Language Remains

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Martin Hägglund’s Radical Atheism is a rich book offering a powerful interpretation of Derrida’s writings. Since I cannot hope to discuss so much of what it covers, I will restrict my focus to one issue, the status and place of value in Derrida’s thinking. Hägglund holds a very clear position on this question, maintaining that Derrida’s deconstructive work is value-neutral and so no ethical or political stance can be derived from it. In this paper I argue against this view, not in favor of being able to derive an ethics or a politics from deconstruction, but in support of the claim that evaluation takes place in all deconstructive analyses because of the necessity of their engagement with language.

I will begin by discussing the distinction drawn by Hägglund between two conceptual couples, “the chance and the threat” and “the best and the worst.” Analyzing Derrida’s appeal to unconditionality, Hägglund highlights “one of the most persistent claims in Derrida’s writings, namely, that there must be exposition to an unpredictable future, there must be finitude and
vulnerability, there must be openness to whatever or whoever comes” (2008, 31), and he argues that this “must” is to be understood descriptively, not normatively. This follows from the nature of spacing, which names the structure of temporality constituted in the fundamental division of the present. Everything in time, Hägglund argues following Derrida, is conditioned by spacing, which means that everything finds itself in an essential relation to alterity. Thus, the exposure of all things to alterity is not something to be desired or feared, worked for or avoided—it is simply the way things are. Openness is a fact, not a norm. Further, Hägglund argues that it is only because of this fact that anything can happen at all, since all events are constituted by the coming of something other to an entity. Without alterity, things simply remain the same, and nothing happens.

Whereas spacing is the condition of everything in time, the focus of Radical Atheism is on life. Now, I’m not completely sure what the scope of life is for Hägglund; that is, I don’t know if he thinks it is correct to say that all things in time are living, or that only a subcategory of them are. I suspect it is the former, since the fundamental thesis of the contamination of life by death would preclude any strict division between the living and the nonliving. But either way, what matters is that life is conditioned by spacing, and so living necessarily entails an openness to alterity. Thus life is mortal, for an openness to alterity is an openness to a future that is essentially unpredictable, and such a future must contain the possibility that life will come to an end.

It is here that Hägglund inscribes the chance and the threat. The openness to alterity that constitutes mortal life can be said to offer a chance for singularities: they are given the chance to survive, to live on. But at the very same time one can see that there is here a threat, namely the threat that singularities will not live on, but end, since this is always one of the possibilities that may come in an open future. The chance of survival and the threat of its end are thus necessary possibilities that arise in mortal life. Or, in Hägglund’s words, “the chance is the threat since the chance is always a chance of mortal life that is intrinsically threatened by death” (2008, 33). For further precision, it is worth clarifying the meaning of the ”is” in this claim. I would suggest that it should not be taken to refer to an identity in which the chance and the threat are asserted to be exactly the same thing. Rather,
they are two different possibilities—the chance of living on, and the threat of not living on—that necessarily arise together because of their source in spacing. An alternative expression of this could thus be “the chance carries the threat” (or equally, “the threat carries the chance”).

Turning now to the other couple, “the best and the worst,” one sees a different relation. Hägglund defines the worst in the context of the previous distinction, stating that the argument concerning the chance and the threat “presupposes that being is essentially temporal (to be = to happen) and that it is inherently valuable that something happens (the worst = that nothing happens)” (2008, 32). The value placed on survival, claiming that to persist in time and have events happen is a desirable thing, implies that to have nothing happen and not survive is the worst of all possible states. The worst is thus the realization of the threat of the end carried in the structure of mortal life. What then of “the best”? This refers to what is traditionally seen as the most desirable thing, namely an existence free from all threat. Such an existence is placed in “the ideal realm of eternity . . . explicitly posited as the immutable and the inviolable” (32). This confirms Derrida’s view that mortal life necessarily carries the threat of the worst, for it is only beyond mortality, beyond time as spacing, that the threat could be annulled.

On the traditional view, therefore, the best is opposed to the worst, since it is that which keeps the worst at bay. However, Hägglund highlights Derrida’s crucial move, arguing that this conception of the best does not prevent the worst from happening. On the contrary, for Derrida’s claim is that the best as traditionally understood is identical to the worst. In an immutable eternity nothing happens, which is precisely the definition of the worst. Ending all possibility of threat, eternity simultaneously ends all possibility of chance and thus ends all possibility of life. As Hägglund writes, “the best is the worst since the best can never become better or worse and thus abolishes the chance and threat of mortal life” (2008, 33). In contrast to Hägglund’s similar statement on the chance and the threat cited above, here the “is” should be understood as marking an identity. Derrida argues that the best and the worst are exactly the same state. This is perhaps the most important claim made in Radical Atheism. Hägglund maintains that it is contrary to what lies at the heart of traditional atheism, theology, and metaphysics, as well
as more specifically of Levinasian ethics, the psychoanalytic conception of desire, and their derivatives. This claim thus both sets Derrida’s work apart from and is at the foundation of his criticism of these alternative positions, a critique Hägglund articulates so well.

Radical Atheism thus offers a clear and very useful articulation of the meaning of the terms chance/threat and best/worst in Derrida’s writings. To repeat: the chance is the chance of living on, the threat is the threat of not living on. The worst is not living on, and the best, which is traditionally seen to be a permanent avoidance of the worst, is in fact its realization. These distinctions clarified, I would now like to explore their implications for understanding certain issues connected to value and evaluation in Derrida’s work.

What is it to evaluate? As a basic definition, to evaluate something is to hold it to be good or bad. Further, at least in the context of Radical Atheism, this is synonymous with the thing being desirable or undesirable. Evaluation thus carries a particular normative weight proposing a scale of comparison between differing states of affairs, where some are seen to be better than others. For example, to evaluate democracy positively is to hold that democracy is a good thing, which is to see it as desirable and to hold that it is better to have democracy than not. Of course, value judgments can be tied to specific contexts, such as valuing democracy at this particular time, in this particular country, in this particular institution, and so on. But they need not, since one can try to maintain that democracy has the same value across contexts. In addition, value judgments are contestable. One can claim that something necessarily has a value, but this can be disputed, resisted, and revised. Values are thus never necessary. Instead, I would propose that that they are best understood in terms of degrees of stability: some values may be widely shared in certain contexts (either inter- or intrasubjective), and so are relatively stable, whereas others may not be or may narrowly be shared and so are unstable. And a value’s position on this scale is never itself fully stable. Stable values can be destabilized, and vice versa.

With these basic features in mind, one can ask what the place of value is in Derrida’s work. Much of what Derrida wrote can be seen as value-neutral in at least one respect, insofar as he describes the operation of conceptual
structures in the writings of others without explicitly endorsing their value. For example, when Derrida argues that giving, as theorized in the work of Marcel Mauss, is caught in an aporetic relation between an economy and its excess, he can be read as doing so without saying that it is better to give than not (1992, 34–70). Such analyses are of course not free of all values. They carry with them an implicit endorsement of standards of accuracy, as well as of many conventions of writing and communication, even as Derrida often challenges these in limited ways. But it remains that a sizable portion of Derrida’s work analyzes conceptual structures without explicitly engaging in a further project of evaluation, which would also propose that these structures are good or bad.

However, even as Derrida’s work may be seen to be often value-neutral in this sense, it is not like this all the time. For Derrida also moves beyond such descriptions and does indeed suggest that certain positions are preferable to others, not because of their descriptive accuracy, but because of their desirability in a given context. This context is usually a political one, such as when Derrida argues in favor of increasing the rights of the sans-papiers (see, for example, 2002, 133–44). Speaking thus, Derrida moves into the sphere of evaluation in the sense in which I am most interested. He proposes the desirability of a phenomenon or course of action and so gives it a positive value. This goes beyond valuing the accuracy of an analysis to the endorsement of one particular state of affairs over another.

Given these two attitudes toward evaluation in Derrida’s work, questions arise concerning their connection. In particular, many have asked whether the values Derrida sometimes espouses can be justified in terms of the value-neutral descriptions he often gives. Most commentators who argue for such a link claim that it will neither have the force of necessity, nor will it follow from some kind of strict deduction. Deconstruction is said to operate according to a sophisticated understanding of normativity, one that left foundationalism behind long ago. And yet we learn from Radical Atheism that many of these same commentators simultaneously rely on simplified formulations in their articulation of normative claims arising from Derrida’s work, formulations that this work has already shown to be mistaken. Consider, for example, Leonard Lawlor’s This is not Sufficient, a book published
while *Radical Atheism* was in press. On his way to articulating a “recipe” for regulating human behavior toward animals, Lawlor makes nuanced statements concerning life and the worst that in fact sound a lot like those made by Hägglund. For example, Lawlor speaks of “mortalism” in Derrida’s thinking, which is to state that “Death is in life” (2007, 37). He also argues that the worst is the eradication of all difference, “when the other to which one is related is completely appropriated to or completely within one’s self,” and which “in its most paradoxical formulation, would be a violence that produced something absolutely alive and absolutely dead” (23). Finally, in seeking to avoid the violence of the worst, Lawlor refuses to appeal to a pure peace that could operate even as an ideal, arguing that “the more sufficient response means that we do not and should not want to eliminate completely the minimal violence” (40).

However, while acknowledging the complications of the Derridean position, Lawlor’s discourse as a whole is governed by a series of oppositions that function in a relatively uncomplicated way. Fundamentally, Lawlor opposes to the worst that which he names the “least violence.” As he states at the very end of the book: “Being infinitely corruptible limits the worst violence with the least violence: every single other is wholly other and every single other corrupts us without being rejected” (2007, 119). Lawlor does not fully specify the content of the least violence, but it is consistently linked to unconditional hospitality. This in turn is associated with a number of other terms (unconditional forgiveness, friendship, and saving) and is placed in opposition to unconditional inhospitality, which is used synonymously with the worst (and is linked to enmity and sacrifice). 4 This series of alignments and oppositions traverses Lawlor’s argument. He thus writes that “we can say that the least violent response is the amiable response” (73), that we should “not think in terms of the enemy, . . . Friendship suspends the killing, even if the condition of friendship and peace consists in the ability to kill or be killed” (81), that the relation he advocates “is not a structure of sacrifice but a structure of saving by means of replacement” (101), and “Let us try to reverse unconditional inhospitality, the worst, into unconditional hospitality” (110).

How are such oppositions sustained? I would suggest that they rest on a mistaken understanding of the relations between the chance, threat, and the
worst articulated above, in two ways. First, Lawlor can advance these claims only by already separating the chance from the threat. It is only if the least violence is free from all threat of the worst that it could be said to “limit the worst violence.” It is only if unconditional hospitality carries a chance and not a threat that it could be the “reverse” of unconditional inhospitality or the worst. For if these positively valued terms also carry the threat of the worst, then the grounds for their distinction from terms at the other end of Lawlor’s value spectrum falls away.

Second, if one looks closer at both ends of this spectrum, one finds a consistent confusion on Lawlor’s part that serves to reinforce these oppositions. At the negative end, Lawlor provides two competing definitions of the worst, claiming that it is both the actual eradication of all difference, and a tendency in this direction. He thus writes, on the one hand, that the worst “amounts to making two into one: it is a form of totalization” (2007, 39). But on the other hand he claims that “the idea of rights in general does not avoid the worst” (9), that “the worst is, as Deleuze and Guattari say in A Thousand Plateaus, ‘the suicidal state,’ ‘realized nihilism,’ in a word, fascism” (23), that “Heidegger’s strategy results in the worst . . . it ends up sanctioning Nazism, or, more generally, racism” (26), that the worst violence “consists in the attempt to eliminate the evil of the pharmakon once and for all” (40), that “this tendency defines the worst, a tendency toward the complete appropriation of all others” (66), and that the risks of “biological continuism and metaphysical separation . . . amount to the worst” (71). In all of these cases the worst is identified with positions that attempt to eradicate all difference, without fully achieving this goal. One may well claim that fascism, racism, Nazism (and even the ideas of rights, biological continuism, and metaphysical separation) all seek to totalize, and so aim for the worst, but none ever actually arrive at this absolute state and thus realize it. Lawlor is at these moments confusing the threat of the worst for the worst itself.

At the other end of the scale Lawlor makes a similar move, sliding between a “lesser violence” and the “least violence”: “what is required, here and now, in the age of so-called globalization, is a lesser violence, ‘violence against violence’: as Derrida says as early as ‘Violence and Metaphysics,’ ‘the least possible violence’” (2007, 24); “What we are seeking here is a lesser violence,
even the least violence” (40). And on a related note: “Derrida claims, in Of Spirit, that it is urgent to find the least bad (less worse) form of complicity with the biologistic and the metaphysical risks. The new logic of the limit is supposed to be a response to this urgency of the least bad or the less worse” (26–27). There is an ambiguity here between aiming for a lesser violence or for the least violence. They are not the same thing. A lesser violence names all of the positions on Lawlor’s scale of values that fall short of the worst, while the least violent names the extreme position that would be opposite to the worst. Taken individually, neither term will do the work that Lawlor needs. A lesser violence is certainly preferable to the worst, but it also coincides with those positions that tend toward the worst (fascism, biological continuism, and so on). Insofar as these positions fail fully to realize the worst, they themselves are rightly named “less violent,” and so cannot be opposed to “a lesser violence.” Or in other words, again, the chance carries the threat. This is perhaps why the “least violent” plays a much bigger role in Lawlor’s argument. However, this term is of little help, for, lying at the limit, it is exposed to the critique outlined above that Derrida makes of “the best.” The least violent, together with the terms to which Lawlor links it, fail to oppose the worst, for they are equivalent to it. Unconditional hospitality, for example, does not avoid totalization, but rather results in it, since all are welcomed within the one. The best is the worst. The answer thus cannot be to promote “a least violence,” for this would be to promote the worst.

It is thus through separating the chance and the threat, and maintaining that the best is not the worst that Lawlor is able to articulate a normative recipe for guiding behavior toward animals on the basis of Derrida’s work. Using Hägglund’s analysis, one sees that not only is this a misrepresentation of Derrida’s understanding of these terms, but, when properly understood, why Lawlor’s project of evaluation fails. Hägglund’s own view of the issue of evaluation in Derrida’s work is decidedly different. Rather than seek to justify a certain set of values from a Derridean perspective, he argues that this perspective is completely value-neutral. This is stated at the most fundamental level with respect to the structure of spacing that I mentioned earlier. Having named spacing the ultratranscendental condition of everything that happens, Hägglund writes that “a number of influential misreadings” fail because
“their common denominator is that they ascribe a normative dimension to Derrida’s argument. The ultratranscendental description of why we must be open to the other is conflated with an ethical prescription that we ought to be open to the other. However, Derrida always maintains that one cannot derive any norms, rules, or prescriptions from the constitutive exposition to the other” (Hägglund 2008, 31, see also 184). To repeat, Hägglund’s point is that spacing is simply the condition of the way things are, and so is presupposed in every relation to alterity. Out of this relation arise both the chance of survival and the threat of its end, the desirable and the undesirable, and this dual valence—this ambivalence—is irreducible. One cannot, therefore, legitimately assign it a single value.

Another place where Hägglund asserts Derrida’s value neutrality is in his interpretation of the meaning of “affirmation.” He writes, for example, that “the unconditional affirmation of survival . . . does not have a moral value in itself. No ethical stance can be derived from it” (2008, 165). This “affirmation” refers to the necessary response that all mortal beings make toward the fact of survival. It is not to be understood as a positive evaluation opposed to a negation. Rather, since all things adhere to the logic of survival, rooted as they are in spacing, any action taken is done in accordance with this logic. (“Affirmation” might not be the best word to describe this—perhaps “acknowledgement” is more accurate—but it is Derrida’s word and Hägglund correctly, and again usefully, articulates its meaning.)

Finally, Hägglund reiterates the same point concerning value neutrality not only at the fundamental level of spacing and its affirmation, but further up the scale, as it were, in Derrida’s analysis of higher-level phenomena such as the operation of ethical and political concepts. He thus asserts that Derrida’s argument concerning a “lesser violence” “is neither positive nor negative; it neither deplores nor celebrates the constitutive violence” (2008, 84). Similarly, when Derrida analyzes hospitality and justice, he uncovers the problematic nature of such concepts, and their inability to function as coherent ethical ideals. “If Derrida is easily misunderstood on this point,” Hägglund remarks, “it is because he uses a ‘positively’ valorized term (‘hospitality,’ ‘justice’) to analyze a condition that just as well can be described with a ‘negatively’ valorized term (‘violent exposition,’ ‘irreducible discrimination’).”
Derrida’s analyses of ethical and political concepts are thus also value-neutral, according to Hägglund. This is again because the logic of spacing gives rise equally to the chance and the threat. Working at the base of these concepts as well, spacing’s ambivalent implications are never left behind.

Thus, for Hägglund, Derrida’s work is neutral with respect to the value of what he analyzes, or in other words, “there is no intrinsic normativity in deconstruction” (2008, 232 n. 4). Deconstruction describes the conditions for evaluation, showing that no value can ever be fully or finally justified, but it does not make or imply value judgments itself. However, one should also note that Hägglund is not saying that one cannot make value judgments at all. For although he argues that deconstruction shows the incoherence of any ultimate justification of evaluation, he does suggest that provisional justification is possible: “The undecidable coming of time makes it possible to justify decisions but at the same time makes it impossible for any justification to be final or sheltered from critique” (171). Evaluation is possible, it is just not legitimate as a part of or derived from a deconstructive analysis. As a consequence, from Hägglund’s point of view, when Derrida does make value judgments, he is either not being deconstructive at such moments, or if Derrida does suggest that he is, then he is wrong to do so. Deconstruction cannot be prescriptive, for its project is to describe the fundamental structure of spacing, that which gives rise both to the chance and the threat, the good and the bad, and so refuses the assignation of a stable value. Evaluation, when it occurs, occurs elsewhere.

In *Radical Atheism* Hägglund is not concerned with what goes on in this elsewhere, but I want to push further in this direction, for to my mind his analysis extends beyond the limits he seems to desire. To state it succinctly, my claim is that if the analysis in *Radical Atheism* is correct, it does not only delegitimize evaluation in deconstruction, it delegitimizes evaluation altogether. In other words, Hägglund’s interpretation renders the provisional judgments alluded to above illegitimate as well. For insofar as deconstruction is a description of the structure of mortal life, what it describes applies “not only [to] everything that can be cognized and experienced, but also [to] everything that can be thought and desired” (2008, 19). It follows that everything that can be thought and desired—everything that can be valued—is
contaminated by the ambivalence of the chance/threat couple. But once this is known, how can one possibly attribute value to anything at all? In valuing something as good, I make a claim not only about its present state, since spacing undermines the identity of the present. Rather, I judge its value as positive in a divided present—in alternative Derridean terminology, I am judging its value “to come” as positive—which is to say that I judge it to carry the chance of what is desired. However, I also know that it equally carries the threat, the possibility of coming as undesirable. This threat is at work immediately, at the very same time as there is a chance. I thus cannot fall back onto understanding this value following a framework of succession, where I first provisionally value a thing as good, always aware than this might later need to be revised if it turns out to be bad. The very same grounds lead me to judge it simultaneously as both good and bad. At once.

One possibility for avoiding this situation is to move away from the rigidity of the designations “good” and “bad,” and speak instead of “better” and “worse.” At first glance this might seem to accommodate the contamination of values that Derrida diagnoses, and as I mentioned above, it is the path that Lawlor sometimes takes, speaking of a lesser violence, that if not the least violence, would still be further away from the worst. However, this won’t work either, for implicit in such comparative judgments are standards against which each value is measured, and these standards are precisely lacking. To repeat, Derrida’s work provides three categories—chance, threat, and the worst (with the best identical to the worst). One cannot use distance from the worst as the measure of value, since this does not coincide with improvement. More life, more events, more openness, and so on, are not signs that the threat of the worst has been diminished. No linear scale is available, and so measurement is rendered impossible.

Thus my claim is that, according to the logic articulated in *Radical Atheism*, there can be no possible coherent justification of decisions of evaluation, not only in deconstruction but anywhere at all. The ambivalence of spacing goes further than simply undercutting any final justification; it undercuts all justifications that could be reasonably given. Now, I take this to be unfortunate, for it implies that all values are arbitrary in their justification. This may indeed be true, but before conceding it I would like to suggest alternative
path, one not taken in *Radical Atheism*, that may restore some level of stability beneath the values that are held. It is not a solid foundation, but it might provide something to stand on, if only provisionally.

My proposal is that the stability of values can be found in the fact of language. Every evaluation, positive and negative, occurs in language, and this is not irrelevant to the force and shape that the evaluation takes. Language is not a neutral medium—it comes already differentially infused with contours of value, formed from the particular sedimented history that precedes it. This terrain exerts forces structuring processes of evaluation, forces never fully determining, but that resist or encourage different paths in the evaluative choices one makes. For example, I can argue that democracy should be valued as a political system and seek to promote it over other forms of government. But I never do so from scratch. This is clearly the case with respect to the descriptive dimension of my enterprise, since the characteristics to which I appeal in support of my position are inherited from the past. I might argue for democracy because it allows free speech, or promotes majority rule, or makes possible the protection of human rights, or enables the poor to govern. Notice that none of these traits are essential to democracy, such that they would be found in every system given the name. Democracy as the rule of the poor is an ancient idea, one that has virtually disappeared from contemporary discourse. Free speech and human rights are features of modern democracy, and their prominence in the modern era has worked precisely to restrict the scope of majority rule. With such diversity, the only thing holding together all of the different systems that are labeled "democracy" is the fact of their being thus labeled. It is the name "democracy" that provides some unity. It is thus this name that allows me to intervene and attempt to transform present descriptions of democracy by drawing on various characteristics that have been associated with it.

My point is that a similar phenomenon occurs in evaluation. The different characteristics of democracy have held different values at different moments, and any evaluation I propose today engages with this history because of sharing the name "democracy." At present, there is a widely shared support of the discourse of democracy—its positive value today is relatively stable—and so for me to reveal a desire for democracy is to follow a path of
little resistance. I could, however, declare myself against democracy, proposing a negative evaluation that would most likely fail to sustain itself in a contemporary context. But note also that this instability of value would not be total, for to oppose democracy is to evoke the value that had in fact, until recently, dominated the history of political thinking. This history remains at work in the play of forces I am engaging in my stance, and so would provide some support for my position.

Thus I am arguing that one never evaluates in a neutral context, since the language with which one must necessarily engage is already infused with value in a sedimented history. As sedimented, this history is a multiplicity always involving contours of relative stability and instability. But these contours will rarely, if ever, be equally shaped, entailing that the ambivalence of spacing that, as I argued, undermines every judgment of value will not manifest itself in an equal manner. In any particular instance the terrain will be tilted, so to speak, toward either the chance or the threat. This does not mean one is forced in one direction over another, but there will be paths of lesser and greater resistance.

Now, in proposing this, one might think that I have not yet challenged any of Hägglund’s claims, for one could try to incorporate this view within his vision of a value-free deconstruction, with judgments of value coming after or otherwise to it. This other space may well be structured as I have described, but this would leave the deconstructive space untouched. However, against this is the fact that deconstruction itself cannot avoid an engagement with language, and so cannot avoid engaging with values. Derrida’s analyses are analyses (in part) of language and take place (wholly) in language. They thus necessarily both bring with them contours of value and, in their utterance, modify the terrain. This would hold even if Derrida completely withheld all value judgments, for in doing so he would leave unchecked the values already at work in the language used. In *Radical Atheism* Hägglund does not acknowledge this necessity. The strength of the book lies in its articulation of a fundamental logic that functions across Derrida’s writings. But this carries with it a certain weakness that I would describe as an indifference to language. It doesn’t matter in *Radical Atheism* which particular term is being shown to follow the logic of deconstruction, whether it be time, hospitality,
writing, violence, justice, life, and so on. Hägglund abstracts the logic underlying each particular term, and it is on this basis that he secures the borders of deconstruction, keeping evaluation at bay. My claim is that this security cannot be maintained because of the necessity that deconstruction takes place in and through language, which necessarily infuses deconstruction with value.

We can better see this by considering further the case of democracy. Hägglund’s analysis of Derrida’s discussions of democracy is a partial exception to my claim, since he agrees that the specificity of this word does play a role in Derrida’s work. Derrida accords a special privilege to democracy in his later writings, not only by taking it as his subject of analysis in Politics of Friendship (1997) and Rogues (2005), but also, in these works and elsewhere, by using the phrase “democracy to come.” In this way Derrida singles out “democracy” from a number of other words that describe political structures—“republic,” “aristocracy,” “oligarchy,” “fascism,” among others—as well as other politically resonating terms such as “community” and “fraternity.” Put simply, Derrida chooses to speak of “democracy to come” rather than “republic to come,” “fascism to come,” or “fraternity to come.” What is the justification for this? Hägglund answers as follows:

If Derrida privileges the concept of democracy, it is not because he thinks it can guarantee a good or just society but because the concept of democracy more evidently than other concepts takes into account the undecidable future. Strictly speaking, one cannot posit an absolute democracy even as a theoretical fiction. The very concept of democracy inscribes the relentless coming of other circumstances that one will have to negotiate. (2008, 171–72, see also 195–96)

Hägglund claims that “democracy” more obviously accounts for the undecidable future that spacing necessitates to be a feature of all concepts. It is not that “democracy” names anything unique—it cannot, since Hägglund follows Derrida in emphasizing democracy’s lack of essence—but rather that it does a better job of highlighting a characteristic shared by all political structures, namely an openness to change and transformation through self-
engagement. “Democracy” is thus said to have a descriptive merit and this justifies its privilege in Derrida’s writings.

Now one can question whether democracy does in fact have this distinction. For in elevating its openness to self-transformation, Derrida is not stating a characteristic of democracy that is obvious to all. He is selecting one strand from the descriptive history of democracy and attempting to make it more central than it has previously been. But one can also imagine doing precisely the same thing with, say, “fraternity,” since as Derrida shows in Politics of Friendship, fraternal discourse also has a tradition of self-transformation that could be equally mined. It is thus unclear that democracy has any special status predisposing it to the position of descriptive merit that Hägglund underlines.

But even granting this privilege, it falls short of my claim, which is that Derrida’s deconstructive analysis involves an elevation of democracy not only as descriptively accurate, but also as desirable on other grounds. And Derrida himself supports this stronger claim. In Rogues he argues that the utterance “democracy to come” can hesitate endlessly, oscillate indecidentally and forever, between two possibilities. The first possibility corresponds to the neutral, constative analysis of a concept . . . [which] would amount to saying: if you want to know what you are saying when you use this inherited word democracy, you need to know that these things are inscribed or prescribed within it; for my part, I am simply describing this prescription in a neutral fashion. (2005, 91)

This fits Hägglund’s view that when Derrida speaks of “democracy to come,” he is giving a neutral description of that which the concept “democracy” entails. But Derrida insists that together with this interpretation comes another possibility:

But, on the other hand, no longer satisfied to remain at the level of neutral, constative conceptual analysis, “democracy to come” can also inscribe a performative and attempt to win conviction by suggesting support or adherence, an “and yet it is necessary to believe it,” “I believe in it, I promise, I am in
on the promise and in messianic waiting, I am taking action or am at least enduring, now you do the same,” and so on. (91)

Here Derrida argues that in speaking of “democracy to come” he may well be endorsing it. The act of engaging with the language of democracy through its conjunction with the “to come” works to place Derrida on the side of democracy, casting him as someone who supports it and calls for others to support it, too. Why is this? My suggestion is that it is precisely because of the sedimented history of value accruing to the terms Derrida invokes. This applies to his appeal to the “to come [à-venir],” for such a phrase does more than merely articulate the nature of spacing, carrying with it a trace of hope and positive possibility. But it also applies equally, if not more so, to “democracy,” a term whose positive value is stable because of its wide support, in spite of the many different interpretations of its meaning. To utter the words “democracy to come” therefore feeds into the values that the words already carry. Otherwise put, something is going on when Derrida says “democracy to come” that would not take place were he to speak of “republic to come,” “fraternity to come,” “fascism to come,” or even “democracy not to come,” even though each one of these structures resemble the others at the fundamental level of spacing.10

Now, Derrida does not argue that one of these interpretative possibilities (the constative and the performative) is the correct one, and the other mistaken. He claims that both are equally possible, and although he does not explicitly state that this indecidability is inescapable, in my opinion this is precisely what is entailed by the inherited nature of language.11 Derrida cannot control the value of his discourse any more than he can control its meaning. This does not mean, of course, that he has no influence on this process. Just as he attempts to transform the inherited meanings of democracy, so too he can try to intervene into its value. The analysis in Rogues, for example, underlines at length the negative characteristics of democracy, and one could imagine Derrida or his heirs coming out forcefully against it on this basis. As I have already noted, this would be a difficult task, given the stability of democracy’s desirability in contemporary political discourse. But
note that in taking this path, one would have already moved well beyond the simply descriptive project that Hägglund argues is that of deconstruction.

I am arguing, therefore, that it is only by remaining indifferent to language that Hägglund can sustain his view of deconstruction as an enterprise free of evaluation. Now, to be sure, to hold that language is inescapably infused with contours of value, and is inescapable for deconstruction, does not imply that an ethics or politics is deducible from it as its necessary consequence. Deconstruction still does not say what is to be done. But neither does it mean one’s discourse can remain neutral with respect to this question. Thus I would argue that one task arising from the challenge of Radical Atheism is to search for a place between strict deduction and complete neutrality in the relationship between deconstruction and value. My suggestion is that it will be carved out by, and within, the fact that language remains.

NOTES

1. Hägglund notes that Derrida does not consistently adhere to the distinction between these two couples, sometimes using them interchangeably (2008, 33). But he is correct in insisting on their difference, for in doing so, he clarifies much in the analyses of ethical, political, and religious concepts in Derrida’s writings.

2. This issue is not directly addressed in Radical Atheism. But early in his argument Hägglund seems to suggest that life covers all things in time. For example:

   What I want to emphasize here is that Derrida describes the trace and différance as conditions for life in general. . . . For Derrida, the spacing of time is an ‘ultra-transcendental’ condition from which nothing can be exempt. . . . On the one hand, the spacing of time has an ultratranscendental status because it is the condition for everything all the way up to and including the ideal itself. The spacing of time is the condition not only for everything that can be cognized and experienced, but also for everything that can be thought and desired. On the other hand, the spacing of time has an ultratranscendental status because it is the condition for everything all the way down to minimal forms of life. As Derrida maintains, there is no limit to the generality of différance and the structure of the trace applies to all fields of the living” (Hägglund 2008, 18–19).

   “Life in general” here covers more than what one perhaps more usually consider to be living, including all thoughts and desires, and shortly after (27–28) Hägglund
cites a passage from *Of Grammatology* that explicitly challenges the division between life and its other.

3. There is an equivocation in the text here over just what is being described as desirable. I take it that Hägglund’s claim “it is inherently valuable that something happens (the worst = nothing happens)” implies that survival itself is inherently valuable. However, there are at least two reasons for thinking this cannot be the case. First, the sentence immediately following this claim states, “In other words, it presupposes that *temporal finitude is the condition for everything that is desirable*” (2008, 32). This suggests that survival is the condition for desire, and so not itself desirable or undesirable, a claim that Hägglund subsequently reaffirms (for example: “Mortality is the possibility for both the desirable and the undesirable” [32–33], “the precarious time of survival is neither something to be lamented nor something celebrated as such. It is rather the condition for everything one wants and everything one does not want” [34]). Second, as I argue below, all values are contestable, which implies that nothing can be “inherently valuable.” Hägglund would seem to agree on this point, later arguing that it is “a part of deconstructive reason to recognize that no value has an inherent value, and that any value can be used for better or for worse” (185). I think that the only consistent interpretation of Hägglund’s view is to see him here describing what is generally valued (that something happens), rather than what the deconstructive analysis itself values. As will be seen, Hägglund believes that the latter category is in fact empty, since he argues that deconstruction is a value-free enterprise.

4. Missing from the second series is a term that would be opposed to forgiveness, but this may be because Lawlor seems to assimilate forgiveness quite strictly to the other terms: “Once again, the more sufficient response is the friendly response: unconditional friendship. And unconditional friendship is unconditional forgiveness since all the others, all the animals, are defective” (2007, 109). And shortly after: “The reversal, then, is an experimentation on the equality of violence, which means that all living beings, no matter how violent, are treated equally in the sense of hospitality. Unconditional hospitality is forgiveness. We could say at this moment, ‘O my enemies, there are no enemies’” (111).

5. I should note that Lawlor argues that the terms he uses fall short of being values: “Yet hospitality and equality here do not really function as values; they are instead what I would call ‘prevvalues,’ valuationally indeterminate” (2007, 111, see also 32–36). However, in opposition to this claim, I would maintain that hospitality, friendship, the least violence, and so on, together with their opposites, do function as values in Lawlor’s discourse. They are presented as desirable or undesirable, as things that should be promoted or avoided.

6. Related to this confusion is another slide that Lawlor makes in the text, one central to his argument but also unwarranted. Discussing the worst in the context of Derrida’s analysis of globalization and the war on terror, Lawlor writes the following: “Let me repeat this crucial comment: A new violence is being prepared and in truth has been unleashed for some time now, in a way that is more visibly suicidal *plus visiblement*...
suicidaire) or autoimmune than ever. What does it mean to be ‘more suicidal’? To be more suicidal is to kill oneself more...’ (2007, 20; citing Derrida 2005, 156). But “more visibly suicidal” is not equivalent to “more suicidal”—the “more” qualifies “visibly,” not “suicidal.” This renders doubtful the analysis that Lawlor pursues in the subsequent few pages.

7. I argue more fully against appealing to the notion of a “lesser violence” in normative readings of Derrida in ‘A Genealogy of Violence, from Light to the Autoimmune” (Forthcoming). In Radical Atheism, Hägglund also provides arguments against this appeal (2008, 82–84, 170–71, 231–32 n. 4). It is also worth noting that Lawlor would no doubt refuse my interpretation of his work on this point, since he asserts that the least violence and its associated unconditionality remain violent, and so could never be called the best. But my claim is that by placing them at the positive extreme, they are in fact equivalent to the best, and thus equivalent to the worst. Consider, for example, the following claim, part of which I have already cited: “Let us try to reverse unconditional inhospitality, the worst, into unconditional hospitality. Unconditional hospitality is not the best but only the less bad. Indeed, it is a kind of mirror image of the worst. Being vulnerable in the way I have described, there is no guarantee that the worst will be avoided. The recipe describes a dangerous experiment; prudence is required” (Lawlor 2007, 111). To describe unconditional hospitality as only “less bad” than the worst is to say that it does not occupy the extreme opposite to the worst. But this is to say that it is not a “mirror image” of the worst that could be achieved through a reversal. Further, if it is only less bad, then it falls short of being the least violent. Finally, to admit that unconditional hospitality provides no guarantee that the worst will be avoided implies that it would not be preferable to any of the other positions that lie on this side of the worst, which equally fail to avert its threat.

8. This is even more apparent in Derrida’s use of the term “autoimmunity” to describe this aspect of democracy. Since (as far as I am aware) Derrida is the first person in history to do this, one can read this intervention as an attempt to introduce a new strand into future legacies of democracy.

9. In particular, Derrida highlights the fact that fraternity has been related to exactly the kind of universalizing movement that he locates in democracy. We read, for example, that “the fraternal figure of friendship will often bestow its features, allegorical or not, on what all revolutionary oaths involve with respect to responsibility to a future” (1997, 236). How is this future different to the one attached to democracy? And Derrida describes Michelet’s formula “Fraternity is the law beyond the law” as a “hyperbolization of the fraternity concept which extends it not only beyond all boundaries but indeed beyond all juridical, legislative, and political determinations of the law” (1997, 237). Does this not suggest that fraternity can overcome all limitations on its definitions, just as is claimed of democracy?

10. I earlier cited part of the following statement from Radical Atheism: “Neither justice nor hospitality can therefore be understood as an ethical ideal. If Derrida is easily misunderstood on this point, it is because he uses a ‘positively’ valorized term (‘hospitality,’ ‘justice’) to analyze a condition that just as well can be described with a ‘negatively’
valorized term (‘violent exposition,’ ‘irreducible discrimination’) (Hägglund 2008, 105). My point is that, although these terms are interchangeable in the description of the necessity of endless negotiation, their substitution would have profound effects in terms of the values carried by Derrida’s discourse.

11. Derrida does not state that the two possibilities are necessities, reserving their presentation under the mark of possibility (“‘democracy to come’ can hesitate endlessly . . . it can, on the one hand, correspond to the neutral, constative analysis of a concept . . . ‘democracy to come’ can also inscribe a performative . . . these two postures, can alternate . . . they can be addressed to you by turns, or else they can haunt you . . .” [2005, 91, my emphasis]). He thus leaves open the possibility that these possibilities are not necessary. He does, however, argue that a retreat into irony in the face of this division would itself carry a democratic appeal, given the links between irony, democracy, and the right to public space (91–92).

REFERENCES


