

MARTIN HÄGGLUND  
HARVARD SOCIETY OF FELLOWS

THE RADICAL EVIL OF DECONSTRUCTION:  
A REPLY TO JOHN CAPUTO<sup>1</sup>

In contemporary debates the most common charge made against religion—whether by those who seek to abolish or to renew religious faith—is that it tends to generate violence and intolerance. While religious teachings often emphasize love and tolerance, it is easy enough to recite a litany of the genocides, persecutions, and wars pursued in the name of one religion or another. For the new atheists, such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, this violent track record is the clearest example of how religion poisons everything and corrupts a humanity that otherwise would stand a better chance of being peaceful. For those who seek to renew the sense of religious faith, such as John Caputo and Richard Kearney, the violence of religion is rather an effect of a “metaphysical” conception of God, which needs to be relinquished in favor of a “post-metaphysical” theology that would retrieve the goodness and love that is supposedly at the heart of true religious experience.

Thus, in his recent book *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*, Kearney approvingly quotes a passage from *The God Delusion*—where Dawkins produces a long list of atrocities undertaken in the name of religion—while maintaining that such violence is an effect of the belief in an omniscient and omnipresent God. “This is the God rightly dismissed, in our day, by Richard Dawkins.”<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Kearney advocates a conception of God as a principle of goodness that has no power to prevent evil but is actualized whenever good is done. The “kingdom of God” is not an eschatological state at the end of history but rather

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<sup>1</sup> A first version of this response was written for the *Derrida and Religion* conference at Harvard University, March 26-27, 2010. I am grateful to the organizers, Edward Baring and Peter Gordon, as well as to all the participants, in particular John Caputo, Hent de Vries, and Richard Kearney. I also want to thank Sean D. Kelly for his insightful response to my paper at the conference.

<sup>2</sup> Kearney, *Anatheism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2009), 73.

actualized in every good deed. Accordingly, the presence of the good is the presence of God whereas “evil is the absence of God. God has no power over what God is not—namely evil. God can only be good—unconditionally good in a gifting, loving, creating way.”<sup>3</sup>

A similar conception of God—and the kingdom of God—emerges in Caputo’s “weak” theology. Caputo too highlights the violent history of religious rule (“What has been more violent than theocracy? What more patriarchal, more hierarchical? What more authoritarian, inquisitorial, misogynistic, colonialist, militaristic, terroristic?”), but he goes on to emphasize that “all this power mongering is just rouged and powdered theology,” which is “human, all too human, and not to be confused with God.”<sup>4</sup> The kingdom of God is rather “found whenever war and aggression are met with an offer of peace. The kingdom is a way of living, not in eternity, but in time, a way of living without why, living for the day, like the lilies of the field—figures of weak forces—as opposed to mastering and programming time, calculating the future, containing and managing risk.”<sup>5</sup>

This opposition between two ways of relating to the future (one that generates “war” by seeking to master or calculate time, the other that brings “peace” by renouncing the attempt to program what will happen) is central to Caputo’s reading of Jacques Derrida. According to Caputo, “deconstruction is a blessing for religion, its positive salvation” since it “discourages religion from its own worst instincts” and “helps religion examine its conscience, counseling and chastening religion about its tendency to confuse its faith with knowledge, which results in the dangerous and absolutizing triumphalism of religion, which is what spills blood.”<sup>6</sup> All of Caputo’s work on a supposedly deconstructive religion is structured around this opposition between a “good” religion that welcomes others and a “bad” religion that excludes others. The religion *without* religion that Caputo ascribes to Derrida would be a religion without violence, which repeats “the apocalyptic call for the impossible, but without calling for the apocalypse that would consume its enemies in fire” and “repeats the passion for the messianic promise and messianic expectation, *sans* the concrete messianisms of the positive religions that wage endless war and spill the blood of the other.”<sup>7</sup> For Caputo, then, Derrida’s work helps us to move away from “the bloody messianisms” in favor of “the messianic” promise of a kingdom that is open to everyone.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kearney, *Debates in Continental Philosophy* (New York: Fordham UP 2004), 290.

<sup>4</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God* (Bloomington: Indiana UP), 33. Hereafter *WG*.

<sup>5</sup> Caputo, *WG*, 15. See also Caputo’s claim that “In the world, violence is met with counterviolence; in the Kingdom it is met with forgiveness. In the world, betrayal is concealed with a kiss; in the Kingdom it is healed by a kiss,” *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia UP, 2009), 63-64.

<sup>6</sup> Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (New York: Fordham UP, 1996), 159.

<sup>7</sup> Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997), xxi. Hereafter *P&T*.

<sup>8</sup> See for example *P&T*, xxi, 205. See also Caputo’s *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 114.

The logic of Caputo's argument runs counter to the logic I pursue in *Radical Atheism*, which seeks to provide a new framework for understanding Derrida's engagement with religious concepts. Specifically, I argue that the proliferation of apparently religious terms in Derrida's late works—which engage with notions such as the messianic, faith, and God—does not signal a religious “turn” in his thinking. Rather, I show how Derrida reads these concepts against themselves in accordance with a logic of radical atheism that I trace throughout his writing. Contrary to what Caputo holds in his response to my work, radical atheism does *not* subscribe to the binary of theism and atheism but seeks to demonstrate that there is an irreducible atheism at the “root” of every commitment, faith, and desire. Far from allowing anyone or anything to be exempt from violence, I argue that this structure of commitment accounts for a constitutive violence that is at work even in the most peaceful approach to the world, whether “secular” or “religious,” “atheist” or “theist.”

Rather than properly engaging the radical atheist conception of desire, Caputo claims that my critique of religion is limited to the orthodox two-worlds theology of classical theism and that I mistakenly assimilate him to such orthodox theology. Thus, Caputo defends himself at length against my supposed charge that he believes in the idea of immortality or in the existence of another world that would allow us to escape from time into eternity. I have allegedly taken him to be a defender of divine omnipotence—a “two-worlds Augustinian who thinks that a Hyperbeing called God can do impossible things” (42)—and thereby missed that he is not making claims about ontology but about desire, namely, “the desire for the impossible” that according to Caputo is “the common passion” (111) of deconstruction and religion.<sup>9</sup> It is certainly no accident that Caputo does not provide any quotations from my work when he makes these claims about what I criticize and do not criticize. In fact, I *never* charge Caputo with making ontological statements about God or believing in the existence of omnipotence, immortality, or another world. On the contrary, my critique is aimed precisely at Caputo's conception of the *desire* for the impossible in Derrida.<sup>10</sup> In the course of articulating this critique, I also take issue with Caputo's readings of the messianic, the unconditional, and a number of other terms in Derrida. These criticisms are not addressed in Caputo's response and if it were simply a matter of setting the record straight I would not insist on them here. However, given that Caputo's reading is the most influential attempt to make sense of Derrida's treatment of religious concepts—and that our debate speaks to the general question of the relation between deconstruction and

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<sup>9</sup> Caputo, “The Return of Anti-Religion: From Radical Atheism to Radical Theology,” *JCRT* 11.2 (2011). All page-references to Caputo's response refer to this text.

<sup>10</sup> Thus, my critique of Caputo's reading of the relation between deconstruction and negative theology takes issue with his argument that “deconstruction desires what negative theology desires and it shares the passion of negative theology” (see *Radical Atheism*, 116-17). When Caputo refers to these pages (*JCRT* response n.13) he passes over my actual critique in silence and instead claims that I am charging him with a theological argument à la Jean-Luc Marion, which is not the case.

religion—I will seek to elucidate the stakes of our differences in the course of elaborating the logic of radical atheism.

Following Derrida, I define religion as premised on the idea of “the unscathed” (*l’indemne*), which he glosses as the pure and the untouched, the sacred and the holy, the safe and sound. The common denominator for religions is thus that they promote a notion of the unscathed—regardless of whether the unscathed is posited as transcendent or immanent and regardless of whether it is called God or something else. As Derrida puts it, “every religion” holds out a “horizon of redemption, of the restoration of the unscathed, of indemnification.”<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, the religious promise of the good would be the promise of something that is unscathed by evil. The good may be threatened from the outside—by corruption, idolatry, misunderstanding, and so on—but in itself it is exempt from evil.

Now, it is precisely such a notion of the good that we find at the heart of Caputo’s weak theology. While Caputo relinquishes the idea of God as omnipotent and as the creator of the world, he retains God as the name of the good. Thus, on Caputo’s reading, the act of God’s creation is not a movement *ex nihilo* from nonbeing to being; it is rather a movement from being to the good. As he puts it, God is not the reason that things exist but “the reason that things are good,” since God “breathes the life of the good over them” and calls us “beyond being to the good.”<sup>12</sup> Given that Caputo’s God is not a “strong” one, he is powerless to prevent his call for goodness from being corrupted by humans and nature, but his “weakness” does not make him liable to be or to do evil. On the contrary, Caputo argues that it is the weakness of God that exonerates him from evil: “God is not to be blamed for the evils of a world God created good. God is supposed to give humankind direction, hope, and meaning...but not to be causally responsible for every last thing that happens” (77).

To be clear, I do not assume that Caputo believes in the *existence* of a weak God who created the good; rather, I take issue with the priority of the good that informs his fable of God. That Caputo subjects the fate of the good to the undecidability of promise/threat—as he emphasizes in response to my critique—does not affect the priority of the good. While granting that the good may always be corrupted, Caputo nevertheless retains the name of God as the name of an “unconditional love” (88), which is “unconditionally affirmed and unconditionally promised” (92-93) in the story of God’s creation and in “his promise that everything he has made, *come what may*, is good” (93). The fact that what comes turns out to break the promise—“Then Cain murders Abel and the bloody course of history is launched” (178)—does not alter the fact that the promise of the good is *primary* in Caputo’s story of creation.<sup>13</sup> Following the

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<sup>11</sup> Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge,” 84n.30.

<sup>12</sup> Caputo, *WG*, 178, 88. Page-references in this paragraph and the next refer to this book.

<sup>13</sup> The primacy of the promise of the good in Caputo’s argument is evident from the way he figures the relation between promise and threat. On Caputo’s account, *if* the

same logic, Caputo asserts that “life has an inviolability about it, a sacredness that it is the role of the name of God to confer and confirm” (92), whereas “the problem of evil is in part human malice, which is as old as Cain” and “in part the vagaries of disease and natural disasters” (92).

The priority of the good structures not only Caputo’s weak theology but also his reading of Derrida. Caputo argues that “deconstruction means the rule of the gift, of the good, of justice, of hospitality.”<sup>14</sup> Caputo here inserts “the good” as a term equivalent to Derrida’s notions of the gift, justice, and hospitality – despite the fact that Derrida never aligns any of these terms with the good. Furthermore, Derrida’s work provides the most powerful argument against the idea of the good at the center of Caputo’s reading. Derrida maintains that the exposure to alterity – which he analyzes as constitutive of the gift, justice, and hospitality – is not characterized by goodness but rather by what he describes as *radical evil*. While Caputo claims that “the messianic is destroyed, violated, by radical evil,”<sup>15</sup> I will demonstrate that for Derrida the messianic *is* radical evil.

The term “radical evil” is taken from Kant’s treatise *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, but it receives a quite different meaning in Derrida’s work. Kant treats evil as an effect of the free will, which may lead one to follow the incentives of one’s sensuous nature rather than the moral law. Evil is thus “radical” for Kant in the sense that the possibility of evil is at the root of our human nature and cannot be eliminated from the way we are constituted. Nevertheless, for Kant, the ever-present possibility of evil does not call into question the Idea of a good that is exempt from evil. Even though we as finite beings can never attain something that is good in itself, we can strive toward it as an ideal that in principle is thinkable and desirable. In contrast, Derrida argues

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promise were kept it would be good, whereas the threat is that the promise may be broken or betrayed, as when Cain murders Abel. Thus, when Caputo tries to counter my critique by emphasizing that he agrees with my analysis of the promise, he symptomatically misconstrues the logic of my argument. “As Hägglund likes to emphasize,” Caputo writes, “promises are made in the face of a threat, threats threaten what we are promised” (*JCRT* response n.31). This formulation, however, is not mine and is in fact incompatible with my argument, since it continues to assume that the threat is external rather than internal to the promise. For Caputo, it is axiomatic that if the promise were kept it would be good, so the threat is that the promise may *not* be kept. In contrast, I argue that “it is precisely the axiomatic distinction between promise and threat that Derrida calls into question by aligning every act with the structure of the promise. It follows that even when I threaten to rob or kill, I am making a promise. Hence, the threat that is intrinsic to the structure of the promise does not only consist in that the promise may be broken, but can also consist in that the promise may be kept. Derrida epitomizes the interdependence of promise and threat in his claim that ‘the threat is not something that comes from the outside to place itself next to the promise.’ Rather, ‘the threat is the promise itself, or better, threat and promise always come together *as* the promise. This does not mean just that the promise is always already threatened; it also means that the promise is *threatening*.” (*Radical Atheism*, 138). To break or betray the promise may therefore be better than keeping it.

<sup>14</sup> Caputo, *WG*, 112.

<sup>15</sup> Caputo, *P&T*, 158.

that evil is intrinsic to the good that we desire. Evil is thus “radical” for Derrida in the sense that it is at the root of the good as such.

While this may seem like an abstract argument, Derrida makes it concrete through the notion of hospitality. For example, Derrida argues that if I invite a good friend and we have a great time it is an irreducible condition that “the experience might have been terrible. Not only that it *might* have been terrible, but the threat remains. That this good friend may become the devil, may be perverse. The perversity is not an accident which could once and for all be excluded, the perversity is part of the experience.”<sup>16</sup> Far from restricting this argument to the sphere of friendship, Derrida generalizes it in accordance with the logic of radical evil. As he puts it: “for an event, even a good event to happen the possibility of radical evil must remain inscribed as a possibility,” since “if we exclude the mere possibility of such a radical evil, then there will be no event at all. When we are exposed to what is coming, even in the most generous intention of hospitality, we must not exclude the possibility that the one who is coming is coming to kill us, is a figure of evil” (9). Accordingly, Derrida emphasizes that even the other who is identified as good may always *become* evil and that “this is true even in the most peaceful experiences of joy and happiness” (9). The point is not only that evil is a necessary possibility but also that *nothing would be desirable* without it, since it is intrinsic to the experience of the good itself. Whatever I “invite” into my life—whatever I welcome or desire—opens me to the visitation of an other who can destroy my life. Yet without the possibility of such visitation there would be no one to invite and nothing to desire. No one could come and nothing could happen, since life only can live on through the exposure to a future that opens the chance of survival and the threat of termination in the same stroke. Following his example of the friend, Derrida thus maintains that “when I experience something good, the coming of a friend for example, if I am happy with a good surprise, then in this experience of happiness, within it, the memory of or the lateral reference to the possible perversion of it must remain present, in the wings let’s say, otherwise I could not enjoy it” (9).

Derrida’s notion of radical evil thus undermines the religious conception of the good. To recall, Derrida maintains that the common denominator for religions is that they promote the absolute immunity of the unscathed as the supremely desirable. The good may be threatened by corruption from the outside, but in itself it is immune from evil. Derrida’s argument is, on the contrary, that the good in itself is not a state of absolute immunity but rather *autoimmune*. To establish this argument, it is not enough simply to insist on the ever-present *possibility* of evil. Rather, one must show that the good in its *actuality* is already violated by evil, already involved in its own destruction. As I demonstrate in *Radical Atheism*, the latter argument depends on Derrida’s conception of time. Given that the present ceases to be as soon as it comes to be, it attacks its own integrity from the beginning and makes it impossible for anything to be unscathed. This is why Derrida maintains that autoimmunity is located “in the

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<sup>16</sup> Derrida, “Perhaps or Maybe,” *PLI* nr. 6 (1997), p. 9. Page-references in this paragraph refer to this text.

very structure of the present and of life.”<sup>17</sup> In order to survive—even for a moment—a life cannot have any integrity as such but is already marked by the alteration of time. Even if all external threats are evaded, the good is therefore compromised from within, since the attack on its integrity is already operative within the good that is defended.

We can thus understand why Derrida insists on a distinction between *faith*, on the one hand, and the religious ideal of absolute immunity (*the unscathed*) on the other. The two are usually conflated in the notion of religious faith, which is understood as the faith in an absolute good that is safe from the corruption of evil. Drawing on his logic of radical evil, however, Derrida reads the religious ideal of absolute immunity against itself. To have faith in the good is not to have faith in something that can be trusted once and for all. On the contrary, the good is autoimmune because evil is inherent in its own constitution. As Derrida emphasizes, there is “nothing immune, safe and sound, *heilig* and holy, nothing unscathed in the most autonomous living present without a risk of autoimmunity” (82). The argument here—articulated in Derrida’s main essay on religion, “Faith and Knowledge”—is that the very movement of sacralization is contradicted from within by a constitutive autoimmunity. To hold something to be sacred is to seek to immunize it, to protect it from being violated or corrupted. Yet one cannot protect anything without committing it to a future that allows it to live on and by the same token exposes it to corruption. The immunization of the good must therefore “take in trust”—as Derrida puts it—“that radical evil without which good would be for nothing” (82). This condition of radical evil cannot be removed, since removing it would amount to the “annulment of the future” (83).

Derrida thus highlights the logic of radical evil through the notion of faith. Derrida argues that faith—taking in trust—is constitutive of experience in general. In order to do anything, we must have faith in the future and in those on whom we depend, since we cannot *know* what will happen or what others will do to us. Consequently, the faith that sustains us, the trust that allows us to act, is necessarily open to being deceived and the credit granted to the other open to being ruinous. As Derrida argues, “this break with calculable reliability and with the assurance of certainty—in truth, with knowledge—is ordained by the very structure of confidence or of credence as faith.”<sup>18</sup> Whatever we do, we place our faith in a future that may shatter our hopes and lay to waste what we desire. This necessity of faith is not due to a cognitive limitation but to the undecidability of the future, which opens both chance and threat at every moment. As Derrida underscores, “this ex-position to the incalculable event” is “the irreducible spacing of the very faith, credit, or belief without which there would be no social bond, no address to the other.”<sup>19</sup> It follows that one cannot maintain a strict opposition between good and evil, or between sworn faith and perjury. Rather, Derrida argues that “only the infinite possibility of the worst and of perjury can

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<sup>17</sup> Derrida, *Rouges*, 127.

<sup>18</sup> Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. G. Collins (London: Verso, 1997), 16.

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, *Rouges*, trans. M. Naas and P-A. Brault (Stanford: Stanford UP 2005), 153.

grant the possibility of the Good, of veracity and sworn faith. This possibility remains infinite but as the very possibility of an autoimmune finitude."<sup>20</sup>

What Derrida here describes as the autoimmunity of finitude is intrinsic to the very movement of *survival*, which takes the time to live by postponing death. On the one hand, to survive is to retain the past, to keep it in resistance to loss. On the other hand, to survive is to live on in a future that separates itself from the past and opens it to being lost. No matter how much I try to protect my life, I can only do so by exposing it to a future that may erase it, but which also gives it the chance to live on. The movement of survival is therefore autoimmune. Life bears the cause of its own destruction within itself, so the death that one defends against in the movement of survival is *internal* to the life that is defended.

This logic of survival is at the core of what I analyze as Derrida's radical atheism. 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, it is *because* of temporal finitude that one cares about life in the first place. If life were fully present in itself – if it were not haunted by past and future, by what has been and what may be – there would be no reason to care about life, since nothing could happen to it. That is why I argue, in a central thesis of *Radical Atheism*, that the so-called desire for immortality is contradicted from within by a desire for survival. If one did not desire to survive, one would not fear death and dream of immortality. For the same reason, however, 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 the time of life. Given the desire for survival, the timelessness of God or immortality is thus *undesirable*, since it would eliminate the possibility for anything to happen and anyone to survive.

Following the same logic, Derrida argues that life necessarily is open to death, good necessarily open to evil, peace necessarily open to violence. Inversely, an absolute life that is immune to death, an absolute goodness that is immune to evil, or an absolute peace that is immune to violence, is for Derrida the same as an absolute death, an absolute evil, or an absolute violence. This is a radical atheist argument because Derrida calls into question the very *desirability* of the religious ideal of the unscathed. An absolute immunity would close all openness to alterity, all openness to the unpredictable coming of time, and thereby close the opening of life itself.

Caputo here retorts that the above argument does not deliver "an *a priori* argument *against* the existence of God" and does not disprove the existence of eternity, since the fact that nothing happens and nothing survives in eternity "is not an objection to eternity; it is the definition of eternity."<sup>21</sup> This would indeed be a problem for radical atheism if the latter sought to refute the *existence* of God and eternity along the lines of the negative ontological argument that Caputo

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<sup>20</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, 153.

<sup>21</sup> Caputo, *JCRT* response, 116.



ascribes to me. Radical atheism, however, does not dispute the existence but rather the desirability of God and eternity. The state of eternity that traditional theology holds out as “the best” (absolute life, absolute peace) is on Derrida’s account “the worst” (absolute death, absolute violence). Whether or not such a state can exist is not decided by radical atheism and nothing in my argument depends on deciding it. The point is rather to show that a desire for the religious ideal of the unscathed—for absolute immunity—would have to renounce all care and become completely indifferent to the fate of survival. This is why some religious sages preach *detachment* as the path to the salvation of eternity. Only by detaching oneself from the care for temporal life can one embrace the prospect of eternity. The radical atheist argument, however, is that such detachment dissimulates a preceding *attachment* to temporal life that is the source of both what we desire and what we fear, both the desirable and the undesirable.

As an *effect* of this double bind one can certainly come to embrace a religious desire for absolute fullness/absolute emptiness. The 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 attachment to temporal 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.<sup>22</sup>

Consequently, radical atheism does not “suppress” Derrida’s analysis of faith or his notion of “hope, expectation and aspiration” (as Caputo alleges in his response). Rather, I give an account of the faith of deconstruction that runs counter to the religious interpretations. Faith in general—including hope, expectation and aspiration—is sustained by what Derrida analyzes as the unconditional affirmation of survival. Whatever one may have faith in—whatever one may hope for, expect or aspire to—one has to affirm the time of survival, since it opens the possibility to live on and thus to want something or to do something in the first place. This unconditional affirmation does not oblige one to accept whatever happens; it only marks the exposure to what happens as an unconditional condition. Whatever we do, we have always already said “yes” to the coming of the future, since without it nothing could happen and nothing would be desirable. But for the same reason, every affirmation is essentially

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<sup>22</sup> Instead of taking into account this radical atheist argument, Caputo construes my book as “mounting a frontal attack from without that tries to hammer religion senseless” (33) and reducing “the deconstruction of religion to hammering away at the onto-theological voice of two-worlds Augustinianism, contrary to everything that Derrida says about the multiplicity of voices, including the irreducible plurality of voices in Augustine’s *Confessiones*” (108). Far from suppressing the multiplicity of voices in Augustine, my reading shows how the logic and desire of radical atheism is legible in his *Confessions*. See *Radical Atheism*, 107-09, 146-63.

compromised and threatened by negation, since the coming of the future also entails all the threats to which one may want to say “no.”

The affirmation of survival is thus unconditional because it is a *necessary but not sufficient condition* for all responses to life. Without the affirmation of survival there would be no resentment and hate (since one would not be threatened by anything) but there would also be no compassion and love (since one would not be committed to anything). Indeed, all the values that traditionally are assumed to be based on religious faith—compassion, love, responsibility for the other, and so on—presuppose the affirmation of survival. Without the exposure to a future that can harm us there would be nothing to take responsibility for, since nothing could happen to us. It is therefore the temporal finitude of survival—and the affirmation of such survival—that raises the demand of responsibility. If one were not committed to the survival of someone or something, one would never be precipitated to take action. Even if I sacrifice my life for another this act is still dependent on the affirmation of survival, since I would not sacrifice my life for the other if I were not committed to the survival of him or her or it.

The first question, then, is how one can rigorously account for survival as a constitutive condition. As I argue at length in *Radical Atheism*, Derrida’s notion of “the trace” here provides the logical infrastructure. Derrida defines the structure of the trace as the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space, which he abbreviates as spacing (*espacement*). This structure should not itself be understood as a *temporal* process, where time becomes space and space becomes time, but rather designates a *logical* co-implication of time and space. Consequently, in elucidating the notion of spacing I do *not* appeal to a realist conception of time as transcendent being or a materialist metaphysics of becoming, as Caputo charges in his response. Neither realism nor materialism are invoked in *Radical Atheism*, so it is hard to see how Caputo can claim that the book is “organized” around an opposition between religion and materialism. Furthermore, in the one essay where I do address the question of materialism (and to which Caputo refers) I explicitly emphasize that the trace is not an ontological stipulation about being as such but rather a logical structure that makes explicit what is implicit in the concept of succession.<sup>23</sup> Succession should here not be conflated with the chronology of linear time, but rather accounts for a constitutive deferral and delay 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 of time.

Thus, when I maintain that the structure of the trace “follows from” the constitution of time it is not because time precedes the trace—everything I argue runs counter to that thesis—but because the necessity of the trace structure can

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<sup>23</sup>See Hägglund, “Radical Atheist Materialism: A Critique of Meillassoux,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* eds. Bryant, Srnicek and Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011): 114-29.

be derived from the logical implications of succession.<sup>24</sup> For one moment to be succeeded by another it cannot *first* be present in itself and *then* cease to be. 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 a 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 spatial inscription of the trace, since the latter enables the past to be retained for the future. Yet the spatial inscription of the trace 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 a future that gives it both the chance to remain and to be effaced.

The structure of the trace thereby accounts for the autoimmunity of survival. As the condition of possibility for retaining the past, the trace is also the condition of possibility for life to resist death in a movement of survival. The trace can only live on, however, by being exposed to its possible erasure and thus breaches the integrity of any immune system from the beginning. The trace makes it *possible* for life to survive but at the same time makes it *impossible* for life to be given or protected in itself. The autoimmunity that follows from this tracing of time is what Derrida calls the structure of the event and he emphasizes that it is *unconditional*, in the sense that it is the condition for anything to happen. As he puts it: “Without autoimmunity, with absolute immunity, nothing would ever happen.”<sup>25</sup>

Now, Caputo too recognizes that Derrida “describes the irreducible condition of our lives, the inescapable circumstance of living always already under these conditions of archi-spacing.”<sup>26</sup> Yet for Caputo this necessary spacing is not the unconditional; the unconditional is rather what is held out as a “promise” or a “dream.”<sup>27</sup> “Derrida is dreaming of something unconditional,” he writes, “something for which the current conditions of being are no match, something that belongs to another order.”<sup>28</sup> The unconditional and the conditional would thus belong to two different “orders.” This is the matrix for Caputo’s misreading of Derrida. For example, Caputo explains the unconditional by appealing to the

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<sup>24</sup> Thus, when Caputo in his response recalls that “the experience of time is constituted by the trace; the trace does not follow from or follow upon time” (62) he is not presenting an objection to my argument; he is merely reiterating the thesis that I elucidate at length in *Radical Atheism*. Similarly, when Caputo underlines that *différance* is not itself a “spatio-temporal being” but rather “an account of space and time” that is “not identical with space and time in any of its ‘transcendent’ versions” (59), he does not “undermine” my conception of an ultra-transcendental aesthetics; the latter account is precisely what I develop in terms of the ultra-transcendental in chapters 1 and 2 of *Radical Atheism*.

<sup>25</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, 152; see also 143–44.

<sup>26</sup> Caputo, “Love Among the Deconstructibles,” *JCRT* 5.2 (2004), 38.

<sup>27</sup> See Caputo, “Love Among the Deconstructibles,” 38.

<sup>28</sup> Caputo, “Without Sovereignty, Without Being,” *JCRT* 4.3 (2003), 14.

idea of “unconditional love.”<sup>29</sup> Far from being deconstructive, this idea of unconditional love is based on the religious ideal of absolute immunity. If love is given unconditionally, it is immune from what may happen to it and thus from the condition of temporality. Unlike the promise that lovers give in fact and in deed, the promise of unconditional love would be the promise of fidelity without the possibility of betrayal. This notion of unconditional love, however, is incompatible with Derrida’s analysis of the promise. Derrida is *not* claiming that something unconditional is promised; he is arguing that any promise is unconditionally exposed to being broken or betrayed.

For the same reason, the unconditional does not belong to a different “order” than the here and now. The unconditional is the spacing of time that is the *structure* of the here and now, the structure of what happens, of the event. That I insist on this point does not mean that I think deconstruction is a “pure description” (a phrase I have never used) or a value-free enterprise that does not engage in performative acts of commitment. Contrary to what Caputo claims, I do not “silence” the “call” of the unconditional or deny “the unconditional *claim* of the future *upon* the moment.”<sup>30</sup> Rather, I argue that both Caputo and a number of other influential readers of Derrida have misconstrued the logic of the relation between the unconditional and the conditional. What is “called” for by the unconditional is not something unconditional (e.g. unconditional love) but rather acts of engagement and performative commitments that are *conditional* responses to an unconditional exposure. That performative acts are conditional does not mean that they are determined in advance but that they are dependent on a context that is essentially vulnerable to change. This unconditional exposure may always alter or undermine the meaning of the performative act and is therefore not reducible to it.

Accordingly, Derrida insists that there is a “nonperformative exposure” to what happens, which he dissociates from the notion of an “imperative injunction (call or performative).”<sup>31</sup> Following Derrida’s emphatic distinction, there is

*on the one hand*, a paradoxical experience of the performative of the promise (but also of the threat at the heart of the promise) that organizes every speech act, every other performative, and even every preverbal experience of the relation to the other; and, *on the other hand*, at the point of intersection with this threatening promise, the horizon of awaiting [*attente*] that informs our relationship to time—to the event, to that which happens [*ce qui arrive*], to the one who arrives [*l’arrivant*], and to the other. Involved this time, however, would be a waiting *without* waiting, a waiting whose

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Caputo’s *WG*, 88-89. In the response Caputo wrote for our debate at Harvard, he described this idea of unconditional love in terms of a love that would be “given without condition, come what may, as opposed to the promise lovers give in fact and in deed.”

<sup>30</sup> Caputo, *JCRT* response, 66.

<sup>31</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, 91.

horizon is, as it were, punctured by the event (which is waited for *without* being awaited).<sup>32</sup>

It is precisely the latter structure of the event—“what comes about in an unforeseeable and singular manner”—that Derrida describes in terms of a nonperformative exposure.<sup>33</sup> Derrida even provocatively emphasizes that the unconditional exposure to the event “couldn’t care less about the performative.”<sup>34</sup> The unconditional is thus the spacing of time that does not depend on a performative commitment, since it is the condition for all performative acts, and it cannot be embraced as something good in itself, since it is the source of every chance *and* every threat. For the same reason, the unconditional exposure to time is inseparable from (“calls for”) conditional, performative responses that seek to discriminate between the chance and the threat. As Derrida clearly underlines, the exposure to the event—an “exposure without horizon, and therefore an irreducible amalgamation of desire and anguish, affirmation and fear, promise and threat”—is “the condition of praxis, decision, action and responsibility.”<sup>35</sup>

What is at stake in the distinction between the conditional and the unconditional is therefore a *logical* distinction that makes explicit what is implicit in reckoning with the temporality of everything to which we are committed. As Derrida emphasizes, it is *because* one is exposed to the incalculable that it is necessary to calculate and it is *because* one is exposed to an undecidable future that it is necessary to make decisions. Inversely, these conditional responses are unconditionally haunted by the relation to the undecidable that remains in and through any decision. It is not only that I cannot calculate what others will do to me; I cannot finally calculate what my own decisions will do to me, since they bind me to a future that exceeds my intentions, and in this sense I am affected by my own decisions as by the decisions of an other.

When Derrida analyzes the “unconditional” in conjunction with highly valorized terms, such as hospitality and justice, he is therefore not invoking an unconditional good. On the contrary, he seeks to demonstrate that the unconditional spacing of time is inscribed within the conditions for even the most ideal hospitality or justice. Justice and hospitality require conditional laws but at the same time they cannot be reduced to a rule for how the law should be applied. The demand for justice or hospitality is always raised in relation to singular events—for which there is no guarantee that the given laws are adequate—thereby opening the laws to being questioned, transformed, or eliminated. Derrida can thus claim that conditional laws of hospitality and justice are guided and inspired, as well as given meaning and practical rationality, by

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<sup>32</sup> Derrida, “Marx & Sons,” in *Ghostly Demarcations*, ed. M. Sprinker, (London: Verso, 2008), 250-51.

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, “Typewriter Ribbon,” trans. P. Kamuf, in *Without Alibi* (Stanford: Stanford UP 2002), 146.

<sup>34</sup> Derrida, “Typewriter Ribbon,” 146.

<sup>35</sup> Derrida, “Marx & Sons,” 249.

the unconditional. The point is that there would be no need for conditional laws without the exposure to unpredictable events. This unconditional exposure is both what gives practical rationality to conditional laws and what inspires one to defend or to challenge them, depending on the situation.

Despite Caputo's claims to the contrary, it is therefore central to my analysis that "the temporalization of the future takes place for Derrida as an *experiential* and *appellatory* and *injunctive* structure," where we are "related to the future in terms of responsibility, hope, expectation and desire."<sup>36</sup> What is at stake, however, is the autoimmune structure of the responsibility, hope, expectation, and desire for the future. Precisely because Caputo does not think through this logic of autoimmunity he opposes my argument on the basis of a simplistic binary. According to Caputo, I envision the future as something "we have every reason to protect ourselves against" (60), since my "attitude" toward the future is "fearful and protective" (77). This leads Caputo to "presume" that I do not think we should take risks but rather "only take safe bets, and never put our money where we don't have good reasons to expect a return" (89). In contrast, Derrida's "attitude" toward the future is according to Caputo "hopeful and welcoming" (77), since "the *à venir* is what is to come not factually but optimally, what we are hoping for, what we desire" (60). It would be hard to imagine a more straightforward misreading of Derrida's notion of the *à venir*. Derrida makes clear that the *à venir* is the source of *both* what we desire *and* what we fear, *both* what we hope for *and* what we dread. Thus, one cannot choose between a general stance toward the future that is *either* protective *or* welcoming, *either* fearful *or* hopeful. The *à venir* is undecidable and thereby makes it impossible to have a given "attitude" toward it. That is the logic I pursue throughout *Radical Atheism*, rather than promoting any fearful or protective attitude.

At times, Caputo himself outlines this argument in response to my work—for example, when he maintains that "for Derrida the future is our hope even as it is dangerous, which is the passion of life" (60)—but he fails to draw the consequences. If the passion for life is one that engages us to the mortal and vulnerable (as Caputo approvingly invokes my radical atheist notion of desire) and we are "praying for our lives" (122), then passion and prayer can inspire one to seek greater protection just as well as greater exposure. Indeed, for all his talk of responsibility, Caputo never seems to think of it in terms of having responsibility for a determinate other who is under threat. If he did, it would quickly become apparent that one cannot *a priori* advocate the value of exposure over the value of protection.

Furthermore, the passion for mortal life will necessarily generate both a positive and a negative "attitude" to the future, since it gives rise both to enabling expectation and disabling dread, unexpected chance and traumatic threat. This is precisely what I demonstrate in my reading of *Circumfession*, which stages how the affirmative passion for mortal life is parallel with and inhabited by jealousy, desperation, negativity, neurosis. Again, this is an analysis with which Caputo

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<sup>36</sup> Caputo, *JCRT* response, 58.

claims to agree, but if he did he would have to give up his opposition between openness and closure, exposure and protection. Derrida is *not opposing* closure or protection in favor of openness or exposure; rather, he is analyzing and staging their autoimmune co-implication. As Derrida summarizes the argument in "Faith and Knowledge," "there is no opposition, fundamentally, between 'social bond' and 'social unraveling.' A certain interruptive unraveling is the condition of the 'social bond,' the very respiration of all 'community.' This is not even the knot of a reciprocal condition, but rather the possibility that every knot can come undone, be cut or interrupted" (158). It follows that the openness of the future is not something that one can promote *against* the closure of determination; the unconditional openness of the future is rather what makes the closure of determination necessary and unavoidable while compromising its integrity from within.

Far from being a relation between two different orders, the relation between the conditional and the unconditional is thus an autoimmune relation. Inscribed within the conditions for any given X is the unconditional spacing of time that compromises the integrity of X and undermines the very ideal of absolute immunity. Accordingly, Derrida emphasizes that the unconditional spacing of time "will never have entered religion and will never permit itself to be sacralized, sanctified, humanized, theologized.... Radically heterogeneous to the safe and sound, the holy and the sacred, it never admits of any *indemnification*" and is "neither Being, nor the Good, nor God."<sup>37</sup>

Caputo, however, does not take into account the logic of autoimmunity and instead aligns Derrida's notion of the unconditional with the name of God, which he glosses as the name of "unconditional love...the name of everything we hope for in the future, the name of the one who is coming, or coming again, to save us, to establish a reign of messianic peace, the name of the kingdom to come, of the justice that is coming to lift us up in its arms and embrace us like a mother holding her child."<sup>38</sup> To be sure, Caputo does not claim that such unconditional love, messianic peace, or absolute justice actually exists; they are rather a "promise" and a "dream" that we can never actualize. Yet it is precisely the dream of something beyond the condition of autoimmunity that Derrida's radical atheism calls into question. Atheism has traditionally focused on denying the existence of absolute immunity, without questioning that we desire and dream of it. In contrast, the radical atheism of deconstruction seeks to elucidate that what we desire and dream of is itself inhabited by autoimmunity.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 58-59.

<sup>38</sup> Caputo, *WG*, 89.

<sup>39</sup> Subsequent to *Radical Atheism*, I have deepened my account of atheism by differentiating between three forms of traditional atheism—melancholic atheism, pragmatic atheism, and therapeutic atheism—explaining the ways in which radical atheism distinguishes itself from all three of them. See Hägglund, "The Challenge of Radical Atheism: A Response," *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 9.1 (2009): 227-250.

It is thus instructive to consider what Derrida means by the desire for the impossible, which Caputo promotes as the common denominator between deconstruction and religion whereas I argue that it is the core of radical atheism. According to Caputo, “the impossible, being impassioned by the impossible, is the religious, is religious passion,” since “our hearts are burning with the desire to go where we cannot go, to the impossible.”<sup>40</sup> It is easy to see how misleading this argument is once we realize that the impossible for Derrida is not somewhere we can never go—or something we can never reach—but rather where we always find ourselves to be. The impossible is what happens all the time, since it designates the impossibility of being in itself that is the condition of temporality. As Derrida explains, the impossible is “the exposure to what comes or happens. It is the exposure (the desire, the openness, but also the fear) that opens, that opens itself, that opens us to time, to what comes upon us, to what arrives or happens, to the event.”<sup>41</sup> That we desire the impossible, then, does not mean that we desire something above or beyond the possible. On the contrary, it means that whatever we desire is constituted by temporal finitude, which makes it impossible for it to be in itself. This impossibility of being in itself has traditionally been regarded as a negative predicament that we desire to overcome, since it opens for corruption at every moment. Derrida’s radical atheist argument, however, is that the impossibility of being in itself is *not* a negative predicament. Rather, the impossibility of being in itself opens the chance of everything we desire and the threat of everything we fear.

For Caputo, on the contrary, that we desire the impossible means that we desire or “dream” of the kingdom of God, where the impossible would become possible. Over and over again in his writings on Derrida, Caputo invokes the claim from the New Testament that “for God all things are possible.” Or as Caputo himself explains: “To the way things happen when God rules, where with God nothing is impossible, I link what Derrida calls ‘the impossible’.”<sup>42</sup> The fact that Caputo is not making a claim about the existence of God or the kingdom of God—that he is writing a “poetics” and not a metaphysics of the impossible, as he stresses in response to my critique—does not make any essential difference, since his poetics and the conception of desire that informs it is incompatible with what Derrida means by the impossible. I explained this at length in *Radical Atheism*, but let me here take a concrete example by returning to the problem of hospitality. Consistent with the general logic of his reading, Caputo links Derrida’s notion of unconditional hospitality to the kingdom of God, which he glosses as “a city without walls, a nation without borders, unconditional hospitality” (WG 278). If we wonder how such hospitality could be possible, Caputo reminds us that we are talking about the kingdom of God, where the impossible is possible: “Remember that in the kingdom God rules, not the world, which means that there the human, all too human rules of entrance requirements, etiquette, and human hospitality hold no sway” (WG 259).

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<sup>40</sup> Caputo, *P&T*, xx, and WG, 104.

<sup>41</sup> Derrida, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” trans. M. Naas and P-A. Brault, in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003), 120.

<sup>42</sup> Caputo, WG, 102, see also 87-88.



Caputo thereby *opposes* unconditional hospitality to conditional hospitality in a way that is deeply at odds with Derrida's thinking. For Derrida, unconditional hospitality is not something that we are prevented from achieving because of our human limitations but rather something to which we cannot avoid being subjected. As Derrida underlines, *nothing happens* without unconditional hospitality. Unconditional hospitality is thus another name for the exposure to temporal alterity, which opens one both to what is desired and what is feared. Thus, in a striking passage, Derrida links unconditional hospitality to the susceptibility of being "violated and raped, stolen...precisely where one is not ready to receive."<sup>43</sup> This should surely make us pause. Derrida is *not* saying that we should let ourselves be overtaken and remain unprepared for what may happen; he is saying that such passive exposure to the other, such dependence on others who may turn out to violate us, is at work in everything we do, whatever we do, and that we need to take this structural necessity into account to understand the exigencies of hospitality. If we maintain, on the contrary, that there is an axiomatic "injunction" to be unconditionally hospitable—for example by maintaining that we should "put ourselves at risk *as far as possible* in forgiveness or hospitality," as Caputo claims in his response to my work (89)—we are at best operating with a pious assumption that the other is good and at worst advocating an ethics of submission, where the self should give itself over to the other even at the expense of being brutally violated or stolen.

Caputo used to rely on the first alternative, claiming that the other is always "the victim, not the producer of the victim. It would never be the case that the 'other' to come would be Charles Manson, or some plunderer or rapist."<sup>44</sup> In his response to my work, Caputo seems to have realized that this was an untenable argument and concedes that the other who comes can turn out to be a victimizer just as well as a victim. Given that he nevertheless wants to hold on to the imperative that we should expose ourselves as much as possible to "unknown and menacing others" (88-89) the only alternative that remains is an ethics or politics of submission, where we should renounce calculation, conditions, and protection in order not to resist the open future.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Derrida, "Hostipitality," trans. G. Anidjar, in *Acts of Religion*, 361.

<sup>44</sup> Caputo, "Discussion with Richard Kearney," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. Caputo and Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999), 131. See also Caputo's claim in *P&T*: "The *tout autre* always means the one who is left out, the one whose suffering and exclusion lay claim to us and interrupt our self-possession" (248).

<sup>45</sup> The oscillation between these two conceptions of an "ethics of alterity" (one assuming that the other is good or at least helplessly in need, bearing "the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow and the orphan," the other suspending the question of goodness but nevertheless advocating an ethics of submission) is precisely what I criticize in Levinas. According to Caputo, "the treatment of Levinas in RA demands careful critique" (105), but he immediately goes on to produce a caricature of my argument: "Häggglund labors under the misunderstanding that Levinas is some kind of Neoplatonist who thinks that when you die you enjoy eternal happiness outside of time, if you have been well behaved" (105). In fact, my critique of Levinas has nothing to do with the question of the afterlife or eternal happiness. Rather, I provide a

Caputo tries to circumvent the obvious vacuity of such an imperative by instead turning the passion for the impossible into a matter of heroism. Thus, he draws a distinction between “playing it safe by staying behind the lines of the possible” (which is presumably bad or at least characteristic of “mediocre fellows” who do not have the proper religious passion) and “risking the impossible” (which is presumably good or at least characteristic of the “saints” who are driven by religious passion). We are thus told that the “saints” of “deconstructive responsibility” are distinguished by the fact that they “lead maximally risky lives, exposing themselves to the risk of the impossible. Far from trying to keep themselves safe, religious people (inside and outside religion) are constantly doing things that seem irresponsible and uncommonly dangerous to the rest of us who stay safely behind the lines” (90). These saints, Caputo candidly concedes (92), can always turn out to be monsters in exempting themselves from law and calculation, but this is the price to be paid for refusing to stay “behind the lines in the secure surroundings of the possible, the literal, the safe, where there are neither saints nor monsters” (90).

That Caputo succumbs to this logic of heroism indicates how far he is willing to go to save his idea that there is an opposition between the possible and the impossible in Derrida’s thinking. Caputo has to assume that there is a security of “the possible” where things are safe, calculable, and free of risk, in order then to oppose it to the insecurity of “the impossible” where things are dangerous, incalculable, full of risk, and where only saints or monsters dare to go. For Derrida, however, *there is no such opposition* between the possible and the impossible or between the conditional and the unconditional. Derrida is *not* arguing that security and calculations are something that we should seek to transgress in favor of the insecure and the incalculable; he is arguing that any security is unconditionally exposed to insecurity and any calculation unconditionally exposed to the incalculable. The point of deconstructive analysis is not to choose between the safe and the unsafe, or between the calculable and the incalculable, but to analyze their co-implication and the autoimmunity that follows from it. The condition of autoimmunity may inspire one to defend a given safety or to give it up, but in either case one is exposed to a temporality that exceeds one’s control, and there is no guarantee that less safety is better than more or vice versa.

Caputo tries to challenge the above argument by insisting that the “axiom” of deconstruction is “*always and everywhere to keep the future open.*”<sup>46</sup> Caputo himself, however, goes on to concede that “starting out from our irreducible exposure to an unpredictable future, which is irreducibly pre-given, Derrida’s next step is to

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detailed account of why and how Levinas fails to think through the undecidability of alterity and its consequences for ethics. In pursuing this analysis, I do not reduce the other or alterity to something “neutral” (as Caputo claims). Indeed, I never speak of alterity or the other as “neutral” but rather seek to analyze what follows from the constitutive undecidability of alterity.

<sup>46</sup> Caputo, *JCRT* response, 84.

ask how we are going to respond to the *claim* that is made upon us by the future” (84). For Caputo to refute my argument, then, he would have to show that there is something in the very claim made upon us by the future that “calls” us *always to be more open* rather than less, *always to expose ourselves more* rather than less. Whatever such an unequivocal call may be—and however Caputo may claim to have heard it—it would by definition deny the undecidability of the future and the responsibility of deciding whether or not one should be more or less open. The openness to the future is unconditional in the sense that one is necessarily open to the future, but it is not unconditional in the sense of an axiom which establishes that more openness is always better than less.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, when Caputo attempts to establish what it would mean to keep the future open rather than close it down, he relies on a set of binary and utterly deconstructible oppositions. “Derrida’s concern,” Caputo insists, “is whether our response to the coming of the other is inventive or uninventive, exceptional or routinized, generous or mundane, surprising or preprogrammed, unexpected or predictable, excessive or merely normative.”<sup>48</sup> This argument presupposes that there can be a response to the other that is predictable and programmed (and accordingly is *in opposition* to the unexpected and surprising), which is exactly the presupposition that the logic of deconstruction undermines. Furthermore, Caputo emphatically *opposes* the following of rules and norms in the name of our responsibility to the future, with the effect that he is led to glorify the transgression of rules and the suspension of the law. On Caputo’s account, we “close down” and “avoid” (79-80) our responsibility to the future if the “they” (*das Man*) are allowed to “lure” us into “merely ‘following the rules’” (86). The failure of responsibility would thus be “not a fall *from* the normative” but “a fall *into* the normative” (81), where “one fails not by breaking the rule but by *keeping*

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<sup>47</sup> Caputo tries to draw support for his argument by appealing to an interview where Derrida claims that “one should only ever oppose events that one thinks will block the future or that bring death with them: events that would put an end to the possibility of the event” (quoted in *JCRT* response, 39). This is clearly an imprecise remark by Derrida, which is moreover contradicted by the overall logic of the passage in which it appears. If we were to take the remark seriously it would mean that we should not oppose any political events (e.g. racism, sexism, colonial oppression, and so on) as long as they do not put an end to the possibility of the event, which according to Derrida’s own analysis is impossible except through an absolute violence that would eliminate the possibility for anything to happen. Derrida’s remark would thus mean that we should not oppose any political events that fall short of being absolutely violent, which includes all forms of political violence that actually takes place. What Derrida is arguing in the interview, however, is that the coming of the event is *not* good in itself and that we should *not* “give up trying to prevent certain things from coming to pass (without which there would be no decision, no responsibility, ethics or politics).” Consequently, Derrida’s argument does not support the view that it is better to be more open rather than less open to the future. To be sure, “even when we block things from happening, that is a way to keep the future open” (as Caputo glosses Derrida’s point) but it does not follow from this argument that we should block less rather than more in a given case. Furthermore, Caputo does not provide any reason for why we should make this inference; he merely assumes it.

<sup>48</sup> Caputo, *JCRT* response, 88.

a rule; one fails by failing to suspend the rule" (86). That there may be rules or norms that one has good reasons to follow—and that the exigency of responsibility resides precisely in deciding whether or not to follow them in a given case—are obvious counterpoints that Caputo conveniently suppresses. Instead, he draws a dividing line between those who are "failing to keep the future open" (85) by sticking to the normative and the deconstructive saints (or monsters) who are suspending normative justification in heeding the "call."

To refute this opposition between the open and the closed, the exceptional and the normative, is not to deny the logic of the *hyper* in Derrida (as Caputo alleges in his critique of my argument). On the contrary, it is to elucidate the *hyperpolitical* logic of deconstruction.<sup>49</sup> The logic of the hyperpolitical does not appeal to a position "beyond" political decisions, norms, and calculations (e.g. religious sainthood). Rather, it seeks to demonstrate that there is no position—as well as no decision, norm, or calculation—that is immune from critique and contestation. Caputo's distinction between two types of relationality (one that applies to those who remain in the safety of the possible and another that applies to those who dare to venture into the impossible) is by contrast profoundly *depoliticizing*. It reserves a special status for the supposed "saints" whereas Derrida does not grant a special status to anyone and underlines that everyone is subject to the same condition of radical evil.

Symptomatically, Caputo here appeals to Kierkegaard's reading of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, which distinguishes between "the religious relationship" on the one hand and the ethical relationship on the other. For Kierkegaard, the sacrifice of Isaac is only unjustifiable and a murder in terms of the ethical, whereas the religious concerns the individual's relation to God that transcends the problem of ethical justification. Derrida's reading of Kierkegaard, however, undermines precisely this distinction between two types of relationality. For Derrida, the sacrifice of Isaac does not belong to a special category reserved for saints and monsters (as Caputo has it) but testifies to "the most common and everyday experience of responsibility."<sup>50</sup> Whenever I devote myself to another, I turn away from other others and thus exercise a violent discrimination. As Derrida puts it in *The Gift of Death*, "I cannot respond to the call, the demand, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others" (68). This violence of exclusion is inscribed *in the very movement of love* and not something that could be eliminated in a kingdom of God or anywhere else. Derrida's argument in *The Gift of Death* thus allows us to deepen the logic of radical evil. The point is not only that what I valorize as good can turn out to be bad, or that the deed I hold to be good can turn out to be evil. The point is also that *even when I do good*—even when I devote myself to someone in a loving or generous way—*I necessarily do evil*, since my very act of devotion is also an act of exclusion and sacrifice.

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<sup>49</sup> For an elaboration of the logic of the hyperpolitical, see *Radical Atheism*, chapter 5.

<sup>50</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. D. Wills (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995), 67.

This notion of radical evil does not seek to justify violence or to reduce all forms of violence to the same. On the contrary, it seeks to recognize that we are always negotiating violence and that our ideals of justice cannot be immune from contestation and struggle. Every ideal of justice is rather inscribed in what Derrida calls an “economy of violence.”<sup>51</sup> While struggles for justice often are pursued in the name of absolute justice, these claims can always be shown to be incoherent and hypocritical. There is no call for justice that does not call for the exclusion of others, which means that every call for justice can be challenged and criticized. The point of this argument is not to discredit calls for justice, but to recognize that these calls are always already inscribed in an economy of violence.

Thus, what Derrida analyzes as the passion for justice cannot be opposed to the violence of law and the autoimmunity that opens the future cannot be opposed to the immunization that is indispensable for the formation of an identity or community. As Derrida puts it in “Faith and Knowledge,” “no community is possible that would not cultivate its own autoimmunity, a principle of sacrificial self-destruction ruining the principle of self-protection (that of maintaining its self-integrity intact), and this in view of some sort of invisible and spectral survival” (87). The “beyond” to which we sacrifice life is thus not the beyond of eternity but rather the survival of finite life itself. This spectral survival can inspire both the protection and the violation of a given integrity: an integrity that one may want to defend, transform or undermine depending on the context. In every case, however, the survival of life depends on the sacrifice of what does *not* live on and is thereby haunted—compromised in its very integrity—by what is left behind or killed off so that something else may survive. If one survived wholly intact—unscathed by the alteration of time—one would not be surviving; one would be reposing in absolute presence. Sacrificial self-destruction in view of survival is therefore a structural necessity—as Derrida goes on to emphasize—because it “keeps the autoimmune community alive, which is to say, open to something other and more than itself: the other, the future, death, freedom, the coming or the love of the other, the space and time of a spectralizing messianicity beyond all messianism” (87).

Derrida thus analyzes the autoimmune structure of faith under the heading of “the messianic.” More than any other term in Derrida’s vocabulary, the messianic has invited the misconception that he promotes a hope for religious salvation. I argue, however, that Derrida’s notion of the messianic follows the logic of radical atheism. A radical atheism cannot simply denounce messianic hope as an illusion. Rather, it must show that messianic hope does not stem from a hope for the absolute immunity of salvation but from a hope for autoimmune survival.

To this end, Derrida unearths an “atheological heritage of the messianic,” as he puts it in *Specters of Marx*.<sup>52</sup> The messianic is here linked to the promise of justice, which is directed both toward the past (as a promise to remember victims of

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<sup>51</sup> See Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, chapters 3 and 5.

<sup>52</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. P. Kamuf (London: Routledge 1994), 168.

injustice) and toward the future (as a promise to bring about justice). This messianic promise of justice is radically atheist because it proceeds from the affirmation of survival as a necessary but not sufficient condition. Without the affirmation of survival one would never be compelled to fight for the memory of the past or for a better future, since one would not care about anything that has happened or anything that may happen. The affirmation of survival is thus the condition not only for concern with one's own wellbeing but also for all concern with questions of justice that transcend oneself.

The affirmation of survival is never innocent, however, since one always lives on at the expense of what does *not* live on. The commitment to the survival of another is therefore always at the expense of another other. To maintain the memory and life of certain others is necessarily to exclude or violate other others. This necessity of discrimination is what Derrida calls the "law of finitude, law of decision and responsibility for finite existences, the only living-mortals for whom a decision, a choice, a responsibility has meaning and a meaning that will have to pass through the ordeal of the undecidable."<sup>53</sup> The law of finitude is not something that one can accept or refuse, since it precedes every decision and exceeds all mastery. There can be no taking of responsibility and no making of decisions without the temporal finitude of survival, which always entails discrimination. Whatever we do, we are inscribed in an economy of violence where matters are urgent precisely because everything we do makes a difference for better or worse. It is in this economy of violence that Derrida locates the passion for and the struggle to achieve justice. For the same reason, the passion and the struggle for justice cannot aim at achieving a nonviolent peace, since it lives off and is animated by the violent discrimination of survival.

Now, in his response to *Radical Atheism*, Caputo claims that he too reads Derrida in terms of a passion for survival. If Caputo were to draw the consequences of the unconditional affirmation of survival, however, he would have to abandon not only the opposition between openness and closure that underpins his notion of responsibility but also the idea of peace that underpins his reading of Derrida's "religion." Indeed, the violence and discrimination that is intrinsic to the affirmation of survival is incompatible with the messianic notion of peace that Caputo ascribes to Derrida. According to Caputo, the messianic is "where we touch upon the heart of Derrida's religion," which Caputo describes as a call for "a just one to come, a call for peace."<sup>54</sup> Caputo even insists that "the meaning of the messianic is, or should be, *shalom, pax*."<sup>55</sup> This messianic promise of peace is, according to Caputo, perverted by concrete religions insofar as they confine the messianic promise within the borders of a *people* and thereby excludes others. In contrast, Caputo promotes "a dream of justice for *all* of God's children—that is the religion that emerges from an hour on the couch with deconstruction. That religion is good news, for the oppressed and everybody else."<sup>56</sup> For Caputo,

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<sup>53</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 87.

<sup>54</sup> Caputo, *P&T*, xxviii.

<sup>55</sup> Caputo, *P&T*, 190.

<sup>56</sup> Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 160.

Derrida's notion of the messianic thus avoids the violence of determinate religion in favor of the indeterminacy of a messianic promise that opens the kingdom of God to everyone. In this kingdom, Caputo tells us, "everyone is welcomed with a jubilant divine indiscriminacy," since no one is excluded.<sup>57</sup>

Such a reading of the messianic is quite incompatible with Derrida's understanding of the term. It is true that Derrida describes the messianic as a "universal" structure of experience, but it has nothing to do with welcoming everyone in universal openness. On the contrary, the universal structure of the messianic is the exposure to an undecidable future, which entails that "the other and death—and radical evil—can come as a surprise at any moment."<sup>58</sup> Accordingly, Derrida maintains that the messianic may be "a fear, an unbearable terror—hence the hatred of what is thus awaited."<sup>59</sup> Far from promising peace, the messianic is the opening of a future that is the source of all hope but also of all fear and hatred, since it entails that the desired other can always be or become a menace. As Derrida argues, one cannot desire the coming of the future "without simultaneously fearing it" since it can "bring nothing but threat and chance at the same time."<sup>60</sup>

Derrida thus undermines the common denominator for religious notions of the messianic, namely, the idea that someone could come who would be immune from becoming evil. Derrida's argument is not only that such absolute immunity is impossible to actualize but also that it is not desirable, since it would cancel out the chance of the good in canceling out the threat of evil. The messianic is therefore *not* an endless waiting for something that never comes but *the structure of faith in the here and now*. It is *because* everything we value is threatened from within that we care about it and seek to make it come or to make it stay after it has arrived. It follows that faith is not only predicated on but also animated and sustained by the autoimmunity of survival. In order to care and to commit ourselves, we have to believe in the future not only as a chance but also as a threat.

Derrida succinctly summarized this radical atheist argument in a talk ("Penser ce qui vient") that was presented in 1994. Derrida here maintains that he, "like everyone else" ("comme tout le monde"), is radically atheist ("radicalement athée"). Such radical atheism is not a matter of "personal convictions, opinions, or ideologies that could be shared by some and not by others"; it is rather a "structural atheism" that "characterizes a priori every relation to whoever comes or whatever happens."<sup>61</sup> Derrida thus suggests, most provocatively, a research programme that runs counter to the post-secular approaches that have

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<sup>57</sup> Caputo, *WG*, 278.

<sup>58</sup> Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 56.

<sup>59</sup> Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 173.

<sup>60</sup> Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 174.

<sup>61</sup> Derrida, "Penser ce qui vient," in *Derrida pour les temps à venir*, ed. R. Major (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2007), 21. This text was brought to my attention by Bart Buseyne shortly after the publication of *Radical Atheism*.

dominated the reception of his work on religion. Rather than reading secular concepts and secular experiences as secularized versions of theological origins, the task would be to read theological concepts and theological experiences as theologized versions of an originary and irreducible atheism.

It is the operative logic for such a research programme that I have sought to provide in *Radical Atheism*. The logic of radical atheism allows not only for a critique of religion but also for a critique of traditional critiques of religion. Rather than a priori dismissing political struggles that are fought in the name of religious ideals as deluded, the logic of radical atheism allows us to see that these struggles, too, depend on a faith in and hope for survival. Given that this argument is central to *Radical Atheism*, it is rather surprising to find Caputo portraying me as a traditional atheist for whom “religion poisons everything” (123). Indeed, the extremity of Caputo’s language on this point makes one wonder if he is serious. According to Caputo, I am “engaged in a world wide immunization program to make the world safe from religion” (85n.91); a program in which “the names of God and religion are treated like lepers and consigned to a colony where they can be strictly policed” (123). No quotations from my work are provided to motivate these claims, which read more like an allergic reaction to atheism than a reasoned argument. As I make clear throughout the book, it is not a matter of simply dismissing religious notions and hopes but of reading them against themselves from within. Thus, radical atheism does not renounce struggles for health or denounce hopes for safety, even if they are religiously coded. Rather, radical atheism seeks to demonstrate that these struggles and hopes are not concerned with the absolute immunity that is promoted as the religious ideal. The struggle for health and the hope for safety are not motivated by a commitment to the unscathed but by a commitment to survival.

Given the autoimmunity of survival such commitments may generate all forms of violence, and there are certainly good reasons to analyze the ways in which religious practices are complicit with forms of violence that one may want to transform or seek to eliminate. To assume that a secular struggle always is preferable over one pursued in the name of religion, however, is to adopt a form of paternalism that depoliticizes religion and the question of religion. There are any number of situations in which the given structure of a society makes religious discourse the most powerful tool for mobilizing a struggle against injustice. Moreover, if we seek to show the extent to which social struggles are concerned with material injustice rather than with the religious ends to which they may profess allegiance – that is, if we seek to politicize social struggles – we presuppose the radical atheist conception of desire, according to which struggles for justice are animated and sustained by a hope for survival rather than by an aspiration toward the absolute immunity of the unscathed.

Whether a given struggle should be supported or resisted is a different question, which cannot be answered through deconstructive analysis and requires concrete political engagement. It is precisely by *not* providing an ethical or political principle of any kind that deconstruction politicizes our actions and insists on a



responsibility from which one cannot be absolved. Contrary to what Caputo proposes, deconstruction does not hold that we should seek to expose ourselves rather than to be safe, to take risks rather than seek protection. To posit such a principle is to deny the autoimmunity of exposure and protection, safety and risk, which entails that the advantage of one over the other cannot be given in advance. Autoimmunity thus remains to be reckoned with and negotiated in every here and now, which is also to say in every future to come. Everything remains to be done and what should be done cannot be settled on the basis of radical atheism. Rather, the logic of radical atheism seeks to elucidate why our passion for what can and should be done – our very faith in the world – depends on and proceeds from the radical evil of deconstruction.

MARTIN HÄGGLUND is a Junior Fellow in the Harvard Society of Fellows and a Distinguished International Fellow of the London Graduate School. In English, he is the author of *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford UP 2008), which is the subject of a special issue of *CR: The New Centennial Review* (Spring 2009). He has recently completed his next book, *Chronolibido: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov*. His website is maintained at [www.martinhagglund.se](http://www.martinhagglund.se).

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