time—namely, the minimal recording of temporal passage—without presupposing the advent or existence of life. The notion of arche-materiality is thus *metatheoretically* compatible with the most significant philosophical implications of Darwinism: that the living is essentially dependent on the nonliving, that animated intention is impossible without mindless, inanimate repetition, and that life is an utterly contingent and destructible phenomenon. Unlike current versions of neo-realism or neo-materialism, however, the notion of arche-materiality does not authorize its relation to Darwinism by constructing an ontology or appealing to scientific realism but rather by articulating a logical infrastructure that is compatible with its findings. Following this logic, one can make explicit that the structure of the trace is implicit both in our understanding of the temporality of living processes and in our understanding of how time is recorded in the disintegration of inanimate matter. That is how I account for how the trace structure can be expressive not only of linguistic and phenomenological experience but also of the temporality of evolutionary processes and material structures.

R.K.: *This account seems to link up quite nicely with your notion of survival. Can you make this link more explicit?*

M.H.: The tracing of time is indeed what I call the movement of *survival* that transcends a particular moment of finitude and yet is bound to finitude as a general condition. If something survives it is never present in itself; it is already marked by the destruction of a past that is no longer and remains for a future that is not yet. While one can make explicit that this tracing of time does not depend on the existence of life, only a living being can *care* about the fate of the survival in question. The care for survival that on my account is distinctive of life does not have any power to finally transcend material constraints but is itself a contingent and destructible fact. Without care everything would be a matter of indifference *and that is a possibility*—there is nothing that necessitates the existence of living beings that care. What I am interested in, however, is making explicit what is implicit in being a being that cares and that is why *Radical Atheism* focuses on the time of *life*.

R.K.: *With this notion of care we seem to approach your notion of desire, which is the focus of what you described as the second main strand of questioning in the reception of your work. Can you explain how this relates to radical atheism?*

M.H.: Yes, this is another issue with regard to which I have come to develop—and hopefully refine—my arguments. In short, radical atheism seeks to demonstrate that the temporal finitude of survival is not a lack of being that we desire to overcome. Rather, the finitude of survival precipitates desire and animates faith. Radical atheism thus diverges from how atheism traditionally has focused on denying the *existence* of God and immortality, without questioning that we desire such absolutes. In my response for *The Challenge of Radical Atheism* conference, I deepened this account by distinguishing between three different versions of traditional atheism: melancholic atheism, pragmatic atheism, and therapeutic atheism. Their common denominator is that they all—in different ways—assume that temporal finitude is a lack of being that we desire to transcend, even though the existence of a transcendent state of being is denied. The fundamental drama of libidinal being is thus still assumed to reside in the conflict between the mortal, temporal being that we are and the immortal, timeless being that we desire to be. In contrast, radical atheism seeks to demonstrate that the so-called desire for immortality or timelessness dissimulates a desire for survival that precedes it and contradicts it from within.

The crucial argument here is that the finitude of something is intrinsic to what makes it desirable. It is *because* things can be lost that one cares about them. If things were fully present in themselves—if they were not haunted by what has been lost in the past and what may be lost in the future—there would be no reason to care about them, since nothing could happen to them. *Care in general* thus depends on an investment in survival. If one were not invested in the survival of someone or something, one would not care about anything that has happened or anything that may happen. Accordingly, the purported desire for immortality can be seen to contradict itself from within. Without an investment in survival, one would not fear death and desire to live on. But for the same reason, an immortal state of being cannot even hypothetically appease the fear of death or satisfy the desire to live on. Rather than redeeming death, the state of immortality would *bring about* death, since it would put an end to mortal life. The timelessness of God or immortality is thus not simply unattainable but *undesirable*, since it would eliminate the possibility for anything to survive or anyone to care.

The difficult question, however, is what it means to say that religious ideals of the absolute are “undesirable.” As Michael Naas elucidates in his essay on *Radical Atheism*, I make two different but related arguments. On the one hand, I claim that the religious conception of “the best” (absolute life, absolute peace) is in fact “the worst” (absolute death, absolute violence) since it would cancel out the possibility for anything to happen and accordingly is “undesirable.” On the other hand, I claim that the religious conception of the absolute is undesirable in the sense that *it cannot be desired*. Like Naas, many readers have accepted the first claim while being skeptical of the second. As Ernesto Laclau emphasized in his response, to establish that immortality is undesirable in the second sense “it is clearly insufficient to say that the desire for immortality is equivalent to the desire for death—unless it is shown that there is something intrinsically contradictory in a desire for death.” As Laclau observes, my argument would thus ultimately require that I take issue with the notion of what Freud calls the death drive. This is an argument that I began to articulate before the publication of *Radical Atheism*, but it has been significantly deepened and revised thanks to the probing responses from incisive thinkers informed by psychoanalysis, which in addition to Laclau and Naas include William Egginton and Adrian Johnston.

R.K.: *So can you outline for us today how you have responded to these psychoanalytic engagements with your work?*

M.H.: Briefly put, in taking issue with Freud’s notion of the death drive I tended to invoke (both in *Radical Atheism* and elsewhere) a constitutive *drive* for survival, which I now believe is a mistake. While I did make clear that the drive for survival does not compel one to live on at all costs, but rather can always turn against itself, I now hold this qualification to be insufficient. Moreover, it begs the question of the legitimacy of postulating a given drive of any kind at the basis of libidinal being. As I now argue, it is not a matter of rethinking the constitution of the libidinal economy on the basis of another *drive* but rather on the basis a constitutive *investment*, which does not need to be postulated but rather can be derived from the necessity of *binding*.

As Freud himself emphasizes, all forms of experience answer to different forms of libidinal bonds, since they qualitatively synthesize and “bind” the excitation of life. While the *response* to external or internal stimuli may always be destructive, I cannot have any relation to it at all without binding it, without being bound to it, and thereby minimally invested in it. For the affective self who comes into being through the bond, the binding of excitation is therefore undecidable: it is the source of both pleasure and unpleasure, chance and threat, love and hate. As an *effect* of this double bind one can certainly be driven to seek the termination of life and libidinal bonds—to desire death—since the excitation and tension of life may always become too overwhelming or unbearable.

This explanation of suicidal or destructive behavior as an effect of the double bind must be strictly distinguished from an explanation that posits a death drive as the cause of such

behavior. In responding affectively to the loss or gain of a given bond we are necessarily invested in survival and can come to engage in all sorts of purposeful activity when establishing, maintaining, or terminating libidinal bonds. But the investment in survival—and whatever purposeful activity it may precipitate—derives from a binding that itself cannot be described in terms of a purpose. Indeed, to speak of a purpose of binding itself is to misconstrue the constitutive status of binding. Binding itself cannot have a purpose, since being bound is the condition for having a purpose. The argument about a constitutive binding, then, enables me to further deepen the radical atheist conception of desire, since it allows me to locate the fundamental drama of libidinal being *in the very bond to mortal life*: in temporal finitude as the source of both what we desire and what we fear, both the desirable and the undesirable.

Again, as an *effect* of this double bind one can certainly come to embrace the religious desire for absolute fullness/absolute emptiness. The crucial point, however, is precisely that the latter desire is an effect and not an originary cause—it is not the truth of desire that reveals our lack of the divine but rather a self-defeating attempt to deny the bond to mortal life that is the source of all care. Far from being an external refutation of religion, the logic of radical atheism thereby seeks to read religion against itself from within. Specifically, it allows us to read how the experience of faith, love, and responsibility—insofar as it is committed to something other than absolute life/absolute death—is animated by a radical atheist desire for survival rather than by a religious desire for fullness.

R.K.: *If I might ask just one more question, what is your current research and where is it headed?*

M.H.: I have just completed my next book *Chronolibidinal Reading: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov*. Developing the notion of binding that I outlined above, the book addresses fundamental questions concerning the aim of desire, the nature of temporal experience, and why we are moved by a work of art, focusing in particular on modernist literature. While Proust, Woolf, and Nabokov all sought to transform the art of the novel to convey the condition of time, their works have persistently been read in terms of a desire to transcend temporal finitude. In contrast, I pursue a notion of “chronolibido” that challenges this notion of desire. The fear of time (chronophobia) does not stem from a desire to transcend time, but rather from the investment in a life that will be lost. It is because one desires a temporal being (chronophilia) that one fears losing it (chronophobia). The implications of chronolibido that I pursue in the major works of Proust, Woolf, and Nabokov are not simply an extrinsic theory that I apply to the novels in question, but rather a set of insights that I derive from close readings of the texts themselves. Finally, I systematize the logic of chronolibido through an in depth engagement with psychoanalysis. Contesting Freud and Lacan’s notion of the death drive, I seek to demonstrate how the chronolibidinal notion of binding provides a better model for thinking the constitution of the libidinal economy and why the logic of survival is more expressive of the problems of attachment, trauma, and mourning that are at the center of psychoanalytic inquiry.

I am currently working on two volumes that will complete a trilogy beginning with *Radical Atheism*. The first is tentatively entitled *The Negativity of Time: Critique of Bergson and Deleuze*. I here turn from a critique of the idea of transcendence to a critique of the idea of immanence, while keeping my focus on the questions of time, life, and desire. In three main chapters I develop three key concepts: time and space thought together under the heading of *arche-materiality*, life and death thought together under the heading of *survival*, desire and indifference thought together under the heading of *chronolibido*. In each chapter, I confront both the Bergsonian-Deleuzian understanding of the philosophical issue at stake and provide a rearticulation of how its underlying logic should be thought. The third volume in the planned trilogy will engage Heidegger on the same issues of time, life, and desire, with the aim of articulating a systematic alternative to both philosophies of transcendence and philosophies of immanence.