

A World of Innumerable Inactivities

Martin Hägglund and the Economy of Non-Existence

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The Swedish philosopher Martin Hägglund's work is a gift to theology since it is centred, perhaps surprisingly, on the relation between politics and immortality. For him, the hope for immortality must be detheologized and transformed to a hope for the survival of finite life in order to be legitimate.¹ The inherent finitude and mortality of life makes the desire for immortality not only illusionary, but inherently irrational by annulling the finitude that constitutes life: "To live is to be mortal, which means that the opposite of being mortal – to be immortal – is to be dead. If one can no longer die, one is already dead."²

From Hägglund's perspective, an atheism that only denies the possibility of God, and even more immortality, is not enough. For "in traditional atheism mortal being is still conceived as a lack of being that we desire to transcend. In contrast, by developing the logic of radical atheism, I argue that the so-called desire for immortality dissimulates a desire for survival that precedes it and contradicts it from within".³ What is needed is an atheism so radical that it can prove the illegitimacy of the belief in immortality as something else than desire for survival.

In this text, I shall confront Hägglund's critique of immortality with a text seldom read as a tractate on the afterlife, namely John Maynard

1. See Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*, Stanford, CA 2008.

2. Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 48.

3. Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 1.

Keynes's (1883–1946) essay “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren”.⁴ In this classic text, the economist cites “the traditional epitaph written for herself by the old charwoman: ‘Don’t mourn for me, friends, don’t weep for me never / For I’m going to do nothing for ever and ever.’” “This” inactivity, Keynes continued, “was her heaven. Like others who look forward to leisure, she conceived how nice it would be to spend her time listening-in [...]: ‘With psalms and sweet music the heavens’ll be ringing, / But I shall have nothing do with the singing.’”⁵ Keynes shared the worker’s desire for a world beyond drudgery. What he could not understand was the wish of the dying proletarian to “do nothing for ever and ever” since life for this Darwinist economist was a vital activity with an inevitable economic form.⁶

The inactivity of merely listening-in, as the charwoman called the state she hoped to enter, was incomprehensible as a description of a blissful existence for Keynes. For according to him, “the economic problem, the struggle for subsistence [...] has been hitherto the primary, most pressing problem of the human race – not only of the human race, but of the whole of the biological kingdom from the beginnings of life in its most primitive forms”.⁷ The economic activities that seemingly differentiate us from the rest of the biological world are, in fact, what make humanity part of the life world of animals and plants which also need to care for their existence. And if life is this reproduction of mortals fighting, loving, and struggling for existence, who in their right mind could exhort the living to not mourn the dead since they would “do nothing for ever and ever”?

In this essay, I will answer this question by confronting Häggglund’s so-called radical atheism, actualized by his new defence of a secular faith in the book *This Life*, with the charwoman’s longing for a perpetual sabbath.⁸ I argue that the latter is not only legitimate but ultimately reveals the philosophical and even political weakness of the Swedish philosopher’s critique of immortality, and why his atheism is anything but radical.

The Never Dying Struldbrugs

Only one year after the Great Depression, and in the middle of a deep economic crisis, Keynes argued that if one looked at the technological process of the modern capitalist system, human civilization was entering a post-scarcity world beyond work. However, if liberated from labour, our species would react against the spread of the *otium*, idleness, which once was

4. John Maynard Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, Basingstoke 2010, 321–332.

5. Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, 327.

6. See John Laurent, “Keynes and Darwin”, *History of Economics Review* 27 (1998), 76–93.

7. Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, 326–327.

8. Martin Häggglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual*, New York 2019.

previously monopolized by the leisure classes. The development of the productive forces would generate “a general ‘nervous breakdown’ already visible” in “the wives of the well-to-do classes” since our species is habituated by work to the point of being a *homo occupatus* or *homo faber*.⁹

The turn to the charwoman’s desire for a never-ending sabbath was so uncompromising, that it gladly abandoned the liturgy of the heavenly choirs for the inactivity of listening-in. Keynes used the epitaph to argue that the development of an economy liberated from toil would challenge “the old Adam” with the existential angst of doing nothing: “we have been expressly evolved by nature – with all our impulses and deepest instincts – for the purpose of solving the economic problem. If the economic problem is solved, mankind will be deprived of its traditional purpose.”¹⁰

What is frightening about the charwoman’s vision of the afterlife is that it deprives humanity of its traditional purpose – work as the means of survival – to the point that life can no longer be viewed as activity, and even more specifically the activity of survival. For, as Hägglund has recently argued with great insight: “To be alive is necessarily to have a self-relation, and any self-relation consists in the activity of self-maintenance. Nonliving entities do not have any form of self-relation because they are not doing anything to maintain their own existence.”¹¹ The charwoman’s desire becomes a wish to put life itself, or at least life as we know it, to rest. She envisions an existence that is neither self-relational, nor self-maintaining, but one that is rather involved in an economy beyond the work for survival. Her prayer describes a state completely foreign to what Hägglund would call this life as it would imply an absolute inactivity. The epitaph therefore seems to confirm Hägglund’s thesis that immortality is “not only unattainable but also undesirable, since it would eliminate the care and passion that animate my life”.¹² By arguing thusly, Hägglund takes part in a long critique of the belief in immortality and reveals that his work belongs to this venerable tradition.

Already in 1882, the evolutionary biologist August Weismann (1834–1914) insisted, in *Über die Dauer des Lebens*, that even if there are no physiological arguments against the thesis that an organism could have what he called eternal duration, “ewige Dauer”, immortality would nevertheless create a life not worthy of existence.¹³ Through evolution, death becomes a necessary pre-condition for multicellular life. Without death, life would be trapped

9. Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, 327.

10. Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, 327.

11. Hägglund, *This Life*, 182.

12. Hägglund, *This Life*, 4.

13. August Weismann, *Über die Dauer des Lebens*, Jena 1882. All translations from this and other works originally composed in German, Spanish, and French are mine.

“in old and decrepit, yet immortal individuals” that “take the place or the resource of those who are healthy”.¹⁴ Life needs, in other words, death to be healthy and, in the end, valuable.

The same argument is repeated by the famous biologist Leonard Hayflick.¹⁵ He defended in 1961 what would come to be known as the Hayflick limit, which implies that a normal cell population can only divide a finite number of times until its cell division stops and it starts to die. In 2000, after a group of American biologists showed that one could prevent cellular death, Hayflick recognized that the discovery had profound implications for the discussion on cellular immortality. However, he added: “The fact that immortality, in its stricter definitions has never been demonstrated, even in unicellular forms, provides strong support for the likelihood, if not the hope, that it will not be found to occur in higher forms.”¹⁶ Hayflick not only thought it unlikely that immortality will be demonstrated in higher forms, he also hoped that it never will be demonstrated. Mortality was nothing he lamented since death, once again, made life valuable and worth living. A life that was not survival would be horrific.

Hayflick concluded by recalling the classical story of “the Trojan Tithonus [who] loves Eos, the Goddess of dawn. At her request, Zeus makes Tithonus immortal but, unfortunately, Eos neglects to also ask that he not age. Jonathan Swift rediscovered this theme in his immortal, but continuously aging, *Struldbrugs*”.¹⁷ Tellingly, this myth corresponds to Weismann’s view that immortality is undesirable even if it is not impossible for more complex forms of life. Immortality would annul the evolutionary benefits of natural death by aging or sickness. Following Hägglund, one could insist from a somewhat similar point of view that the charwoman’s desire for immortality is either a perverse desire to end all life, or a hope in need of a demystification or enlightenment that can turn it to a longing for the survival of this, finite, life.

The Prejudice in Favour of the Real

The irrationality of the hope for immortality is the belief that an annulation of death is desirable. Yet Hägglund does not seek to dismiss religion or even the hope for immortality as such. He argues “that there is an irreducible atheism at the ‘root’ of every commitment, faith, and desire” and even more, that there is “a constitutive violence that is at work even in

14. Weismann, *Über die Dauer*, 52.

15. Leonard Hayflick, “The Illusion of Cell Immortality”, *British Journal of Cancer* 83 (2000), 841–846.

16. Hayflick, “The Illusion of Cell Immortality”, 845.

17. Hayflick, “The Illusion of Cell Immortality”, 845.

the most peaceful approach to the world, whether ‘secular’ or ‘religious’, ‘atheist’ or ‘theist’.¹⁸ This inevitable violence is the violence of time itself. We see it in the process of senescence and death that characterizes all finite life, and which several religions view as a sign of a cataclysmic catastrophe in the cosmos; a fall from a world without death.

Thus, for Hägglund, the “desire for salvation is rather a desire for survival that is essentially autoimmune, since the death it defends against is internal to what is defended”.¹⁹ With the Derridean concept of the autoimmunity of life, Hägglund is indicating that, like an autoimmune disease, everything living must be threatened by the death that is immanent to life. For, as stated, “if one can no longer die, one is already dead”.²⁰ This is why the desire for immortality has to be transformed to a desire for the survival of mortal life or, in other words, the survival of a life that is constituted by a form of inherent stalling of death through its self-maintenance.

And yet, the desire of the charwoman was precisely the yearning for a life that no longer has to be lived according to the iron law of such an autoimmunity. Her idea that death is not worth lamenting, is part of a long eschatological tradition describing God’s life as a putting to rest or a resting place, *κατάπαυσις* (Heb. 3:1, 4:1, 4:3), of the work for survival that, for Hägglund, defines life.²¹ From the charwoman’s perspective, heaven can be described as a perpetual sabbath where “all the members and organs of the incorruptible body, which now we see to be suited to various necessary uses, shall contribute to the praises of God; for in that life necessity shall have no place, but full, certain, secure, everlasting felicity”.²² In this description of the sabbatical state, as a transformation of the resurrected body as possessing members no longer “suited to various necessary uses [*usus necessitatis varios*]” needed for survival, Augustine (354–430) indicates why it is impossible to translate the charwoman’s desire into a simple affirmation of the survival of what I with Hägglund define as this life.²³

What the charwoman is challenging is the view that it is impossible to transform the basis of nature and organic existence. Since I do not know the religious tradition to which she belonged, I would insist on a general theological quality of the epitaph in order to argue that it contests what

18. Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 128.

19. Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 130.

20. Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 48.

21. Otfried Hofius, *Katapausis: Die Vorstellung vom endzeitlichen Ruheort im Hebräerbrief*, Tübingen 1970.

22. Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans: Books XXI–XXII*, Cambridge 1998, 373.

23. Augustine, *City of God*, 372, writes: “Omnia membra et viscera incorruptibilis corporis, quae nunc videmus per usus necessitatis varios distributa, quoniam tunc non erit ipsa necessitas, sed plena certa, secunda sempiterna felicitas, proficiente laudibus Dei.”

Leo Strauss describes as the defining characteristic of atheistic discourse in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*: nature as the limit concept for human thought.²⁴ The idea of a creator God, or some other form of transcendence of the realm of time and space, makes nature, if not a contingent phenomenon, at least something which cannot exhaust all of existence. I do not deny that theological discourse often has aimed to give a philosophical argument for what is physically or ontologically possible, and thereby legitimized and even naturalized specific historical conditions and societies. But since such an ontological argument of what is and can be, is often related to a theory of redemption, such as with karmic cycles of sin (and not mere biological death), theological traditions tend to conjure states that are foreign to what we take to be the basis of reality, at least if we believe atheists.

The inner logic of this redemptive type of theology is, by necessity, a critique of what Alexius Meinong (1853–1920) in 1904 called “the prejudice in favour of the real [*des Wirklichen*]”.²⁵ What I mean is that theology cannot only be a philosophy that describes the cause or ground of what is or what might be. Theology is, as it has been alleged, a “science of nonexisting entities”.²⁶ By being theological, thought is pushed to imagine non-existing states, such as the heavenly bodies altering the *usus necessitatis* of survival that Augustine described. And therefore, the longing for immortality is, from the perspective of Hägglund, not only illegitimate, but also undesirable precisely because it exceeds the limits of what is by refusing to be loyal to the prejudice in favour of the real. The imaginative power of even the most conservative theology is that it can habituate the human mind to refuse the given as the epitome of reality. This is certainly what the charwoman is exhorting the living to do.

The charwoman turns a natural fact, the necessity of dying, into a theological locus. From her perspective, the main problem with Hägglund's critique of immortality is that it uses the immanence of existing life as a regulative standard for what we can desire. This makes the Swedish atheist come close to Weissmann's and Hayflick's position that only a life fit for survival would be a desirable existence. In contrast, the charwoman legitimizes the desire for other forms of life since her hope is based on the theological belief that existing life, even existing reality, does not exhaust the modality of being. This is why the charwoman can transform death from being a simple natural fact to a theological locus that can help explain how temporal life

24. Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, New York 1982, 43.

25. Alexius Meinong, *Über Gegenstandstheorie: Selbstdarstellung*, Hamburg 1988, 3.

26. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, London 2004, 322.

becomes immortal and thereby moves beyond the self-maintenance of this life.

Referring to Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) essay “Das Ende aller Dinge”, where Kant is lingering on the German expression “he goes out of time into eternity”, Hägglund agrees with the Prussian philosopher that one must separate time from eternity. But if Kant wants to keep the eternal as an essential concept for moral thought even if eternity itself is something “we certainly cannot [...] conceptualize”,²⁷ Hägglund argues that the desire for the eternal would eradicate life itself, since time, and therefore finite life, and eternity are impossible to reconcile. For as Kant writes, if the angel in Rev. 10:5–6 is not to be taken to be saying nonsense when he shouts “that there shall be no time any longer” – ὅτι χρόνος οὐκέτι ἔσται – “he must be taken to mean that from now on no change will happen; for if there was still change in the world there would also be time”.²⁸ Eternity can only be an eternal present, a state where no change is possible, so the charwoman's listening in would be a nightmare world where everything is frozen into a never-ending and never-changing now. If eternity is such a fossilization of life to an ever present now then, Hägglund writes, “life must be open to death [...] 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 [...] the same as an absolute death, an absolute evil, or an absolute violence”.²⁹ Life necessitates time, and since eternity is void of time, eternity is empty of life.

There is, for Hägglund, nothing outside the temporal domain since “time is an ‘ultratrascendental’ condition from which nothing can be exempt [...] because it is the condition for everything *all the way up* to and including the ideal itself”.³⁰ By being ultratrascendental, and not only a transcendental that structures thought, time forces everything to enter the nothingness of the past. All that is present is (1) the interval between the past and the future and (2) the spatialization of the time here and now: “Given that the now can appear only by disappearing – that it passes away as soon as it comes to be – it must be inscribed as a trace in order to be at all. This is the *becoming-space of time*. The trace is necessary spatial, since spatiality is characterised by the ability to remain in spite of temporal succession.”³¹ Thus, for Hägglund, the “now cannot first be present in itself and then be affected by its own

27. Immanuel Kant, *Schriften zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik*, Frankfurt 1964, 175.

28. Kant, *Schriften*, 182.

29. Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 43.

30. Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 19.

31. Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 18.

disappearance [...] Rather, *the now must disappear in its very event*. The succession of time requires not only that each now is superseded by another now, but also that this alteration is at work from the beginning”.³² Here one can find, to use a tired picture from popular culture, a crack in Hägglund’s theory where eternity might come in. There is something in his theory which is neither temporal nor living, and therefore not marked by the constitutive violence that the autoimmunity of life entails. This is the past itself since the world of that which was is the limit to the work for self-maintenance that Hägglund identifies with being alive.

By defining life as self-maintenance in the violence of time, Hägglund helps us to see that the past is forever that which it turned out to be, since the past is the trace of that which was in the here and now. This is why, for Hägglund, time is radically one-dimensional; an irreversible flow from the past towards the future which gives time and space the structure of an infinite finitude of temporal beings forever dying away and entering the nothingness of the past since “*the now must disappear in its very event*”, and this disappearance is the world of that which was – the domain of the dead. It is, in a sense, the spacing of time as space itself.

Hägglund uses Jacques Derrida’s (1930–2004) concept of *différance* to describe this endless spacing of time as a world of mortal and finite beings, and writes that “the movement of temporalization, which is the spacing of *différance* [...] can be described as an *infinite finitude*”.³³ However, by being the past of an irreversible time that can only move towards the future, if only by endlessly producing the infinite finitude of time itself, the trace reveals that the preceding that has been exhausted in the nothingness of the past shall forever be that which it was. For even if “there is no limit to the generality of *différance* and the structure of the trace applies to all fields of the living”, this *différance* cannot change the past since that which was no longer is marked by the time of survival.³⁴ The past is characterized by the self-identity that life makes impossible because while the living is in becoming, the past is dead. It is the nothingness of what once was. It is, in a sense, self-identical by simply being what it was.

It is from such a perspective that the historian of philosophy Xavier Tilliette (1921–2018) can write that “the immensity of memory was the image of divine immensity. *The wonder of remembrance*; it is [the] latent God [*c’est Dieu latent*]”.³⁵ The latency of the divine is given to memory since the past is a form of quasi-temporality, tied to what one of Tilliette’s many

32. Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 16.

33. Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 93.

34. Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 19.

35. Xavier Tilliette, *La Mémoire et l’Invisible*, Geneva 2001, 19.

subjects, Friedrich von Schelling (1775–1854), describes as a pretemporal eternity, a “vorzeitliche Ewigkeit”.³⁶ I define this pretemporal eternity as *the eternalization of the past as that which was*. The tracing of *différance* spatializes the world as a universe to the point that a theological imagination can wager that time and space themselves have been brought forth from something that transcends the cosmic violence of *différance* that the spacing of time entails for mortal creatures. For, as we will see, the eternity of that which was, the invisibility of the eternalized past which may be defined as the latency of God, is something radically other than the infinite production of finitude that the world age of *différance* implies. This is the cosmos and eon belonging to the old Adam, which Keynes knew was habituated to work for survival for every living being. But perhaps the rest of the dead point to a new cosmos and a new eon; a new Adam able to enjoy the listening-in that is so troublesome for a humanity which only can view life as activity and survival. Let me follow this thought and see how it can perhaps make the desire of the charwoman comprehensible as a desire that exceeds the eon of *différance*.

The Desire to Do Nothing for Ever and Ever

In his book *Tod* the German theologian Eberhard Jüngel makes the following interesting claim: “When the human is dead she is only that which she once was.”³⁷ Death does thereby not exclude being, and does not imply a pure nothingness, since death is – as the Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) insisted in 1921 – always the death of *ein Etwas*, a something, rather than a nothing.³⁸ Death implies the eternalization of life as that which was, according to Jüngel, and the past indicates for Rosenzweig, in a Schellingian manner, the possibility of thinking time in relation to what he called the form of the preceding or the form of the past – “*die Form der Vergangenheit*” – since time always is already there for us as the spatialization of the trace of the past.³⁹

Hägglund comes close to argue that the trace of the past in the present indicates the nothingness of what once was. But the theological traditions that Jüngel and Rosenzweig defend imply that time is already there since it is created as the form of the world: “The world is foremost [...] there. This being of the world is its already–there [*Schon-da-sein*].”⁴⁰ The trace is this *Schon-da-Sein* that for Jüngel and Rosenzweig reveals that if we follow the

36. Friedrich von Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, Frankfurt 1977, 274.

37. Eberhard Jüngel, *Tod*, Berlin 1971, 145.

38. Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung*, Frankfurt 1988.

39. Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung*, 146.

40. Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung*, 146.

arrow of temporality, we enter a world of the past which is not only exempt from death by, paradoxically, already being dead, but is also resting with the eternal as that which it was and, as we will see, could and even more should be. This is the reason why Tilliette views the wonder of remembrance as the latency of God; the dead signify the invisibility and eternity of the divine, and why the charwoman can hope that the dead are not gone but embedded in the life of the eternal by being bestowed an immortality that does not abolish but rather transforms time to something that is marked by the eternal.

What Hägglund cannot accept is that if time is the production of an “infinite finitude”, due to the violence of *différance*, it is also the transformation of that which is finite to what can be called a *finite infinitude* or what Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) would call the good infinite. When a life – or for that matter an event – is given “*die Form der Vergangenheit*” through its death, destruction, or disappearance (I take that a living being can die, a non-organic thing or creature can be destroyed, and an idea or event can disappear or be forgotten) it transforms from being part of the infinite finitude of this-worldly time – the time of *différance* – to a finite infinitude resting with the eternity of God. This transformation is given by the tracing of the past, the presence of the spectres of the dead in the here and now, since time receives self-identity by excluding itself from the alterity of the present and the future. The form of the preceding is a finite infinitude for ever and ever. Thereby, by disappearing in the now as something belonging to the past the present receives the form of existence as that which now is what it forever shall be, since all present time becomes self-identical with its own past in the moment it dies, destructs, or disappears in the world of the past. However, this eternalization of the past as that which was is also countered by a new eternity of that which should be through the hope of the resurrection or, at least, redemption of the dead.

Since past time is structured as the trace of what was in the here and now, the past is a finite infinitude, for the trace is the production of time as an instantiation of an infinite finitude of temporal beings on the border of the eternity that will be given to them when they disappear from the realm of the living. It is in this manner that I argue against Hägglund that the trace of the past in time does not merely reveal that every event disappears into nothingness. More importantly, every present time exists after itself in the form of the preceding since the trace is the spatialization of the past in the present. Presence is not merely or simply an event towards death. For the living, it is also a coming self-identity, a form of eternalization, since the present is only given by its disappearing in the past where it becomes that

which it was. Every “now” exists after itself by having had a history already there. This is the *Schon-da-Sein* of the present that Rosenzweig defended in *The Star of Redemption* and which implied a speculative vision of eternal life as something else than the survival of this life.⁴¹

As stated, what Hägglund calls *différance*, the production of an infinite finitude, does not touch the past and thereby does not in any sense contradict the fact of what I call a finite infinitude, and which now can be described as a being in time marked by the eternal to the point that it can be said to be immortal. The form of the preceding itself indicates such a finite infinitude or immortal being since that which is dead is forever, in all infinity, what it was. One could say that in the past, time is really petrified into the eternity, which the angel of Revelation exclaims as the end of the world.

Often this form of eternity is described as hell, rather than heaven, in the religious traditions, and the myth of the harrowing of Hades when the triumphant Christ liberates the dead and redeems the past, reveals that at least Christians distinguish an eternity of that which was – hell – from an eternity of what should be – heaven. In other words, that which was can be liberated from what it became in time since it participates in the eternal, and this liberation is called eternal life or the redemption of the dead.

If we return to the charwoman’s desire for “doing nothing for ever and ever” it is now evident that what she is longing for is something that is completely illegitimate from Hägglund’s perspective. It would at best push our life into what Hayflick would see as a world of Struldbrugs. At worst, it could imply an eternalized past where life is ossified into that which it forever will be: something dead, something that forever is what it became by entering the past. This would certainly be nothing but a living hell. But the theological tradition that the charwoman belongs to is legitimizing the hope for a form of evolution of life itself and thereby indicating that the ultratranscendental conditions of this life, our mortal and finite life here and now, with all its splendour and clamour, may be transformed and altered. For the charwoman hopes that time itself can become something other than a domain of self-maintenance for the living. Moreover, the desire for eternal life is not a desire for survival of the mortal. It is a desire for the redemption of the dead and therefore a respatialization of the past through the resurrection of that which was. Thereby, the charwoman’s desire is not a hope to end time *per se* – that would be hell. What she hopes more specifically is that we, at least through death, can leave the world age of *différance* and enter a world unknown to a species habituated to view life as the

41. See Mårten Björk, *Life Outside Life: The Politics of Immortality*, Gothenburg 2018, 63–140.

self-maintenance of finite and temporal life. We can therefore now see that the hope for immortality is the hope for a life that no longer needs to work for its survival and even more a hope not for survival but for the resurrection or the redemption of the dead.

If Hägglund insists that “the absolute immunity that religions hold out as the best (the immutable, the incorruptible and the inviolable) [is] ‘the worst’”, this is because he cannot envision a desire for a life with no need to struggle for its self-maintenance. The undesirability of immortality is entailed, according to Hägglund, by the fact that eternal life “would eliminate everything that can be desired. If one removes what threatens life – one removes the object of desire itself”.⁴² This is true if one can desire only that which is, or that which one can comprehend, though it seems that much religious discourse proves that the human animal has the capacity to desire beyond the parameters of what is or even could be. Our species has the ability to cultivate a desire for the impossible and the non-existing. This capacity of the human mind to transcend the given is evident in the practice of prayer which is often a desire for a change in the existing life, be it for a miraculous healing or, as with the charwoman, for a change in the structure of life itself. These desires cannot be viewed as undesirable in themselves, for then desire would be confined to the existing or to what we can comprehend. The human imagination can move our desire deep into the domain of the world that Meinong called *Aussersein* – the set of objects for thought that has no being, such as for instance square circles, resurrected bodies, or a life beyond the work for self-maintenance.⁴³

Beyond the Law of Scarcity

The fundamental problem with Hägglund’s perspective is that it confuses *Sein*, what is, with *Sollen*, what ought to be. Here, we should recall Hermann Cohen’s (1842–1918) claim in *Ethik des reinen Willens* that by differentiating *Sein* from *Sollen*, Kant’s critical project converges with the rich tradition of Platonism: “*In this slogan, Kant agrees with Plato. It is the path of idealism that frees itself from the bondage of nature and from the tyranny of experience.*”⁴⁴ In *Religion of Reason*, Cohen invokes prayer in order to describe such a state liberated from the bondage of nature. In prayer, we refuse to be “engulfed in the stifling present” by cultivating “the ability to anticipate the future and to make it effective. This power of anticipation is, in general, the power of the consciousness of time”.⁴⁵ Here Hägglund

42. Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 9.

43. Meinong, *Über Gegenstandstheorie*, 9.

44. Hermann Cohen, *Ethik des reinen Willens*, Berlin 1923, 13.

45. Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, Atlanta, GA 1995,

would intervene and argue that because it is an anticipation of a change of life in time, prayer can only be a desire for the survival and care of mortal life. But if Hägglund is right that “whatever one may posit as a value, one has to affirm the time of the survival, since without the time of the survival the value could never live on and be posited as a value in the first place”, then he is arguing that time can only be the homogenic time of this life and that we cannot desire something else than the desire of what we are.⁴⁶ Desire cannot move beyond what Cohen calls the bondage of nature and the tyranny of experience. Desire cannot desire that time could be structured by something else than scarcity nor that we do not need to evaluate life as a pool of finite choices. We can only desire the reduction of life to survival.

When we confront the fact that Hägglund refuses to believe that we can affirm time as something else than as a time of survival, and therefore that we can desire something else than this life, this world, this cosmos of *différance*, the question necessarily arises if Hägglund’s atheism is radical or if, as the Argentinian philosopher Fabián Ludueña Romandini has argued, “radical atheism is the most adapted and complete Christianity that can be conceived, namely one that has deconstructed itself entirely in order to fit our age”.⁴⁷ Immortality is, in the end, reduced to the survival of this life by Hägglund. This is why it seems impossible to define his atheism as radical. It is a restorative atheism, a secular faith seeking to defend life as it is, a *laissez-faire* atheism that wants to keep the *différance* running since it is only in time that something can become valuable.

This is also why Hägglund cannot envision what Ludueña Romandini calls a spectral community – *comunidad de los espectros*. The arrow of time is irreversible. The dead cannot be redeemed since life is, and must be, survival. By contrast, the charwoman relativizes the relation between the living and the dead by promising redemption even for the living: “Don’t mourn for me, friends, don’t weep for me never / For I’m going to do nothing for ever and ever.” These are the last words of a dying woman who, seemingly, had lived a long and hard life. But the message of her prayer is not exactly that the living do not have to care about the dead. Since the charwoman’s exhortation to not be sad over the fate of the dead (for even those who have disappeared from the world of the living can be redeemed), comes from a dying woman, the epitaph legitimizes the hope for the redemption of the dead by reconceptualizing the difference between existence and non-existence. It implies an ontology, a new conception of being beyond the

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46. Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 164.

47. Fabián Ludueña Romandini, *La comunidad de los espectros: I. Antropotecnia*, Buenos Aires 2010, 178.

law of scarcity and thereby it brings good news – a kind of εὐαγγέλιον. For the living are given the hope that what is, and the past as well as the future *is* from this perspective, might change to the point that those who live may dare to begin to transform their self-maintenance and struggle for another form of life – even before death. In this sense, the epitaph teaches us how to die by showing us how we can live for something other than the work for survival. We should try to become dead for the value system of *différance*, and we should try to formulate a conception of being and existence from the point of view of an eternal abundance, rather than a murderous scarcity that forces us to identify life with survival and time with the one-dimensional time of this life.

What we take to be good, or what Häggglund calls “valuable”, is structured by the law of scarcity that defines the spacing of time through the violence of time which cuts all life short and makes all abundance and eternity impossible. But what the charwoman desires is that her death entails an end to what life has been for her. She does not seek survival, but the abolition of the numbing drudgery that, according to the myth of the fall from paradise, is the curse of death. Her misery offers a perspective of liberation that moves beyond Häggglund’s affirmation of the time of survival by not seeking to give value to anything possible in this life. Her prayer is a desire for the liberation of life from bondage of nature. It is a desire for the transformation of this life that would blur the distinction between life and death by craving an abundance impossible for a life structured by the scarcity of *différance*.

Jüngel has insisted in his essay “Wertlose Wahrheit”, that the Abrahamic tradition can give us a perspective on being beyond the notion of value that the structure of time forces upon human life: “The Christian experience of truth is the radical questioning of value and value thinking”.⁴⁸ This is not only because Logos, the truth and word through which everything is created, according to Jüngel’s tradition, hanged on a cross, but primarily since the negation of the time that God’s eternity entails is the negation of the time of survival rather than a negation of time as such. In his essay “Die Ewigkeit des Ewigen Leben”, Jüngel quotes Thomas Aquinas’ (c. 1225–1274) suggestive axiom, *aeternitas non est aliud quam ipse Deus* (“eternity is not other than God himself”) and writes: “Although eternal life is promised to the human, human life as such and on its own accord is not eternal life. Eternity is given to him only if God gives him a share in his eternity.”⁴⁹ This is what it seems that the charwoman’s listening-in to the inactivity of God entails; not death, but neither life as we know it. It is a share of the eternal

48. Eberhard Jüngel, *Wertlose Wahrheit*, Tübingen 2003, 100.

49. Eberhard Jüngel, *Ganz werden*, Tübingen 2003, 345.

life of God, and such a share implies a valueless existence since God's radiant abundance makes the scarcity of life, and therefore valuation itself, impossible.

Against Jüngel, I would argue that it is not the Christian experience *per se* that makes value thinking impossible. It is rather the cultivation of the toil for survival that the Charwoman was subjected to into a prayer for an eternal sabbath and, even more, a hope for a world age beyond the laws of *différance*. This is surely close to the slave morality, or the Platonism of the masses, that Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) feared. But perhaps, as Cohen indicated, there is a richness here that unburdens the desire of our species from the care of survival, by letting us think beyond the limit of this life. For to share God's eternity is not to become one with his timelessness; it is to experience a radical transformation of this life, and thereby to be liberated from not only death but also work and value. Life, in other words, is no longer self-maintenance.

Hägglund's politics of survival is, by contrast, an ontologization of value through death, not unlike Sigmund Freud's (1856–1939) pathologization of Rainer Maria Rilke's (1875–1926) and Lou Andreas-Salomé's (1861–1937) lament over the finitude of existence. Their sorrow over the death of flowers on a mountain side makes them blind for the simple fact that death gives life meaning and even more value: "Transience value is scarcity value in time. Limitation in the possibility of an enjoyment raises the value of the enjoyment."⁵⁰ Yet, for Jüngel, this would be to dismiss the valueless truth of that which defies the existing by promising an eternal life so abundant that the desire for the survival of what is no longer can be intact. For Freud just as for Hägglund, life must be activity, but the charwoman seeks something greater than the praxis of stalling death that characterize present life.

In fact, Cohen saw prayer as a messianic hope that articulates the correlation of creaturely time, which is certainly prone to death, with the eternity of God. By doing so, he came close to arguing that prayer seeks to incorporate us in God's pleromatic abundance. Such a correlation, Hägglund insists, would be nothing but a correlation of life with death: "If to be alive is to be mortal, it follows that to not be mortal – to be immortal – is to be dead. If one cannot die, one is dead. Hence [...] *God is death*."⁵¹ To an extent, Cohen could prove Hägglund right. For according to Cohen, "messianism degrades and despises and destroys the present actuality, in order to put in the place of this sensible actuality a new kind of supersensible actuality, not supernatural, but of the future. The future creates a new earth and a new

50. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Freud*, vol. 14, London 1957, 305.

51. Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 8.

heaven and, consequently, a new actuality”.⁵² We can now see why Cohen helps us understand the charwoman’s epitaph. By craving “to do nothing for ever and ever”, she is not desiring survival but a new actuality, a new future, beyond the world age of *différance*.

Hägglund shows that what Keynes calls “the old Adam” cannot enter this future world without dying away from the world of finite life. But this hope for what could be called *another life and temporality* – “a new earth and a new heaven” – is what makes it possible for the living to hope that the dead are unburdened by the struggle for survival, and thereby given a life outside life. This is significant. Hägglund appears not to know that the terms for eternity in Christian religious discourse, such as the Greek αἰώνιον or the Latin *aeternum*, should not be understood as completely separated from time.

On the contrary, these and other concepts for eternity designate a way “to take [*zu nehmen*] a creaturely incomprehensible world- or human age as a limit symbol for what we call ‘divine eternity’”.⁵³ According to this classical interpretation of biblical and theological conceptualizations of the eternal and immortal we can state that immortality denotes an age, a period, a way to exist in the coming, future world. Hägglund fails to see that immortality and eternal life do not necessarily imply an abolishment of time. On the contrary, the hope for immortality for many of those authors he falsely thinks champions timelessness, such as Augustine, is nurtured by a belief in the possibility of a new kind of space-time continuum structured by what can be called the economy of non-existence, such as the events that never took place in the past. The belief in God as a redeemer that can change the parameters of life, and thereby liberate time from the fetters of survival, makes it possible to hope for the resurrection of the dead and, as Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) remarked in 1921, “the hope of redemption that we nourish for all the dead [...] is the sole justification of the faith in immortality, which must never be kindled from one’s own existence”.⁵⁴ The hope for immortality is therefore not necessarily a hope for survival nor for timelessness. It is a hope for the redemption of the dead and for a new actuality where we do nothing for ever and ever since life no longer is activity but a share in the eternal.

In the meanwhile, when the living hopelessly are becoming extinct in the world of *différance*, and those few still yearning for the resurrection of the dead are still only yearning, the charwoman’s desire might be understood

52. Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 291.

53. Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis*, Einsiedeln 1962, 511.

54. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913–1926*, London 1996, 355.

as a hope to inhabit a world of innumerable inactivities that not only the future, but also the past, as the strange world of what once was, indicates. For the past, as that which came before the present, and which the living becomes a part of by dying, is not only the domain of that which was for the living. It is also the realm of what could have been. The past is a part of an economy of uncountable activities that never took place in actual history and becomes the site of what should have been for those who long for the redemption of the dead. That which was belongs to Meinong's *Aussersein* since it is part of a much wider realm of potentiality and, from the charwoman's perspective, it is this domain that can be given a new life by being bestowed immortality by the eternal God. By dying, she hopes to not become what she always was, but rather, to be liberated from the struggle for survival. By dying she hopes to enter into another life where doing nothing entails doing something else and far more important than the activity to uphold this life.

The desire of the charwoman is the completely legitimate desire of a mortal being who has been crushed by life and thereby craves another existence. To put her hope in a secular *Index librorum prohibitorum* would deprive this life one of its most beautiful expressions – the power of human imagination to move beyond a simple affirmation of the time of survival. To transform her hope to such an affirmation would even become an exorcism of the trace since the charwoman's hope for a new life is born from the fact that the living are haunted by the spectres of the dead.

The charwoman craves a world beyond death, and even more so, a body unburdened by the *usus necessitatis* needed for survival. She craves an abundant life liberated from the slaughter-house of *différance*. The existence she wants is not a life that has to maintain its self-relation, an existence subdued to be a subject that must struggle for survival simply because it is existing. It is, rather, a life that complicates the division between life and death by entering the economy of non-existence of the *Aussersein*. Such an existence may certainly be impossible from the lenses of this life. But, as we have seen, Hägglund does not primarily discuss the impossibility of immortality. He more radically refuses its desirability and cannot understand that one can yearn for more than the merely possible, and therefore much more than survival. Yet it is certainly not irrational, or at least impossible, to desire a change so radical that life no longer is forced to reproduce its self-maintenance, and this is what immortality implies from the charwoman's perspective.

Human thought, and human desire, may legitimately move beyond that which we deem to be possible, and why should we not urge for an age

liberated from the drudgery of *différance*? The charwoman craves a change of the parameters of the given. She wants a new form of life. She seeks, in the end, a world beyond value. Häggglund, on the other hand, wants to defend this life and this is why his ontology can easily be separated from his politics and become, against his will, a defence of the *status quo* that biological existence is increasingly intertwined with. For his radical atheism is built upon the eternalization of this life as the horizon for not only possible experience but politics as such.

In sharp contrast, the charwoman articulates that the *otium* of heaven, or for that matter of the leisure classes, is desirable for ever and ever and she suggests the possibility for a politics that aims to transform, rather than eternalize, life here and now. The lasting power of her epitaph is that it instructs us, as finite and mortal beings, to live for something greater than the value system of *différance*, which comes dangerously close to reducing Häggglund's philosophy to a pyrrhic defence of present life. It seems that a truly radical hope must seek "what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, and no mind has imagined" (1 Cor. 2:9). It must, just like the charwoman, desire that which is beyond the confines of a life destined to be governed by work, value, and survival and therefore by our notion of what time, space, and life is in this dying and decaying world that may, or may not, be our last.

Conclusion

When read in relation to Häggglund, the charwoman's epitaph can be said to express the rationality of the hope for immortality. Firstly, it renders the desire to do nothing for ever and ever meaningful by conceptualizing life as something other than an activity or a struggle for survival. Secondly, by conjuring a state beyond the struggle for survival, her hope indicates the fluidity of the border between existence and non-existence. The charwoman thereby invites us to revisit the problem of being by reminding us that immortality, at least for the Christian tradition, does not imply the end of time but the resurrection of the dead and therefore a new earth and a new heaven. Thirdly, the charwoman's epitaph can be seen as an expression of what a long tradition has described as the purpose of philosophy: to teach us how to die and therefore how to live in relation to our coming death. The hope for a world beyond drudgery is the hope that the world of the living can reflect the eschatological bliss of the afterlife to the point that humanity may begin to redeem itself from the reduction of life to a struggle for survival. ▲

SUMMARY

This essay challenges Martin Hägglund's interpretation of the hope of immortality as a longing for death and his identification of life with survival. It does so by interpreting the epitaph of the charwoman, which John Maynard Keynes refers to in "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren", as an eschatological speculation on what the dead are doing in the afterlife. The epitaph expresses a sabbatical hope "to do nothing for ever and ever" and by putting it against Hägglund's understanding of life and immortality I show how a theology of immortality, rising from the charwoman's desire, (1) conjures a state beyond the struggle for survival in order to make the desire to do nothing for ever and ever plausible, (2) reconceptualizes the difference between life and death, and indicates a fluidity of the border between existence and non-existence to the point that the problem of being has to be revisited, and (3) expresses what a long tradition has described as the purpose of philosophy and theology: to teach us how to die (and therefore how to live in relation to our coming death). The author argues that the hope for immortality is not a hope for timeless existence *per se* but rather a hope for a life unburdened by the struggle for survival. Against Hägglund, the charwoman legitimatizes the hope for immortality as a desire that goes beyond the confines of this life.