

Introduction

This book presents a sustained attempt to reassess the entire trajectory of Derrida's work. Refuting the notion that there was an ethical or religious "turn" in Derrida's thinking, I demonstrate that a radical atheism informs his writing from beginning to end. Atheism has traditionally limited itself to denying the existence of God and immortality, without questioning the desire for God and immortality. Thus, 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.

The notion of survival that I develop is incompatible with immortality, since it defines life as essentially mortal and as inherently divided by time. To survive is never to be absolutely present; it is to remain after a past that is no longer and to keep the memory of this past for a future that is not yet. I argue that every moment of life is a matter of survival, since it depends on what Derrida calls the structure of the trace. The structure of the trace follows from the constitution of time, which makes it impossible for anything to be present *in itself*. Every now passes away as soon as it comes to be and must therefore be inscribed as a trace in order to be at all. The trace enables the past to be retained, since it is characterized by the ability to remain in spite of temporal succession. The trace is thus the minimal condition for life to resist death in a movement of survival. The trace can only live on, however, by being left for a future that may erase it. This radical finitude of survival is not a lack of being that is desirable to

overcome. Rather, the finitude of survival opens the chance for everything that is desired and the threat of everything that is feared.

The key to radical atheism is what I analyze as the unconditional affirmation of survival. This affirmation is not a matter of a choice that some people make and others do not: it is unconditional because everyone is engaged by it *without exception*. Whatever one may want or whatever one may do, one has to affirm the time of survival, since it opens the possibility to live on—and thus to want something or to do something—in the first place. This unconditional affirmation of survival allows us to read the purported desire for immortality against itself. The desire to *live on* after death is not a desire for immortality, since to live on is to remain subjected to temporal finitude. The desire for survival cannot aim at transcending time, since the given time is the only chance for survival. There is thus an internal contradiction in the so-called desire for immortality. If one were not attached to mortal life, there would be no fear of death and no desire to live on. But for the same reason, the idea of immortality cannot even hypothetically appease the fear of death or satisfy the desire to live on. On the contrary, the state of immortality would annihilate every form of survival, since it would annihilate the time of mortal life.¹

To establish the logic of radical atheism, I proceed from Derrida's notion of spacing (*espacement*). As he points out in his late work *On Touching*, spacing is "the first word of any deconstruction, valid for space as well as time" (181/207).² More precisely, spacing is shorthand for the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space. Although this coimplication of space and time defines all of Derrida's key terms (such as *trace*, *arche-writing*, and *différance*), it has received little attention in studies of his work. Derrida himself does not undertake a detailed elaboration of how the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space should be understood, while maintaining that it is the minimal operation of deconstruction that is at work in everything that happens. My aim with regard to this matter is threefold. I seek to develop the philosophical significance of Derrida's argument by accounting for *why* spacing is irreducible, *how* it should be understood, and *what* implications follow from thinking it as a constitutive condition. All these issues will be addressed at length in the chapters that follow, so I will here limit myself to emphasizing the aspect that is most crucial for radical atheism. This aspect concerns the ontological status of spacing. Derrida repeatedly argues that *différance* (as a name for the spacing of time) not only applies to language or experience

or any other delimited region of being. Rather, it is an *absolutely general condition*, which means that there cannot even in principle be anything that is exempt from temporal finitude.

It is here instructive to consider the relation between negative theology and deconstruction, which has been an issue since Derrida's earliest writings. Derrida describes *différance* as the condition for everything that can be, while emphasizing that it "is" nothing in itself: it is neither sensible nor intelligible, neither present nor absent, neither active nor passive, and so on. This account of *différance* is formally similar to the account of God in negative theology. Negative theology describes God as the condition for everything that can be, while emphasizing that God himself "is" not a being. The respective reasons why God and *différance* are described as without being are, however, diametrically opposite. The God of negative theology is described as without being insofar as being is understood as a category of finitude. To predicate God is deemed to be inadequate since God transcends the determinations of time and space that all predication entails. God is a positive infinity that is absolutely in itself and must be described in negative terms when one speaks the language of finitude. In contrast, *différance* articulates the negative infinity of time. No moment is given in itself but is superseded by another moment in its very event and can never be consummated in a positive infinity.³ The negative infinity of time is an *infinite finitude*, since it entails that finitude cannot ever be eliminated or overcome. The infinite finitude of *différance* is at work before, within, and beyond anything one may circumscribe as being. *Différance* is thus without being but not because it is something ineffable that transcends time and space. On the contrary, *différance* is nothing in itself because it designates the spacing of time that makes it impossible for anything to be in itself. Consequently, Derrida emphasizes that even though the syntax of his argument resembles that of negative theology, it is *not* theological:

not even in the order of the most negative of all negative theologies, which are always concerned with disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence, and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being. Such a development is not in question here. (*Margins of Philosophy*, 6/6)

Derrida repeats the same argument in his two main texts on negative theology: “How to Avoid Speaking” and *Sauf le nom*.⁴ There is nothing radical about saying that God is nothing as long as one means that God is nothing that can be apprehended by a finite being, but is infinitely superior to anything that can be described in language. Negative theology adheres to the most traditional metaphysical logic by positing an instance that is exempt from temporal finitude.

Nevertheless, there have been numerous attempts to assimilate deconstruction to negative theology. In *The Trespass of the Sign*, Kevin Hart claims that Derrida underestimates the radicality of negative theology and in particular the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius. According to Hart, negative theology is a “non-metaphysical theology” because it does not make positive statements about God as a supreme being or a foundational presence. Rather, negative theology “deconstructs” positive theology by showing that God is neither being nor nonbeing, neither present nor absent. For Hart such negative statements are necessary to ensure that “our discourse about God is, in fact, about *God* and not just about human images of God.”⁵ To construe this elevation of God as a deconstructive move, one must completely misunderstand Derrida’s thinking. Hart’s argument only makes sense if one presupposes that there are two realms: on the one hand the finitude of being, with its “human images,” and on the other hand the infinity of God, which is beyond all such improper images. Hart argues that God is not a being because “being is finite” (xxv) and thus incompatible with the transcendence of God: “God comes only from God, certainly not from being. For without God there could be neither being nor beings” (xxii). Nothing could be further from Derrida’s thinking than this division between two realms. For Derrida, there is only one realm—the infinite finitude of *différance*—since everything is constituted by the trace structure of time. Hence, deconstruction has nothing to do with showing that the signifiers of language are inadequate to a transcendent signified such as God. As Derrida maintains in *Of Grammatology*, the trace structure does not only apply to the chain of signifiers but also to the signified itself. Indeed, “the signified is essentially and originally (and not only for a finite and created spirit) trace” (73/108).

Since Hart fails to assess the logic of deconstruction, he ends up showing the opposite of what he claims to show. As proof of how Pseudo-Dionysius “deconstructs” positive theology, Hart quotes a passage from *The Mystical Theology* where Pseudo-Dionysius refuses to apply either

affirmations or negations to the Cause inasmuch as “It transcends all affirmation by being the perfect and unique Cause of all things, and transcends all negation by the pre-eminence of Its simple and absolute nature—free from every limitation and beyond them all” (quoted in Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 201). The notion of a perfect Cause with a simple and absolute nature, regardless of whether one places it beyond all possible predication, is a metaphysical notion par excellence. This does not trouble Hart, who himself promotes “the deity’s sovereign freedom of self-determination” (xxii) as the cornerstone for a supposedly nonmetaphysical theology. So when Hart sets out to demonstrate that negative theology does not adhere to the metaphysics that Derrida deconstructs, he in fact demonstrates that negative theology adheres to the most classic metaphysical axiom of a sovereign instance.

In a recent essay on Derrida and religion, Hart employs the same argumentative structure in claiming that Pseudo-Dionysius offers an alternative to the metaphysics of presence: “that Pseudo-Dionysius affirms a deity whose hyper-essentiality is a blazing moment of self-presence is not supported by his writings. The God evoked in the *Corpus Arcopagiticum* is neither present nor absent, neither being nor non-being, neither one nor many, and is entirely free to determine itself.”⁶ The logic of this passage is quite self-contradictory. To say that one does not affirm absolute self-presence and then affirm an instance that is “entirely free to determine itself” is untenable, since only an absolute self-presence could be entirely free to determine itself. Hart’s argument, however, is not simply based on a logical oversight that could be corrected by him or any other negative theologian. Rather, the logic of negative theology and the logic of deconstruction are diametrically opposite.

Let me specify the above claim by considering the most prominent modern negative theologian, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion, who has also engaged extensively with Derrida’s thinking. Marion explicitly takes issue with Derrida’s assertion that negative theology is a metaphysics of presence, but he can do so only by misconstruing what Derrida means by the term. Marion reduces the metaphysics of presence to the notion that God can be conceptually comprehended and named as an essence or being. Given Marion’s understanding of the metaphysics of presence, he can oppose it to a *theology of absence* that renounces all names because they are inadequate to the divine Name.⁷ As Marion writes, “the Name does not name God as an essence; it designates what passes beyond

every name" (38), namely, "He who surpasses all nomination" (27). The aim is not "to find a name for God, but to make us receive our own from the unsayable Name" (38). Because of this deference before an unnameable God, negative theology is, according to Marion, "at least as much" (38) opposed to the metaphysics of presence as is deconstruction.

Like Hart, Marion displays a profound inability to assess what is at stake in deconstruction. For Derrida, the metaphysics of presence is by no means limited to the notion that the absolute can be conceptually comprehended and named as an essence or being. Rather, *every* notion of an absolute that is exempt from the spacing of time is a version of the metaphysics of presence. It does not make any essential difference if one says that the absolute is absent and impossible to grasp for the finite human understanding. For Marion, as for every other negative theologian, it is not a question of renouncing God; it is only a matter of denouncing "idolatrous" concepts of God that reduce him to human measures.⁸ To make God unnameable and unthinkable is not a deconstructive move. On the contrary, it is the most traditional metaphysical move since it posits God as absolutely absolute by making him independent from anything other than himself. Marion explicitly asserts that the absolute of God is "undone from any relation, and therefore also from any thinkable relation, which would tie it to an absurd 'other than it.'"⁹

Marion's defense of negative theology against Derrida's critique repeats the very move that Derrida criticizes. Derrida's persistent demarcation of deconstruction from negative theology is motivated by the latter's aim to preserve a God beyond being. To negate all predicates when speaking of God is for negative theology a way of saving God from the contamination of finitude. The apparent negation of God is thus in fact an affirmation of God. Or as Derrida puts it in *Writing and Difference*: "The negative moment of the discourse on God is only a phase of positive ontotheology," since it serves to affirm God as a "superessentiality" beyond everything that is destructible.¹⁰ Marion's response to Derrida's critique is to argue that negative theology offers a "third way" beyond affirmation and negation. According to Marion, Derrida is wrong to assert that negative theology operates in the service of a metaphysical affirmation, since the God of negative theology is explicitly posited as beyond both affirmation and negation. In Marion's formulation, "the third way does not hide an affirmation beneath a negation, because it means to overcome their duel" (26). Like Hart, Marion here cites Pseudo-Dionysius, who asserts that

God is above every negation and affirmation, as well as beyond even the most elevated names we may use to describe him. “Neither one nor oneness, neither divinity nor goodness, nor spirit in the sense we understand it; neither sonship nor fatherhood, nor anything else that is known by us or by any of the other beings” (quoted in Marion, “In the Name,” 26). Marion’s argument, however, does not in any way counter Derrida’s critique of negative theology. There is nothing radical about Pseudo-Dionysius’s claim that God is beyond affirmation and negation, positivity and negativity, since what he means is that God is beyond everything that can be predicated by a finite being. When Pseudo-Dionysius places God above all names, above everything that can be affirmed or negated, it is explicitly in order to place God “above every privation” (quoted in *ibid.*). In short, it is a matter of positing God as absolutely indestructible.

The same move is evident in Marion’s own theology, which is committed to enforcing what he calls “the dividing line between creator and creature” (39). On the one hand there is the mortality of the world, on the other hand the immortality of God. Marion is thus as far as one can get from the deconstructive thinking of a general mortality. A telling example is Marion’s reading of the dictum “God is dead,” which opens his book *The Idol and Distance*. Marion argues that the death of God only affects the false, idolatrous God, since a proper God could never die in the first place:

A “God” who can die harbors already, even when he is not dying, such a weakness that from the outset he falls short of the idea that we cannot not form of a “God.” And is it not the least of courtesies that he should satisfy a propaedeutic concept, even if it is only our own? A “God” who decides to die dies from the beginning, since he undoubtedly needs a beginning—which means that the “death of God” sets forth a contradiction: that which dies does not have any right to claim, even when it is alive, to be “God.” What is it that dies in the “death of God” if not that which could not in any case merit the name of “God”? And therefore “the death of God” expresses, beyond the death of “God,” the death of that which announces it: the death of the “death of God” itself. The contradiction of the terms of the proposition comes to completion in the self-erasure of the proposition: it renders null and void that which it states by annulling the object of the statement. . . . “God” is dead only if “God” can die, that is, if in the first place it was not a question, in the demonstration, of God. (I, 3/17–18, 20)

For Marion the true life of God is immortal. If God were not immortal, he would not be God. Marion employs this definition of God in order to make God immune from any possible refutation. If God is immortal, he cannot ever die and is consequently safe from the atheist proclamation that God is dead.

I am not concerned here with the circularity of Marion's argument, but only with how his assessment of mortality is the opposite of Derrida's. For Derrida life is essentially mortal, which means that there can be no instance (such as God in Marion's account) that is immortal. Even the supposedly divine declaration "I am that I am" is in Derrida's reading "the confession of a mortal," since "*I am* originally means *I am mortal*."¹¹ Proceeding from Derrida's premise, we can pursue a reading of the death of God that goes in the opposite direction from Marion. 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, Derrida does not limit himself to the atheist claim that God is dead; he repeatedly makes the radically atheist claim that *God is death*.¹² That God is death does not mean that we reach God through death or that God rules over death. On the contrary, it means that the idea of immortality—which according to Marion is "the idea that we cannot not form of a 'God'"—is inseparable from the idea of absolute death.

That God is death does not only mean that God does not exist but also that the immortality of God is not desirable in the first place.¹³ This radically atheist argument emerges forcefully through the notion of "autoimmunity," which is at the center of Derrida's main text on religion: the essay "Faith and Knowledge." Derrida here maintains that all religions are founded on the value of "the unscathed" (*l'indemne*), which he glosses as the pure and the untouched, the sacred and the holy, the safe and sound. According to Derrida, "every religion" holds out such a "horizon of redemption, of the restoration of the unscathed, of indemnification" (84n30/75n25). The common denominator for religions is thus that they promote *absolute immunity* as the supremely desirable. This ideal of absolute immunity is succinctly formulated by Augustine in the seventh book of his *Confessions*. Augustine asserts that the immutable is better than the mutable, the inviolable better than the violable, and the incorruptible better than the corruptible. All religious conceptions of the highest good (whether it is called God or something else) hold out such an absolute immunity, since the highest good must be safe from the corruption of evil.

Derrida's argument is, on the contrary, that nothing can be unscathed. His notion of autoimmunity spells out that everything is threatened from within itself, since the possibility of living is inseparable from the peril of dying.

The logic of autoimmunity is radically atheist, since it undermines the religious conception of what is desirable. Mutability, corruptibility, and violability do not testify to a lack of being that we desire to overcome. On the contrary, these features are essential to everything that is desired and cannot be removed. Inversely, the absolute immunity that religions hold out as "the best" (the immutable, the incorruptible, and the inviolable) is on Derrida's account "the worst," since it would eliminate everything that can be desired. If one removes what threatens the object of desire—the evil that threatens the good, the death that threatens life—one removes the object of desire itself. Consequently, Derrida maintains that "a heart would not be good unless it could be other, bad, radically, *unforgivably* bad, ready for any infidelity, any treachery and any perjury" (*On Touching*, 283/319). We will see how the same logic of desire recurs in different variations throughout Derrida's thinking. Whatever is desired as good is autoimmune, since it bears within itself the possibility of becoming unbearably bad.

I develop the logic of autoimmunity throughout this book, but I want to point out that I am not concerned with the relation between how Derrida uses the term "autoimmunity" and how it is employed in biological science. Autoimmunity is for me the name of a deconstructive logic that should be measured against the standards of philosophical logic. This does not mean that the biological connotations of the term are not important, but they do not make the argument dependent on its correspondence with discoveries in contemporary science. The biological connotations of the term "autoimmunity" remind us that Derrida pursues a logic of life (or, rather, life-death), but I seek to establish the power of this logic on philosophical rather than scientific grounds. I argue that the reason why autoimmunity is inscribed at the heart of life is because there cannot be anything without the tracing of time. The tracing of time is the minimal protection of life, but it also attacks life from the first inception, since it breaches the integrity of any moment and makes everything susceptible to annihilation.

Taking Derrida's insight into the trace structure of time as my point of departure, I demonstrate how he rethinks the condition of identity,

ethics, religion, and political emancipation in accordance with the logic of radical atheism. Chapter 1 addresses the relation between Derrida's deconstruction and Kant's critical philosophy. While Kant restricted time to a "transcendental" condition for the experience of a finite consciousness, I maintain that for Derrida the spacing of time is an "ultratranscendental" condition from which nothing can be exempt. 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. The radicality of this argument emerges through Derrida's notion of the "unconditional," which must be strictly distinguished from Kant's. For Kant, the unconditional is the Idea of a sovereign instance that is not subjected to time and space (e.g., God). For Derrida, on the contrary, the unconditional is the spacing of time that undermines the very Idea of a sovereign instance. Thus, Chapter 1 develops a deconstructive logic of identity that allows one to think time as an unconditional condition, without renouncing the exigencies of philosophical reason to which Kant responded in the first Critique. More precisely, I demonstrate how Derrida can be said to write a new transcendental aesthetic (which accounts for the synthesis of temporality without positing a formal unity of apperception that subordinates the division of time) and a new transcendental dialectic (which deconstructs the Idea that the consummation of time is thinkable and desirable).

Chapter 2 develops the deconstructive notion of the synthesis of time through an analysis of what Derrida calls "arche-writing." In particular I seek to consolidate Derrida's reading of Husserl's phenomenology of internal time-consciousness. I engage with prominent phenomenologists, such as Paul Ricoeur, Rudolf Bernet, and Dan Zahavi, who have raised a number of questions that a deconstructive reading of Husserl must answer. The difficulty, however, is that Derrida's own analysis of Husserl is not as thorough as it could be. Consequently, my reading aims at deepening Derrida's analysis of Husserl's theory of time, as well as at elucidating how the question of time is central for deconstructing the logic of identity.

Chapter 3 articulates the link between arche-writing and what Derrida calls "arche-violence." I pursue the notion of arche-violence through a critical reading of Emmanuel Levinas's ethical metaphysics, and take issue with the influential Levinasian readings of Derrida by Robert Bernasconi, Simon Critchley, and Drucilla Cornell. Refuting the prevalent idea that Derrida subscribed to Levinas's conception of alterity, I argue that Derrida

pursued a consistent thinking of time and violence throughout his career. The argument is sustained by detailed analyses of Derrida's late work on questions of justice, hospitality, and responsibility.

Chapter 4 elaborates the significance of Derrida's radical atheism at length. The proliferation of apparently religious terms in Derrida's later work—which engages with notions such as messianicity, faith, and God—has given rise to numerous theological accounts of deconstruction. In contrast to these theological accounts (including those of John Caputo, Hent de Vries, and Richard Kearney), I argue that Derrida relies on the desire for mortal life in order to read even the most religious ideas against themselves. Messianic hope is for Derrida a hope for temporal survival, faith is always faith in the finite, and the desire for God is a desire for the mortal, like every other desire. I conclude the chapter with an in-depth analysis of Derrida's *Circumfession*, which demonstrates how he stages the radically atheist desire for survival in his own confessional writing.

Chapter 5 links the logic of radical atheism to Derrida's conception of democracy. I here further develop the notion of autoimmunity, which Derrida brings to the fore in his discussion of democracy. Specifically, I demonstrate how the radically atheist logic of autoimmunity opens a new perspective on the challenges of democratic politics and on the desire that drives political emancipation. The argument is pursued in dialogue with Ernesto Laclau's theory of hegemony and democracy. On the one hand, I demonstrate how Laclau offers important resources for a deconstructive thinking of the political. On the other hand, I take issue with the Lacanian notion of desire on which Laclau relies. Specifically, I argue that the possibility of democracy hinges on a constitutive desire for temporal survival rather than a constitutive desire for atemporal fullness, as in Lacan. This argument allows me to tie together all the threads of the book and press home the stakes of Derrida's radical atheism, not only for our thinking of politics but also for our basic conceptions of life and desire.

Finally, I would like to offer a remark on the strategy that informs my reading. As will become clear, my main approach is analytical rather than exegetical. I not only seek to explicate what Derrida is saying; I seek to develop his arguments, fortify his logic, and pursue its implications. An instructive example is my treatment of the notion of "survival." Derrida repeatedly indicates that it is of central importance for his entire oeuvre, but he never provides an explicit account of the logic of survival and its ramifications for our thinking of identity, desire, ethics, and politics.

By providing such an account, I seek to “inherit” Derrida in the precise sense he has given to the word. To inherit is not simply to accept what is handed down from the master; it is to reaffirm the legacy in order to make it live on in a different way.¹⁴

Such inheritance cannot be accomplished through pious conservation but only through critical discrimination. One question that is bound to arise, then, is whether there are aspects of Derrida’s work that do not adhere to the radically atheist logic I develop, especially since it stands in sharp contrast to the readings proposed by many other major interpreters. My response is that even if one is able to find passages in Derrida that cannot be salvaged by the logic of radical atheism, it is far from enough to refute the reading I propose here. Like everyone else, Derrida was certainly liable to be inconsistent. However, in order to turn these inconsistencies into an argument against the logic of radical atheism that I establish, one has to show that they are not in fact inconsistencies but rather testify to the operation in Derrida of a different logic altogether.