

FINITUDE, ETERNITY, LOVE, THE GOOD

✂ MARTIN HÄGGLUND'S *THIS LIFE*

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Martin Hägglund's *This Life* is an important treatise on metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, and political philosophy. It is also a critique of religious orientations to the world. I will reflect on Hägglund's account of value and our finitude, and on his criticism of Martin Luther King, Jr's political theology. According to Hägglund, King's appeal to *God* when calling for justice should be replaced by an appeal to our communal norms. To defer to God is at best a colourful way of depicting our own commitments. At worst, it has no determinate content, and it threatens to absolve us of making justice here and now.

I will show that while Hägglund's account is a salutary corrective to a pervasive bad faith, this criticism misses its target. Any identification of *God's justice* with our communal norms is to mischaracterise concepts like these. They are *ideals* that direct our attention outside ourselves, in the same way that love orients us toward an *other*. Hägglund's account points us to the crucial concept of *dependence*, and that once we understand this better, we will see that a religious orientation toward the infinite and secular faith are compatible.

❖ THIS LIFE: SECULAR FAITH ✂ SPIRITUAL FREEDOM

Two concepts play a central role in Hägglund's *This Life*.

*To be **finite** means primarily two things: to be dependent on others, and to live in relation to death. I am finite because I cannot maintain my life on my own, and because I will die. Likewise, the projects to which I am devoted are finite because they live only through the efforts of those who are committed to them and will cease to be if they are abandoned. [TL, p. 4]¹*

From FINITUDE, the second, SECULAR FAITH, follows:

*The sense of finitude—the sense of the ultimate fragility of everything we care about—is at the heart of what I call **secular faith**. To have secular faith is to be devoted to a life that will end, to be dedicated to projects that can fail or break down. [p. 5, 6]*

I call it secular faith because it is devoted to a form of life that is bounded by time ... to have secular faith is to be dedicated to persons or projects that are worldly and temporal. Secular faith is the form of faith that we all sustain in caring for someone or something that is vulnerable to loss. [p. 6]

This Life develops an account of secular faith, its relationship with value, and what this means for our life together. The argument runs from philosophical anthropology to political philosophy. There is a compelling through-line culminating in an appeal to democratic socialism as the only form of collective organisation that does justice to what it means to be human.

For MH, secular faith has a competitor: RELIGIOUS FAITH.

*In contrast, the common denominator for what I call **religious forms of faith** is a devaluation of our finite lives as a lower form of being. All world religions [...] hold that the highest form of existence or*

¹ All citations in [brackets] are to *This Life* (Knopf 2019). Abbreviations: MH = Martin Hägglund; MLK = Martin Luther King, Jr.

the most desirable form of life is eternal rather than finite. To be religious—or to adopt a religious perspective on life—is to regard our finitude as a lack, an illusion, or a fallen state of being. [p. 6]

For MH, to possess religious faith is inconsistent with taking the contingency of life seriously. To truly live is to exercise our capacities to make a difference to what matters. If only the eternal and unchanging is ultimately significant, then nothing I do makes any difference, and nothing I do can matter.

This Life is wide in scope, and it is a useful corrective to an otherworldly orientation to life that devalues the here-and-now. There is much more to the book than I will touch on here.² I focus on MH's concepts of finitude and secular faith, because his critique of religious faith points to an important issue at the heart of both forms of faith, and at the heart of the notion of finitude—**dependence**. I will focus on the different ways that dependence plays a role in our conception of our finite life, its significance, and its relationship with everything upon which we depend.³

MH describes secular faith like this:

When we own our secular faith, we acknowledge that the object of our faith—our spiritual cause—is dependent on our practice of faith. [p. 373]

In my life of commitment to some cause, the outcome of that cause depends on me. Our life and struggle makes a difference. In collective action, the cause depends on *us*. What we *do* matters to what we *care about*.

Secular faith is paired with spiritual *freedom*, the freedom involved in our selection of what to do with the time available to us. For MH, we must recognise that life is finite, for only then does any choice have true weight.

...what I do with my time can matter to me only because I grasp my life as finite. If I believed that I had an infinite time to live, the urgency of doing anything would be unintelligible to me and no normative obligation could have any grip on me. [p. 191-192]

The connection between the actor and the target of the action breaks down for religious faith:

[W]hat I call religious faith disowns our secular faith. Religious faith takes the object of faith to be a god [...] that is independent of our practice of faith. Our spiritual cause is treated as though it were a being that commands and has power over us without being dependent on us. This is the type of faith that King espouses in his religious sermons. [p. 373]

For MH, if religious faith takes its object to be something independent of us, then our action, ultimately, makes no difference to it. We make no contribution to what really matters.

This notion of dependence can be understood in different ways. Let's first attend to MH's account of the religious orientation toward finitude, which understands being finite as "*a lack, an illusion, or a fallen state of being*" [p. 6].

This notion of finitude as lack can be articulated in two ways.

² For an insightful review of *This Life*, see Alexander Douglas's "The Goods of the Earthly City" (2020).

³ So, this talk is very much the response of a *philosopher* to some of the issues arising in *This Life*. For a complementary *theological* reading, situating this work with respect to the "this worldly" theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, see Frank Della Torre II's "Mediating Feuerbach and Barth" (2023).

FINITUDE-AS-ILLUSION: There is *no genuine loss or risk* for those whose life is meaningful, since God has secured your status; the sufferings of this contingent world are of no real significance. They are *illusions* to be transcended. A finite life, on its own is *meaningless*. Life has meaning *only* if it is ongoing, or if this finite world is transcended.

Illusionism can be contrasted with another sense in which the finite is nonetheless understood as a *lack*.

FINITUDE-AS-INCLUSION: A finite life is *incomplete* on its own. A finite contingent life exists *inside* the infinite, and the contingencies of this world can only be properly understood in the context of the non-contingent. Finite life involves loss and risk, and this finite life has value, but this value can only be properly understood by way of its relationship to a non-contingent infinite *other*.

Illusion and *inclusion* are two different ways to understand the relation between the finite and the infinite. Both understand the finite life *on its own* as lacking, and so, both can be seen as forms of what MH takes to be *religious faith*, but only finitude-as-illusion is clearly *inconsistent* with secular faith as MH defines it.

It is clear that many forms of religious faith involve at the very *least* an understanding of our finite life as held in the creating and sustaining activity of an eternal God, and the value of our life can only properly be understood in this setting, so many religious traditions are committed to finitude-as-inclusion. It is *also* clear that many forms of religious faith are committed to finitude-as-illusion, and thereby place themselves squarely in MH's sights.

However, there are strands of religious tradition that are opposed to finitude-as-illusion. Any Christian spirituality that takes Jesus' tears at the grave of Lazarus or in the Garden of Gethsemane as expressions of *loss* and *grief* will find it hard to say that the sufferings of this life have no real significance. However finitude-as-illusion entails that there is no place for a genuinely risky trust in the here-and-now, and no place for the experience of loss.

Since MH takes it that *meaning*—in the only sense that things can have meanings for finite creatures like us—is only to be found in a life that involves secular faith, and since secular faith finds meaning and significance exactly where finitude-as-illusion says it cannot be, it is clear why finitude-as-illusion is inconsistent with secular faith. It is *less* clear that finitude-as-inclusion should suffer the same fate.

Throughout *This Life*, MH argues that appeals to God are superfluous, and are counterproductive when for political engagement. More forms of religious faith are under his scrutiny than those which take the finite world to be of no significance. MH considers the case of a political activist for whom religious faith was at the heart of his own thought and action, Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK).

❖ HÄGGLUND'S CRITIQUE OF MLK

Here MH introduces the place of *God-talk* in MLK's political rhetoric and preaching.

In his role as a Christian preacher, King claims that "the universe is guided by a benign Intelligence whose infinite love embraces all mankind," namely, "the one eternal God" who has "strength to protect us" with his "unlimited resources" and on whose grace we depend. [p. 373]

In MLK's pronouncements and thinking, God looms large, as the ground of our being and the one who will bring all things to completion at their end. If God is the ultimate target of our faith, then for MH, MLK is subject to the criticism that God, being necessary, is independent of us and has no need of us, and our actions do not matter.

The problem with God-talk goes deeper, for MH. Not only is God untouchable by any human action, God as an object of our *understanding* is beyond our grasp. The term *God* is an empty signifier.

[T]he supposed relation between God and our emancipation becomes incomprehensible. What we take to be evil and unjust can be part of God's "plan" or his unfathomable "purposes," which purportedly redeem what happens to us beyond anything we can understand. Moreover, if God is beyond our comprehension, his notion of goodness and justice can be completely at odds with our own. As King avows in one of his religious sermons, "I do not pretend to understand all of the ways of God or his particular timetable for grappling with evil." [p. 373, 374]

So, even though MLK is not committed to *finitude-as-illusion*, for MH, his faith remains problematic. Appeals to *God* are merely totemic rallying cries for those for whom the language has grip. As MLK himself says, God is beyond our comprehension. When we talk about God, we do not know what we are talking about.

Is there anything positive in MLK's appeal to God's demands for justice? Here, MH appeals to Hegel:

The command or the will of God only makes sense if we understand the term in a Hegelian way. "God" is a name for the communal norms that we have legislated to ourselves and to which we hold ourselves. When King invokes the will and the command of God in his political speeches, he is reminding us of what we are committed to in being committed to social freedom for all. [p. 375]

By appealing to God, MLK appeals to our commitments—our self-legislated ideals. *This* is the positive core of the *God* concept in its use, nothing more. There is much to say about this Hegelian account of God-talk, but I will restrict my attention to two points, where the question of *dependence* is intimately involved.

First, a Hegelian interpretation MLK's vocabulary has some virtues: for a believer, talk of God is deeply bound up with talk of what we're committed to—since this believer is committed to *God*. However, this does not mean that we can substitute one concept for the other without loss. *God's justice* cannot be identified as a *concept* with our communal norms—even if we take ourselves, rightly, to have bound ourselves to the norms of God's justice—because we are fallible. God's justice and our own conception of justice do not play the same role in our own thought and talk.⁴ Insofar as a believer takes themselves to be bound to God's justice, then the believer takes their *grasp* of that standard, and the standard itself, to differ. I am authoritative about what I have legislated in a way that I am not authoritative, when it comes to God's justice. (This point is general, and we will return to it in the next section.)

⁴ This point about our fallibility remains, whether or not we take the matters in question to be *objective* or to be *arbitrary constructions*. The game of chess is a human fabrication, and my *understanding of the rules of chess*, and the game *chess* itself play a distinct cognitive role for me, since I know that I might have misremembered a rule. I play so rarely, I need to remind myself of the *en passant* rule whenever it comes up.

So, perhaps in our attempt to rescue God-talk from this Hegelian reinterpretation we have leapt from the frying pan into the fire of MH's first criticism of MLK's rhetoric. MLK admitted that God's purposes are "unfathomable" and God is "beyond our comprehension"—doesn't this make God-talk unintelligible?

This interpretation of MLK is ungenerous. Something that cannot be fathomed and cannot be comprehended is not necessarily something that cannot be *understood*, at least in part. There are many things that I cannot *fathom* and which are beyond my comprehensive *grasp*, but I nonetheless have a *partial* understanding of at least some of them.⁵

In each case my *understanding* of the phenomenon and the phenomenon in question are more than tenuously connected. My understanding of the climate crisis, however partial, is loosely connected to the crisis itself. The same thing holds for God's justice and our idea of justice. For MLK, the relationship between God and our emancipation is *incomprehensible* in that we do not have a complete understanding, but this does not mean we have *no* understanding. MLK says "I do not pretend to understand all the ways of God" not "I do not pretend to understand *any* of the ways of God." God's justice and our ideas of justice do not float freely and independently, no matter what MH claims.

There are more lessons to be learned about the nature of dependence involved in God-talk, in finitude, and in secular and religious faith.

❖ LOVE, THE LOVER & THE BELOVED, AND DEPENDENCE & INDEPENDENCE

Whenever a (finite) lover loves some given beloved, the beloved exceeds the lover's grasp. The lover's idea of the beloved and the beloved themselves always differ. The idea of the beloved points to the beloved, but cannot ever totally comprehend them. Substituting the idea of the beloved for the beloved is an unfair trade. The lover loves *the beloved* not merely *their idea*. The love of the beloved is an *other-directed* attitude, and not mere self-involvement.

The *idea* has its role to play. If we have no idea of the beloved, then the beloved has left no marks on the lover's representations of the world. The idea is the *trace*, it plays its role in the lover's life, in memory, hopes, desires, plans. The idea directs the lover to the beloved. The *idea* is revisable since the lover is fallible. The beloved is the standard by which the lover's idea is measured.

The triad of (1) *lover*, (2) *beloved* and (3) *lover's idea of the beloved* has parallels. We also have (1') *thinker*, (2') *the world* (or *the truth*) and (3') *the thinker's account of the world* (or *theory*). As we navigate the world, we form our own views, and in just the same way we find ourselves in error and revise our account. Whatever your theory of truth, no-one identifies what is *true* with our idea of what happens to be true.

In the same way, *justice* is the standard by which our own commitments to justice are measured. Our appeal to justice is an outward-directed attitude, just as love for a beloved is outward-directed. When we appeal to justice, we orient ourselves beyond our commitments, de-centring ourselves, to look outwardly to an *other*.

⁵ The climate crisis, the game of chess, the parlous state of democratic politics in the early 21st Century, the theorems of Peano Arithmetic, are four different examples, for me.

Dependence plays a crucial role in these triads. The idea of the beloved depends on the beloved, in the sense that the beloved is the standard by which the idea is to be measured. On the other hand, the lover's relationship with the beloved is (partially) mediated by the idea. The idea (in part) directs the lover's attention to the beloved. Had the lover had radically different ideas, they may not have developed a relationship with *this* beloved.⁶

Speaking schematically, dependence between x and the idea of x is two-way: First, for an idea to be an idea **of** x , the given x acts as the criterion. The idea of x is measured by its fittingness to x .⁷ Discovering new things about x counts as a change in our ideas about x rather than a change in x itself. Our idea of x can arise out of our *encounter with* x .⁸ In these senses, the idea of x depends on x .

Second, our encounter with x is, in part, mediated by our idea of x . For the idea to play its role in orienting us toward x , we *employ* the concept to direct our attention and our action. Insofar as our action is guided by concepts, and we give an account of our actions using *reasons*, our actions concerning x depend on our concept of x .⁹

Let's return to MLK's appeal to God's justice. What happens if we substitute the call to justice with an appeal to our own commitments? When we appeal to our commitments as contingent revisable choices we have made, we thereby make salient the possibility that of *unmaking* those commitments. If we appeal to those commitments *as commitments* then we foreground their status as contingent choices. If we appeal to the *content* of our commitments—by reminding ourselves that *Black lives matter*, or that *all are created equal in the image of God*—then the status of these claims as our commitments is *expressed*, but the *content* of those commitments is in focus, rather than their status as our commitments. What should motivate us is the *other* that calls us to action, rather than our *idea* of that other.

As MH has it, to *own* our secular faith is to take the object of our faith to be contingent on our action. Our action makes a difference to our goal. This means that *God* is an inappropriate object for secular faith, since God is not contingent upon us. Does this make secular faith—in the sense of commitment to risky action that could fail and projects that require participation to sustain—*impossible* for one who believes in such a God? I will attempt to show that there is

⁶If, by some misunderstanding, I have somehow taken the rules of draughts (checkers) to be the rules of chess, I do not thereby become a chess player (whether a proficient one or a terrible one) by playing what I mistakenly *take* to be chess. Playing draughts, thinking yourself to be playing chess does not constitute playing chess. I have no space here to explore the parallel with what it takes to *believe in* or to *love God*.

⁷The general notion of fittingness is, intentionally, very broad. Whether an idea of a human beloved fits the beloved, whether a theory fits the world, whether a mathematical theory fits its objects and a notion of God is fitting for God are different matters, and there is nothing to say that there is a unified theory of “representational correctness” that applies to all these different cases.

⁸Again, what counts as an “encounter with x ” is, intentionally, similarly broad. An encounter with another human is not the same thing as an encounter with numbers, and neither is the same as whatever counts as an *encounter with the world*. (What experience is *not* an encounter with the world under some guise or other?) What could or should count as an *encounter with God* is again another question entirely.

⁹This two-way dependence connection between x and the idea of x is close to Brandom's distinction between reference dependence (concept P is REFERENCE DEPENDENT on concept Q if P applies to something only if Q applies to something), and sense dependence (concept P is SENSE DEPENDENT on concept Q if someone can have the *idea of* P only if they also have the *idea of* Q). See (Brandom 2002, p. 194-195) for more on this distinction. Here, our *idea of* x depends (at the level of *reference*) on x . Our rational orientation toward x depends (at the level of *sense*) on our *idea of* x .

space for secular faith in MH's sense, even when the central object of that faith may nonetheless remain independent of us.

Start with an analogy: consider a mathematician who has devoted their life to Goldbach's conjecture (GC).¹⁰ They devote all their time learning number theory, going to conferences, working with the problem. They make many friends, and have many projects as they go. Each individual step has only derivative value insofar as it leads towards (or away from) the numbers themselves. They like the culture of mathematics, and they take joy in their successes and sorrow in their failures along the way, but what makes their successes *successful* is the greater understanding gained toward GC, and what makes the failures painful is that they are missteps along that journey. The *target* of the quest is the necessary unchanging world of mathematics. Whether GC is true or not is truly *unresponsive* to the mathematician's activity.

What is the *point* of this activity, given that the central object of devotion is utterly unresponsive to their action? Here, the contingent risky activity of mathematical research (with all its gains and losses) *expresses* the mathematician's devotion. The secondary projects constitute the mathematician's obsession. They are embarked upon for the mathematician to understand numbers. This secondary project—of deepening *understanding*—is how the mathematician expresses their underlying devotion to the necessary world of mathematics. While the object of attention and effort is utterly independent of the mathematicians' activity (nothing the mathematician can do will *make* GC true) the obsession carries with risks. As the years pass, the mathematicians' powers will decline, and the search for a proof will almost certainly end in failure.¹¹ The object of their obsession remains unperturbed, but their relation to that object will change. The project of *understanding* reaches its limits. While the focus of their devotion is unchanged and goes on beyond the life of this mathematician, their expression of that devotion reaches its end. This is a secular faith in MH's sense, since the projects along the way involve risk, and suffer loss, even if the central *core* of the devotion is the austere unchanging world of numbers.

What of the faith of a believer, like MLK, whose focus of devotion is *God*, and who is committed to the Kingdom of God, which he takes to involve just relations between black and white Americans, and a reconfiguring of the unjust distribution of wealth between rich and poor? What about the motivational power of *this* kind of faith, with its religious core? Does this kind of faith ultimately disengage the believer from action?

The problem becomes more pointed because MLK's devotion, unlike the mathematicians', involves the trust that success will come. The arc of history bends towards justice even though local setbacks might cause us to doubt. For MLK, the Kingdom of God is coming whether we take part, or not. So, not only is God independent of us, on this view, but so is the earthly result of God's work, at least in the sense that the end is assured. Is such a confidence compatible with a secular faith that motivates *action*?

¹⁰ That is, they want to know whether every even number greater than 2 is the sum of two prime numbers. GC is, at present, an open question.

¹¹ Christian Goldbach made his conjecture in 1742, and despite concerted efforts of mathematicians to this day, the question remains unanswered, so the odds for our hypothetical mathematical obsessive are *not* good.

Note that if this is a failing for religious faith, it is a failing for any kind of political faith where the goal is to be achieved by collective action. For collective action, it is necessary that *many* individuals act, but often, no given individual's action is essential. This does not mean that any individual action toward this collective end is in vain, because the actions of each individual help *constitute* the collective action.

Despite the fact that my action is not necessary for the collective action to succeed, devotion to a social goal can motivate action toward that end, just as obsession with mathematics motivates the mathematician's actions. Such devotion works itself out in action by motivating participation *in* the activity, of shaping oneself into conformity with the goal, which is valuable in and of itself, even if my individual action is not necessary for the goal to come about. For the believer, a hope for God's justice to come—even combined with a confidence that it will come, with or without me—can *motivate* participation, and engagement in the here-and-now, because it is a distinct value to participate in an activity (and to help *constitute* that activity) if the activity is valuable.

This commitment to a social end counts as a risky commitment to *finite* and *contingent* ends by MH's lights, despite the underlying necessity of the ultimate aim. For MH, acknowledging that life is finite involves granting that "the projects to which I am devoted are finite because they live only through the efforts of those who are committed to them and will cease to be if they are abandoned" [p. 4]. The commitment to work for just social arrangements and a flourishing community counts as this form of acknowledgement, even when underwritten by a faith that God will bring the effort to a good end in the long run. If one is working toward a social arrangement of finite creatures, this arrangement lives *only* through those actions and efforts of those who are a part of the enterprise. To be sure, for MLK those efforts are animated by the activity of God, but the Kingdom of God does not float freely of the activities of the finite creatures whose actions *constitute* that community.

The faith that these efforts succeed in the long run need not demotivate action: The arc of history may bend toward justice in the long term, but this term may be *very long*. Someone devoted to that end will do what they can to bend that arc since there cannot be *any* good social arrangements without the activities and commitments of people. Our commitments to justice, even when sustained by a faith that things will go well *in the end*, are risky and prone to failure in the short term. Viewed in the light of history, the terms of our lives *are* short, so there is no guarantee that we will live to see any success. Our actions, and our participation toward that end, can fail, even if, in the long run, it is guaranteed some succeed.¹² The contingent actions of finite creatures matters even in the presence of an underlying enclosing necessity.

❖ RISK, DEPENDENCE & TEMPORALITY

The parallel between collective social action and the believer's understanding of God's action in history does not tell the whole story. Not every socialist has Marx's confidence about the direction of history. MLK's faith that God's Kingdom will come, in the long run, is distinctive. On this view, although there is significant *short-term* risk in the believer's everyday work, there

¹² This attitude is structurally identical to that of the Marxist who takes the forces of history to inevitably bring about the revolution. This attitude need not demotivate.

is no *long-term* risk. God *will* win out eventually. Although our interim efforts can fail, if God prevails in the long run, what risk remains? MH could argue that this religious orientation infantilises the believer, making them a child, dependent for security on another, their Divine care-giving parent.¹³ Their concerns matter only as concerns of the toddler on the playground matter. The troubles of the moment (such as a scraped knee) matter to the child, and they matter to the parent, but only derivatively. The cares and worries of the toddler pale into relative insignificance for the loving parent, who knows the wider context. In playground troubles, the good-enough parent is a source of security, who will ensure that no *real* peril befalls the child. On some religious views our situation is like that of the child in the care of a loving parent. Are we merely toddlers on the grand scheme of things?

Let's see how far we can go using this image of the dependent child, in full knowledge that if we are children, we are children who can do terrible and wonderful things to each other even on a planetary scale. This children's playground contains wondrous delight and terrifying monsters.

At the very least, in the Christian tradition, the attitude of religious faith understood as trust in a loving parent expresses an important truth. If this dependence on receiving care from a loving *Other* expresses a reality in the human condition, then it draws the distinction between *abject* loss, as MH understands it, and *limited* loss. If all loss has its limits, and nothing escapes the care of a loving parent, then MH's challenge remains: does life lose its meaning? Are we *infantilised* and play-acting at freedom and responsibility if abject loss is foreclosed?

I have no space for an extended treatment of this question, but I offer some observations. There is a significant conceptual shift involved in understanding ourselves as children loved by a caring parent, and dependent on the care of others, rather than as self-constituting subjects, and it is worth reexamining MH's secular faith with this in mind.

If we return to MH's claim that choices can ultimately matter to us only when we accept that our time is finite [p. 191-192], we see another way that this reasoning fails. A child's choices matter to the child, even when that child has no idea of how long life is. In any decision making between one activity and another, the relevant choices are between the activities of the moment. The notion that choice does not matter because any activity deferred now could be done *later* has no grip, for two reasons.

First, we do not make choices with total indifference over a range of times in the future far ahead, because my choice now is about the immediate future and the range of options available to me here and now. My present task to select action from a range of available options in the present.

Second, not every action is infinitely deferrable. Our desires, our hopes and our plans are not all about fungible repeatable options that will always be available to us. I have to make choices about unrepeatable options. This is a part of what it is to be dependent on the world around us in its contingent particularity. If I want to climb some particular mountain, I could do that tomorrow, or next year, or next decade, but if I want to be the *first* to climb that mountain, or if

¹³ Thanks to Jared Michelson for raising this point.

I want to introduce *you* to the joys of mountain climbing, then this choice cannot be arbitrarily deferred.

Our choices have weight because of our finitude, but that finitude is about more than lifespan. Some things that matter to us are possibilities which might be gone, never to return. This is a *metaphysical* point: independently of whether our lives come to an end, I can never re-do *today*. What is done is done, and it will never be that it was *not* done. Significant loss is possible, even for a child whose understanding of the horizon of death is so far into the distance to not be a day-to-day concern.

Once we recognise that whatever is done will always have been done, we can see that MH's reflections about finitude contain an unarticulated assumption about goals. When MH says that to have secular faith is to be "*dedicated to persons or projects that are worldly and temporal*" and that secular faith "*is the form of faith that we all sustain in caring for someone or something that is vulnerable to loss*" [p. 6], then we can see that even in this ever-changing world, there remain things that are everlasting and are invulnerable to loss—things that are *past*. If I desire to climb some mountain, then if I succeed, I *have* climbed that mountain, and that will *always* be true, even when that climb is forgotten. The goal was to climb the mountain—and this event comes and is gone—but I also aimed to *have climbed* the mountain, and this state, once it comes, is everlasting. Once I have climbed, nothing ever take that from me, not even my death and departure from the memories of others. Every contingent goal has an unchanging shadow in history as it recedes into the past. Everything we desire that is vulnerable to loss comes with a token that we *also* desire, that is with us forever.

There is more to say, but no space remains. We have seen that understanding finite life in a context of the infinite is not in tension with taking that finite life seriously and having its own significance. We have seen that MH's criticism of the religiously motivated activism of MLK is misplaced and his redescription of MLK's vocabulary in Hegelian terms obscures the shape of those commitments as orienting us beyond ourselves, and we have seen that the notion of being part of a goal that depends on us can be articulated in different ways. When it comes to collective action, participation can be well motivated even when our individual action is not necessary for the action to come about.¹⁴

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¹⁴ Thanks to Alexander Douglas, Jared Michelson, Andrew Torrance, Sharon Southwell and audiences at the 2023 BSPR Conference and the St Andrews Logos seminar for helpful feedback and discussions.