

In the night of nonknowledge: Derrida on freedom

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Abstract

Jacques Derrida had never written a book on “freedom.” This word occurs very rarely in his writings until the late ’80s; since then, he had increasingly employed it, but with circumspection. In this article, I aim to show that we can trace a thinking of freedom throughout Derrida’s work and that this thinking describes a singular trajectory from the subjective freedom of the humanist history of life to the presubjective freedom of symbolic life. To this end, first, I shall explore Derrida’s early deconstructive reading of the conception of subjective freedom that underpins modern philosophical and biological accounts of the living. Second, I shall focus on the conception of the other’s freedom that Derrida finds at work in the symbolic machine of sovereign decision. The turning point of this trajectory, I shall argue, is the elaboration, proposed by Derrida in the late ’80s, of an experience of freedom as nonknowledge that is neutralized by and yet exceeds subjective and sovereign freedom.

Keywords: contingency; decision; Kant; Jacob; machine; madness; nature; Nietzsche; sovereignty; unconditionality

Resum. *En la nit d’un no-saber: Derrida sobre la llibertat*

Jacques Derrida no va escriure mai un llibre sobre la «llibertat». Aquesta paraula apareix molt rarament en els seus escrits fins a finals dels anys vuitanta; des d’aleshores, Derrida la va emprar cada cop més, però amb cautela. En aquest article, em proposo mostrar que podem rastrejar un pensament de la llibertat tot al llarg de l’obra de Derrida i que aquest pensament descriu una trajectòria singular des de la llibertat subjectiva de la història humanista de la vida fins a la llibertat presubjectiva de la vida simbòlica. Amb aquesta finalitat, primer exploraré la lectura deconstructiva primerenca que Derrida ofereix de la concepció de la llibertat subjectiva que sustenta els discursos filosòfics i biològics moderns sobre allò vivent. En segon lloc, em centraré en la concepció de la llibertat de l’altre que Derrida veu implicada en la màquina simbòlica de la decisió sobirana. El punt d’inflexió d’aquesta trajectòria, argumentaré, és l’elaboració, feta per Derrida a finals dels anys vuitanta, d’una experiència de llibertat com a no-saber que es neutralitza amb la llibertat subjectiva i sobirana i, tanmateix, l’excedeix.

Paraules clau: contingència; decisió; Kant; Jacob; màquina; follia; naturalesa; Nietzsche; sobirania; incondicionalitat

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Summary

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Act, doing, decision, responsibility, freedom are heterogeneous to knowledge. We never *know* what we do, not because we close our eyes or remain ignorant or unconscious on this subject, but because doing and the decision to do presuppose a rupture or heterogeneity, a hiatus between knowing and acting, knowledge and freedom, and so forth. (Derrida, 2019: 285 [my translation])

1. The excess in the symbolic machine

A reader who is familiar with the work of Jacques Derrida is aware that he had never written a book on “freedom.” This word occurs very rarely in his writings until the late '80s; since then, Derrida had increasingly employed it, but with circumspection. In this article, I aim to explore Derrida's scattered engagement with “freedom” in order to show that we can trace a thinking of freedom throughout his work and that this thinking plays an important role as this work develops.¹

I shall start by recalling a late text in which Derrida explains his reservations towards “freedom.” This will allow us to highlight the trajectory of the thinking of freedom that, according to my reading hypothesis, is at stake in the philosopher's work. We are in chapter 4 of Derrida's conversation with Elizabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow ... A Dialogue* (2001). Roudinesco invites Derrida to address the question of contemporary scientism, “the ideology originating in scientific discourse, and linked to the real progress of the sciences, that attempts to reduce human behavior to experimentally verifiable physiological processes.” She wonders if, to counter this ideology, “it isn't necessary to restore the ideal of an almost Sartrean conception of freedom” (Derrida and Roudinesco, 2004: 47). From this invitation there follows a rich dialogue on the topic of freedom to which I shall return later. Here I focus on the passage from Derrida's response where he justifies his cautious recourse to the word “freedom” by suggesting the divorce between two different experiences linked to it: subjective freedom and freedom in the symbolic machine. The argument that I shall develop in this article consists of the following steps: Derrida's thinking of freedom moves between the two poles represented by these expe-

1. To my knowledge, the only study devoted to Derrida's thinking of freedom is Hobson (2012), which does not account for the trajectory of this thinking.

riences; the persistence of subjective freedom in philosophical and cultural discourses polarizes his circumspection in the use of the word; the divorce between the two kinds of experience constitutes the point of departure for the other thinking of freedom that Derrida had elaborated since the late '80s. The aforementioned passage reads:

If I am cautious about the word 'freedom,' it is not because I subscribe to some mechanistic determinism. But this word often seems to me to be loaded with metaphysical presuppositions that confer on the subject or on consciousness—that is, on an egological subject—a sovereign independence in relation to drives, calculation, economy, the machine. If freedom is an excess of play in the machine ... then I would militate for a recognition of and a respect for this freedom, but I prefer to avoid speaking of the subject's freedom or the freedom of man. (Derrida and Roudinesco, 2004: 48-49)

I shall read this passage in light of the three-step argument that I have proposed. First, Derrida distances himself from the concept of subjective/sovereign freedom as it hinges on the metaphysical presupposition undergirding the humanist and oppositional account of the history of life. This freedom, which constitutes the essential feature of the self-present and conscious subject, demarcates the frontier that, within that account, divides the human from the animal-machine (see section 3). Second, Derrida subscribes to another conception of freedom, as the excess in/of the machine produced by the humans, which I shall call the symbolic machine (for reasons that will appear evident later). This conception requires another account of the stage of life corresponding to the symbolic, as a nonoppositional articulation of freedom and the machine. For this reason, Derrida's reservations towards freedom are far from relapsing into a subscription to determinism, namely, to a mere reversal of the humanist opposition freedom/machine. For what matters to us here, I anticipate elliptically that this other freedom accounts for the interruption of consciousness that is implicit in the symbolic machine (for example, a decision) and prevents the latter from being fully reappropriated by its producer. Third, I will show that Derrida's treatment of freedom throughout his work goes from the deconstruction of subjective freedom to the elaboration of the excess in the symbolic machine. This deconstruction takes place within Derrida's broader deconstructive reelaboration of the humanist and oppositional account of the history of life. In section 3, I shall focus on two noteworthy moments of this reelaboration, in writings from the '70s, where Derrida engages with the humanist conception of freedom at work in philosophical and biological discourses. In the late '80s, Derrida thinks, in the wake of Nietzsche, the divorce between this humanist conception and the alternative of the excess. As I show in sections 4-6, this dissociation opens up a more complex account of symbolic life, which Derrida develops until his latest writings. Prior to exploring this trajectory of thinking, in the subsequent section, I shall try to inscribe its turning point in a precise moment of Derrida's work corresponding to the reading of Nietzsche's

conception of friendship that he develops in the late '80s, in *The Politics of Friendship* (1994).²

2. The other's freedom

In *Beyond Good and Evil* (§44), Nietzsche affirms that “the philosophers of the future” will be “very free spirits,” not merely “free spirits, but rather something more, higher, greater and fundamentally different.”³ “In all the countries of Europe, and in America,” he goes on, “there is now something that abuses this name: a very narrow, restricted, chained-up type of spirit whose inclinations are pretty much the opposite of our own intentions and instincts” (2002: 40). They are misnamed “free spirits” and are “slaves of democratic taste and its ‘modern ideas.’” They are characterized by their striving for “green pasture happiness of the herd, with security, safety, contentment, and an easier life for all” (2002: 41). For Nietzsche, the philosophers of the future situate at the antipodes of those free spirits unworthy of the name. He describes their freedom as follows:

Grateful even for difficulties and inconstant health, because they have always freed us from some rule and its ‘prejudice,’ grateful to the god, devil, sheep, and maggot in us, curious to a fault, researchers to the point of cruelty, with unmindful fingers for the incomprehensible, with teeth and stomachs for the indigestible, ready for any trade that requires a quick wit and sharp senses, ready for any risk, thanks to an excess of ‘free will.’ (2002: 41-42)

In his remarks on this text, in *The Politics of Friendship*, Derrida interprets this other freedom of spirit as the experience of the undecidable.⁴ This interpretation is full of consequences for the subsequent developments of his thinking of freedom. As we see later, Derrida dissociates this other freedom from the metaphysical presupposition of the self-present and conscious subject underpinning the classical and humanist conception of decision. Furthermore, he thinks of this freedom as the excess in the symbolic machine of a decision, as the element of unconsciousness that prevents decision to come back to the subject that it is meant to presuppose. Referring to Nietzsche’s philosophers of the future, Derrida explains that they “*already are philosophers capable of thinking the future*, of carrying and maintaining the future—which is to say, for the metaphysician allergic to the *perhaps*, capable of enduring the intolerable, the undecidable and the terrifying” (Derrida, 1997: 36-37).

Later, in the same work, Derrida engages with another text by Nietzsche, from *The Gay Science* (§61), which allows him to further develop his interpretation of a nonclassical and nondemocratic conception of freedom. This text, written “In honor of friendship,” recalls that “the feeling of friendship was in

2. This work is based on a three-year seminar taught between 1988 and 1991.

3. On the freedom of Nietzsche’s free spirits, see Davis Acampora (2015).

4. For an overview of Derrida’s Nietzsche, see Schrift (1995: 9-32).

antiquity considered the highest feeling, even higher than the most celebrated pride of the self-sufficient sage” (Nietzsche, 2001: 72).⁵ It narrates the story of the dramatic encounter between the Macedonian king and the Athenian philosopher. Derrida rereads this story as the affirmation of the divorce between the two experiences of subjective freedom and another kind of freedom that entails the delivery over to the other (or the other’s freedom) and the interruption of subjective self-reappropriation. He uncovers in the latter a loss of consciousness, namely, madness, which, elsewhere in the same years, he finds at work at the heart of a just decision (see section 4). Finally, Derrida highlights that the implications of that divorce extend on our classical conception of democracy, as it rests on the metaphysical presupposition of the self-present and conscious subject.

First, Derrida rereads Nietzsche’s story as a split between the conception of subjective freedom and the experience of friendship as the gift of/dependency on the other.

Now the tale, setting face-to-face a king and a philosopher, a Macedonian king and a Greek philosopher, tends to mark a split between this proud independence, this freedom, this self-sufficiency that claims to rise above the world, and a friendship which should agree to depend on and receive from the other. The Athenian philosopher disdains the world, refusing as a result the king’s gift (*Geschenk*) of a talent. ‘What!’ demanded the king. ‘Has he no friend?’ Nietzsche translates: the king meant that he certainly honoured the pride of a sage jealous of his independence and his own freedom of movement; but the sage would have honoured his humanity better had he been able to triumph over his proud self-determination, his own subjective freedom; had he been able to accept the gift and the dependency — that is, this law of the other assigned to us by friendship, a sentiment even more sublime than the freedom or self-sufficiency of a subject. (Derrida, 1997: 63)

At this point, Derrida wonders if there is any freedom in this experience of friendship, and if the latter is linked to the loss of identity that is designated as madness. Finally, he seems to suggest that there is some freedom, but of another kind (“what concept of freedom—and of equality—are we talking about?”), and that political consequences may follow from it for our future discourses on democracy (“what are the political consequences and implications, notably with regard to democracy ... of such a *divorce between two experiences of freedom* [my emphasis].”) (Derrida, 1997: 64).

As I have shown in this section, in the late ’80s Derrida seems to highlight in Nietzsche’s text another, so to speak, presubjective freedom that provides him with the premises for thinking of freedom as the excess in the symbolic machine and thus for giving a more complex account of symbolic life. It is time now to go back to the ’70s, to examine Derrida’s treatment of the humanist and metaphysical conception of subjective freedom.

5. On Nietzsche’s philosophy of friendship, see Verkerk (2019).

3. Freedom and contingency

In the two texts that I explore here, Derrida places the concept of subjective freedom within the humanist and oppositional account of the history of life. This concept is seen to hinge on the metaphysical oppositions that are at stake in that account and thus on the presupposition of the self-present and conscious human subject. Building on his conception of *grammē* as the minimal structure of experience and thus of the history of life as the history of the articulations of *grammē*, Derrida unfolds a differential and nonoppositional account of the living and its evolution in which there does not seem to be space for the humanist and subjective freedom (Derrida, 1976: 9-10 and 83-84). In the first text, from “Economimesis” (1975), Derrida focuses on the elaboration of freedom, in Kant’s third *Critique*, as one of the two poles of the opposition nature/culture. In the second text, from the recently published seminar on *Life Death* (1975-76), Derrida highlights the role that freedom plays in the history of life told by molecular biologist François Jacob.

In the opening pages of “Economimesis,” a short essay that develops as a tour de force through the *Critique of Judgement*, Derrida draws attention to the definition of art in general, as opposed to nature, which Kant proposes in §43.⁶ Derrida finds in the concept of freedom (*qua* human and subjective freedom) that is involved in this definition the index of the humanist and oppositional history of life that is at stake in the Kantian text. He starts by paraphrasing the second paragraph of §43, where Kant argues that “only production through freedom, i.e., through a capacity for choice that grounds its actions in reason, should be called art,” and has recourse to the classical topos of “the product of the bees,” which, to his view, can be described as a work of art but only by “analogy” with the latter. “As soon as we recall that they do not ground their work on any rational consideration of their own,” Kant continues, “we say that it is a product of their nature (of instinct), and as art it is ascribed only to their creator” (Kant, 2000: 182). Derrida’s paraphrase ends with the following statement, which suggests the link between the Kantian nature/art opposition and the humanist account of the living secured in this opposition: “there is therefore no art, in a strict sense, except that of a being who is free and *logon ekon* [a reference to the Kantian “rational consideration”]” (Derrida, 1981: 5). From this point on, Derrida advances his interpretation of the Kantian concept of art as a product of freedom, which can be read as the first moment of the two-step deconstructive reelaboration of the humanist history of life that he unfolds fully in the other text examined in this section. Derrida limits himself to explaining that, by constructing this concept of free production, Kant wishes to affirm the history of life that is at stake in oppositions such as nature/art, natural/free products, and instinct/logos. Finally, this concept, and the oppositional history of life that it carries with itself, rest on the presupposition of animality as an undifferentiated stage of life,

6. For a deconstructive reading of nature in Kant’s third *Critique*, see Bennington (2017).

whose differences are reduced to the frontier that separates it from the human subject (and its values: consciousness, freedom, language, etc.). Derrida writes:

The concept of art is also constructed with just such a guarantee in view. It is there to raise man up, that is, always to erect a man-god, to avoid contamination from 'below', and to mark an incontrovertible limit of anthropological domesticity. The whole economimesis (Aristotle: only man is capable of *mimesis*) is represented in this gesture. Its ruse and its naïveté lie in the necessity, in order to save the absolute privilege of emergence (art, freedom, language, etc.), of grounding it in an absolute naturalism and in an absolute indifferentialism; somewhere human production has to be renaturalized, and differentiation must get effaced into opposition. (Derrida, 1981: 5)

In the other text under scrutiny here, *Life Death* §1, Derrida displays a full version of the deconstructive rewriting of the humanist history of life that he sketches in his reading of Kant. This rewriting consists in revealing the metaphysical presupposition underpinning that history and displacing the latter into a grammatological and differential account of the living in general. I shall focus on Derrida's reading of the history of life (as a history of memories) that Jacob tells us in the Introduction to his masterwork *The Logic of Life* (1971).⁷ This history of life is characterized by two main stages corresponding to the emergence of biological memory (the genetic program understood as the conservation of the biological inheritance of a species from generation to generation) and cerebral memory (understood as the basis for cultural and symbolic institutions).

For modern biology, the special character of living beings resides in their ability to retain and transmit past experience. The two turning-points in evolution—first the emergence of life, later the emergence of thought and language—each corresponds to the appearance of a mechanism of memory, that of heredity and that of the mind. There are certain analogies between the two systems: both were selected for accumulating and transmitting past experience, and in both, the recorded information is maintained only as far as it is reproduced at each generation. However, the two systems differ with respect to their nature and to the logic of their performance. The flexibility of mental memory makes it particularly apt for the transmission of acquired characters. The rigidity of genetic memory prevents such transmission. (Jacob, 1973: 2-3)

Derrida engages in a close reading of this history of life, which consists of a double pair of remarks and questions. Prior to focusing on the second pair, which touches on the subjective freedom involved in Jacob's history of life, I shall summarize the first one. Derrida begins by remarking that Jacob does not seem to draw the implications of the analogy that he discovers at work between biological and symbolic programs and that undergirds his history of life/memory (Derrida, 2020: 15). As Derrida remarks, this analogy is possible

7. For a more extended analysis of this reading (including a close engagement with scholarship), allow me to refer to Senatore (2020).

precisely as the biological discourse of his day (molecular biology), of which Jacob is an advocate, subscribes to the fact that genetic memory works *like* a symbolic memory (namely, a semiotic code). “Genetic reproduction is not a copy, says Jacob,” Derrida observes, “the copy is not a copy either; it is a variation within a strictly regulated code” (2020: 16). At this point, Derrida wonders, and this is his first question following the first remark, what are the implications of this analogy? He reformulates the symbolic pole of this analogy in light of a so-called modern conception of the symbolic, identified as agonistic and differential, which calls into question the metaphysical presupposition of the conscious human subject. Therefore, what are the implications, he asks, of the fact that the topos of the genetic program is the one “with which, today, a certain modernity marked by psychoanalysis, linguistics, and a certain Marxism describes the functioning of institutional [cultural, and so forth] programs” (2020: 17)? Derrida explains this topos as follows:

a planned program, but one whose subjects are effects and not authors, a program whose design is not structurally deliberate, conscious, and intentional but functions all the better as a program, an oriented program, as a result, a program in compliance with predetermined goals, corresponding to relations of production, of reproduction, to an entire agonistics where every force works to promote its own reproduction and modes of reproduction. (2020: 17)

The first consequence is, according to Derrida, that the difference between genetic and symbolic programs, and thus between the two stages of the history of life that Jacob tells us, is no longer rigorous but quantitative. For this reason, Jacob ends up describing that difference in terms of rigidity/softness (2020: 17). The second consequence is the project of a deconstructive re-elaboration of the question of animality (classically reduced to the life stage of the biological as opposed to the symbolic), which Derrida only anticipates elliptically and which promises an alternative nonoppositional and differential account of the living in general. “I would be in favor,” Derrida confesses, “of a de-limitation that gets rid of [*faisant sauter*] ... this opposition [between the genetic and the symbolic] in order to make way not for the homogeneous but for a heterogeneity or a differentiability” (2020: 18).

The second remark made by Derrida concerns the other version of the opposition between the genetic and the symbolic that Jacob offers in his Introduction. Jacob distinguishes the two programs in light of their relation to the environment, which seems to be a more rigorous and qualitative opposition than the opposition rigidity/softness (2020: 18). The argument for this new opposition is that genetic memory does not admit deliberate changes caused by the environment, but only contingent changes for which there is no correlation between cause and effect.

Each individual programme is the result of a cascade of contingent events. The very nature of the genetic code prevents any deliberate change in programme whether through its own action or as an effect of its environment. It

prohibits any influence on the message by the products of its expression. The programme does not learn from experience. (Jacob, 1973: 3)

We should conclude, Derrida suggests, that the symbolic program is susceptible of *deliberate* change where the biological program is not (2020: 19). Therefore, Jacob's (for Derrida, suspicious) reference to deliberate change betrays the presupposition of the self-present and conscious subject and of the subjective freedom involved in its products. As Derrida remarks, the deliberate correlation between cause and effect is a "conscious or knowing [*consciente ou sciente*] correlation" and thus contingency is a relation of nonknowledge or nonconsciousness [*non-science ou conscience*] (2020: 18). (Here Derrida develops a promising conception of unfreedom and contingency as nonknowledge and madness, namely, as the experience of a certain interruption of subjective reappropriation.) We have come to Derrida's second question: is the presupposition that the symbolic program undergoes a deliberate and conscious change verified? To address this question, Derrida appeals again to the theoretical advancements of the modernity evoked above, for which not only is that presupposition not confirmed, but, as we know, an analogy is at work between the functioning of biological and symbolic programs. As Derrida puts it, "causality in the order of, let us say, 'cerebral-institutional' programs ... has exactly the same style, in its laws, as the causality that Jacob seems to want to reserve for genetic programs," (2020: 19). Therefore, the *parti pris* of Jacob's discourse, the implication of subjective freedom in the production of symbolic programs, is a conceptual construction that wishes to reaffirm the humanist and oppositional history of life. According to Derrida, Jacob takes the idea of an essentially deliberate program from the same metaphysico-ideological opposition that he had highlighted in the Kantian definition of art, an opposition that wishes to secure the privilege of symbolic life. Here Derrida further develops his appeal to modernity in order to display an alternative, agonistic and differential account of change in symbolic life, in which subjective freedom and consciousness do not seem to be involved, and which seems to intersect with a deconstructive reelaboration of the humanist history of life as the history of *grammē*.

Now if anything has been learned from what are today called the structural sciences, it is the possibility of affirming that systems linked to language, to the symbolic, to cerebral memory, etc., also have an internal functioning, itself internally regulated, that escapes deliberation and consciousness and enables the effects that come from the outside to be perceived as contingencies, heterogeneous forces that need to be interpreted, translated, assimilated into the internal code in an attempt to master them. And it is when this attempt fails that "mutations" are produced, mutations that might take all kinds of forms but that signal in each case a violent intrusion from the outside, necessitating a general restructuring. (Derrida, 2020: 20)

We can draw some conclusions from the exploration of these early texts on subjective freedom. There does not seem to be space left for this freedom in the

account to come of the functioning of the symbolic machine, unless we dissociate from it another experience of freedom that is much closer to the highlighted conception of contingency as nonknowledge and madness. In the following section, I shall jump back to the late '80s in order to look into the gesture of that dissociation, which leads Derrida from subjective freedom as opposed to the animal-machine to freedom as the trace of nonknowledge in the symbolic machine.

4. The test of the undecidable

In the Foreword to *The Politics of Friendship*, Derrida announces that one of the tasks of his book is that of exploring the status of decision and the deciding subject (“We will then ask *ourselves* what a decision is and *who* decides”). Furthermore, he anticipates that he will dissociate from the so-called classical decision, which, by definition, hinges on the metaphysical presupposition of the free subject, a new conception of decision, which entails, in turn, an alternative conception of freedom and subjectivity. “And,” he continues “[we will ask] if a decision is — as we are told — active, free, conscious and wilful, sovereign. What would happen if we kept this word and this concept, but changed these last determinations?” (Derrida, 1997: xi). We see in a moment why it is important to retain the old name of “decision” and thus to unfold this new decision as the effect of a dissociation.⁸

Derrida responds to the aforementioned task in a couple of pages from chapter 3, which can be read as his short treatise on decision. He offers therein a two-movement deconstructive reelaboration of classical decision that consists of uncovering the aporia for which the latter is not a decision at all, and developing the alternative conception of a decision worthy of the name. On one hand, Derrida unpacks the contradiction implicit in classical decision between the two mutually exclusive meanings of interruption—as a certain interruption of knowledge and consciousness—and the free subject. According to what he had suggested earlier on in the wake of Nietzsche, we can reread in this contradiction the dissociation between the two experiences of subjective and the other’s freedom. On the other hand, Derrida develops an alternative conception of decision that draws together the meanings of interruption and responsibility.

In what follows, I engage in a close reading of Derrida’s text in order to highlight his deconstructive reelaboration of decision as it develops. His short treatise begins by uncovering the aporia of so-called classical decision. To this end, it explains how it is interwoven together with the aporia of the event:

8. In *Scatter 1*, Bennington offers another reading of the two texts examined in this section, which focuses on the madness of decision (2016: 159-186). I engage in a further exploration of Derrida’s work on decision in a study included in a forthcoming collective project on *The Politics of Friendship*.

There is no event, to be sure, that is not preceded and followed by its own *perhaps*, and that is not as unique, singular and irreplaceable as the decision with which it is frequently associated, notably in politics. But can one not suggest without a facile paradox, that the eventness of an event remains minimal, if not excluded, by a decision? Certainly the decision makes the event, but it also neutralizes this happening that must surprise both the freedom and the will of every subject — surprise, in a word, the very subjectivity of the subject, affecting it wherever the subject is exposed, sensitive, receptive, vulnerable and fundamentally passive, before and beyond any decision — indeed, before any subjectivation or objectivation. (Derrida, 1997: 68)

The event accounts for the experience of a certain interruption of knowledge and consciousness, which is traditionally associated to decision. However, this eventful experience is neutralized by the decision so long as the latter presupposes the constitution of the free subject, namely, subjectivation, which the eventful experience should anticipate. Building on this double aporia of event and decision, Derrida argues for the inability of the classical conception of decision (including Schmittian decisionism) and of the underpinning conception of subjectivity to account for a decision worthy of the name. Nothing happens to the free subject, not even that for which it believes that it decides. Derrida's argument reads:

Undoubtedly the subjectivity of a subject, already, never decides anything; its identity in itself and its calculable permanence make every decision an accident which leaves the subject unchanged and indifferent. *A theory of the subject is incapable of accounting for the slightest decision.* But this must be said *a fortiori* of the event, and of the event with regard to the decision. For if nothing ever happens to a subject, nothing deserving the name 'event', the schema of decision tends regularly — at least, in its ordinary and hegemonic sense (that which seems dominant still in Schmittian decisionism, in his theory of exception and of sovereignty) — to imply the instance of the subject, a classic, free, and wilful subject. (1997: 68)

At this point, Derrida unfolds the second movement of his deconstructive re-elaboration of classical decision. He begins by wondering if another decision can be thought that would account for the other experience of freedom implicit in interruption, namely, a presubjective freedom, at the same time as for responsibility. "But should one imagine, for all that, a 'passive' decision, as it were, without freedom, without that freedom?," Derrida wonders. "Without that activity, and without the passivity that is mated to it?," he goes on, "But not, for all that, without responsibility?" (1997: 68). From this suggestion, he elaborates the conception of a decision that is passive or of the other in me, as it retains the experience of freedom that it shares with the event and that prevents it from being reappropriated by the free subject; and yet it remains a responsible decision. Furthermore, the deciding subject is affected originarily, namely, before any self-reappropriation, or it lets itself be affected by its decision. Let us read Derrida's elaboration:

The passive decision, condition of the event, is always in me, structurally, another event, a rending decision as the decision of the other. Of the absolute other in me, the other as the absolute that decides on me in me ... This normal exception, the supposed norm of all decision, exonerates from no responsibility. Responsible for myself before the other, I am first of all and also *responsible for the other before the other*. This heteronomy, which is undoubtedly rebellious against the decisionist conception of sovereignty or of the exception (Schmitt), does not contradict; it opens autonomy on to itself, it is a figure of its heartbeat. It matches the decision to the gift, if there is one, as the other's gift. (1997: 68-69)

In a subsequent passage, Derrida has an explicit formulation of the other experience of freedom that underpins his conception of a responsible decision. He identifies this experience as the decisive and deciding moment of the act within the act of decision, freedom itself, which interrupts knowledge, thus preventing decision from being a property of the free subject and from relapsing into the contradiction of classical decision. This experience is not merely opposed but heterogeneous to knowledge, namely, nonknowledge or unconsciousness, as it anticipates subjectivation. It is from this perspective that a decision is unconscious, or, so to speak, contingent.

To give in the name of, to give to the name of, the other is what frees responsibility from knowledge—that is, what brings responsibility unto itself, if there ever is such a thing. For yet again, one *must* certainly *know*, *one must know it*, knowledge is necessary if one is to assume responsibility, but the decisive or deciding moment of responsibility supposes a leap by which an act takes off, ceasing in that instant to follow the consequence of what is—that is, of that which can be determined by science or consciousness—and thereby *frees itself* (this is what is called freedom), by the act of its act, of what is therefore heterogeneous to it, that is, knowledge. *In sum, a decision is unconscious*—insane as that may seem, it involves the unconscious and nevertheless remains responsible. And we are hereby unfolding the classic concept of decision. It is this act of the act that we are attempting here to think: 'passive,' delivered over to the other, suspended over the other's heartbeat. (1997: 69)⁹

Finally, Derrida thinks of freedom as the experience of the other's freedom (the delivery over to the other [*livré à l'autre*]), which interrupts the reappropriation of the free subject that is at stake in classical decision and makes it unworthy of the name. Let us take this new thinking of freedom and decision as a new analysis of the symbolic machine: its consequences are enormous. Here Derrida offers an account of the symbolic machine that is more complex than the account examined in section 3: another experience

9. For other remarks on this text, see Hobson (2012: 43-44). On freedom as the hiatus between knowledge and responsibility, see Derrida (1995: 25-26). Here I recall that, in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (1997), Derrida suggests a convergence of paths between his conception of passive decision and the thought of intentionality (as hospitality) developed by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (Derrida, 1999: 22-24 and 135-136).

of freedom, as nonknowledge and the other's freedom, plays as the condition for this machine.

In the same years, in *Force of Law*, Derrida engages in another response to the task established in *The Politics of Friendship*.¹⁰ He develops another thought of a decision worthy of the name, this time, a just decision, which entails another elaboration of his thinking of the other's freedom. We find this thought in the pages dedicated to the three aporias concerning the relation between justice and right, in which Derrida explores the conditions for making a just decision and their repercussions on the status of decision and deciding subjectivity. Here I shall trace in Derrida's formulation of the three aporias his elaboration of the other's freedom and the autohetero-affective subjectivity that are found at work in a just decision.

In the first aporia, Derrida points out that a just decision must be free and thus cannot merely follow from the application of a rule. In other words, it requires a certain unconditionality and nonknowledge. However, a just decision must also be recognized as such and thus follow a rule: it must be repeatable. For this reason, Derrida argues that this decision must be free, namely, it must exceed subjective reappropriation, at the same time as it must be identifiable as a rule. In Derrida's words, a just decision "must not only follow a rule of law or a general law but must also assume it, approve it, confirm its value, by a reinstating act of interpretation, as if, at the limit, the law did not exist previously, as if the judge himself invented it in each case" (Derrida, 2002: 251). In the second aporia, Derrida affirms that a just decision must do the test of the undecidable, namely, it must go through the experience of a certain interruption of knowledge and consciousness that is not opposite but heterogeneous and excessive with regard to them. This experience prevents decision from being the application of knowledge or of the rule and thus from being reappropriated by the self-present and conscious subject. Derrida writes:

The undecidable is not merely the oscillation or the tension between two decisions. Undecidable—this is the experience of that which, though foreign and heterogeneous to the order of the calculable and the rule, *must* [*doit*] nonetheless—it is of *duty* [*devoir*] that one must speak—deliver itself over to the impossible decision while taking account of law and rules. A decision that would not go through the test and ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision; it would only be the programmable application or the continuous unfolding of a calculable process. (2002: 252)

Here Derrida marks a radical shift between his account of a just decision and the classical account of decision, which, as we know, rests on the metaphysical presupposition of subjectivation and thus neutralizes the meaning of interruptive freedom implicit in the name of decision. "In a way, and at the risk of shocking," he affirms, "one could even say that a subject can never decide anything [*un sujet ne peut jamais rien décider*]: a subject is even that to *which* a

10. *Force of Law* was first presented in 1989; the complete French version came out in 1994.

decision cannot come or happen [*arriver*]” (2002: 253). However, Derrida goes on, a just decision cannot remain suspended in the experience of the undecidable and thus “has again followed a rule, a given, invented or reinvented, and reaffirmed rule” (2002: 253). But this does not mean that this experience has been dialectically overcome by the decision, as it interrupts subjective reappropriation. Rather, this experience plays as the excess in/of the symbolic machine of decision, and an account of the latter cannot overlook this excess. As Derrida puts it, the undecidable is not “a surmounted or sublated [*relevé*] (*aufgehoben*) moment in the decision,” but “remains caught, lodged, as a ghost ... an essential ghost, in every decision, in every event of decision” (2002: 253). As we see later, it constitutes the historicity of symbolic life.¹¹

Finally, in the third aporia, Derrida unfolds his conception of a passive decision. He starts his analysis by recalling the meaning of interruption inscribed in a just decision, for which the latter must retain nonknowledge, the delivery over to the other, or the test of the undecidable. For this reason, the moment of decision remains a finite moment in time, as it requires that interruption for something to happen to the deciding subject. As Derrida puts it in a memorable way, decision acts “in the night of nonknowledge and nonrule” (which is “not the absence of rule,” 2002: 255).

And even if it did have all that at its disposal, even if it did give itself the time, all the time and all the necessary knowledge about the matter, well then, the moment of *decision as such*, what must be just, *must* [*il faut*] always remains a finite moment of urgency and precipitation; it must [*doit*] not be the consequence or the effect of this theoretical or historical knowledge, of this reflection or this deliberation, since the decision always marks the interruption of the juridico-, ethico-, or politico- cognitive deliberation that precedes it, that *must* [*doit*] precede it. (2002: 255)¹²

Now, as we know, this moment of decision is also a moment of madness, precisely because the interruption of knowledge and consciousness does not let itself be overcome by the free subject, and thus a just decision that goes through it must be passive or unconscious. It follows that the deciding subject is autohetero-affective: it is somehow anticipated by a just decision and can only let itself be affected by it. As Derrida explains, the instant of decision: “is a madness, a madness because such decision is both hyper-active and suffered [*sur-active et subie*], it preserves something passive, even unconscious, as if the deciding one was free only by letting himself be affected by his own decision and as if it came to him from the other” (2002: 255).

In conclusion, the account of decision offered by Derrida here sheds light on the experience of presubjective or the other’s freedom that makes the moment of decision into a finite moment of madness, an experience which I have iden-

11. On the problems related to a history of freedom, see Derrida (1995: 4-5).

12. This night of nonknowledge recalls the darkness (*nuit*) of “the blind origin of the work” evoked in “Force and Signification” (1963), a darkness in which Derrida places the “absolute freedom” of writing (1978: 7-12).

tified as nonknowledge and the test of the undecidable. In doing so, this account touches upon the condition and the limit of the symbolic machine, upon its historicity. In the next section, I shall demonstrate that this new thinking of freedom provides Derrida with the premises for a further elaboration of the history of life that he had told us earlier on. To this end, I shall refer to a later text that, in an explicit fashion, brings presubjective freedom within the account of symbolic life.

5. Destined to be free

Let us go back to Derrida's conversation with Roudinesco that we have interrupted in section 1. I shall reread Derrida's response to Roudinesco as the elaboration of a thinking of freedom alternative to her appeal to Sartrean freedom. I recall that Derrida expresses his reservations towards this appeal by suggesting the dissociation between two kinds of freedom. As we have seen, the latter allows for a more complex analysis of symbolic life as it takes account of the experience of another freedom that is retained in that life and constitutes its limit. Derrida's response begins by situating the analysis of symbolic life at the frontier of scientism, as it focuses on what escapes the scientist account, the genesis and historicity of the machine. In doing so, it seems to echo the relation between structuralism and a certain thinking of force, which Derrida had developed in the early essay "Force and Signification."

What bothers me about some of the people who identify with scientism is that their mechanical models often fall far short of the hypercomplexity of the machines, real or virtual, produced by humans (and to which, for example, all the aporias and the 'impossibles' taken up by deconstruction bear witness, precisely there where it puts the most powerful formalizing machines to the test, in language; and it does this not in order to disqualify the 'machine' in general, quite the contrary, but in order to 'think' it differently, to think differently the event and the historicity of the machine). (Derrida and Roudinesco, 2004: 48)

Drawing on the reference to the impossibles of deconstruction (such as event, justice, responsibility), and in line with the elaboration subsequent to this response, I shall propose another interpretation of this passage. Derrida also seems to subscribe to an account of those experiences that are heterogeneous and excessive with respects to symbolic life and of which the latter bears the trace. Think, for example, of freedom as nonknowledge, in the case of decision. Therefore, Derrida observes that the relation between the event and the machine is "a complex relation" and "not a simple opposition." As we know, and Derrida recalls this point, the event accounts for the moment of the interruption of knowledge and subjective self-reappropriation, thus the moment of madness, which haunts symbolic life. "We can call it [the non-machinelike] freedom," he admits, but only if "there is something incalculable," namely, on condition that we are thinking of what we have described as the other's freedom. And he adds:

And I would also distinguish between an incalculable that remains homogeneous with calculation ... and a noncalculable that in essence would no longer belong to the order of calculation. The event—which in essence should remain unforeseeable and therefore not programmable—would be that which exceeds the machine. (Derrida and Roudinesco, 2004: 49)

By employing the word and concept of freedom, we should not forget the trajectory of the deconstructive reelaboration that has taken us from subjective to presubjective freedom. We should thus read this recourse to freedom as an attempt to give it a “postdeconstructive value.” For this reason, to my view, Derrida feels the need to express again his reservations towards freedom by confessing his fear of “reconstituting a philosophical discourse that has already been exposed to a certain deconstruction (freedom as sovereign power of the subject or as independence of the conscious self ...).” In this context, he refers to the book that Jean-Luc Nancy had dedicated to freedom (*The Experience of Freedom*, 1988) as to the only and most persuasive attempt of a postdeconstructive conception of freedom (2004: 52).¹³

Derrida resorts to the case of decision to unfold his thinking of postdeconstructive freedom and thus his deconstructive rewriting of Roudinesco’s appeal to Sartre. Building on the results of his account of a responsible decision, he suggests that we understand freedom as the interruption of knowledge and power and as the test of the undecidable, which constitute the condition for and the excess in every responsible decision. They anticipate subjective or sovereign reappropriation and thus make decision into the other’s decision.

This can be called freedom, but with the reservations I just indicated. The condition for decision ... is the experience of the undecidable I just spoke of in terms of ‘the one who or which comes.’ If I know what it is necessary to decide, I do not decide. Between knowledge and decision, a leap is required, even if it is necessary to know as much and as well as possible before deciding. But if decision is not only under the authority of my knowledge but also *in my power*, if it is something ‘possible’ for me, if it is only the predicate of what I am and can be, I don’t decide then either. That is why I often say, and try to demonstrate, how ‘my’ decision is and ought to be the *decision of the other* in me, a ‘passive’ decision, a decision of the other that does not exonerate me from any of my responsibility. (Derrida and Roudinesco, 2004: 53)

Here Derrida evokes a certain necessity of freedom by rephrasing the Sartrean statement that “man is condemned to be free.”¹⁴ This necessity accounts for the irreducibility of postdeconstructive freedom to subjective freedom, with respect to which it is heterogeneous and excessive. “But whenever the one who or which remains to come does come,” Derrida observes, “I am exposed, destined [*voué*] to be free and to decide, to the extent that I cannot

13. For an overall interpretation of Nancy’s work, see Derrida (2005b).

14. As a starting point for a comparative reading of Sartre and Derrida, see Giovannangeli (2001).

foresee, predetermine, prognosticate” (2004: 53). This rephrasing testifies to the trajectory that, in my reading, the thinking of freedom describes in Derrida’s work, from the subjective freedom of the humanist history of life to the presubjective freedom of symbolic life.¹⁵ In the next section, I shall demonstrate that one of the latest tasks that Derrida assigns to his work, thinking unconditionality without sovereignty, can be interpreted as the ultimate elaboration of the other thinking of freedom that he had found in Nietzsche.

6. Sovereign freedom

As we saw in section 3, Derrida’s analysis of decision aims to dissociate the experience of presubjective freedom, understood as a certain unconditionality (interruption of knowledge and the delivery over to the other), from the presupposition of the free subject, which that experience anticipates and exceeds. This analysis applies to the classical conception of decision, where presubjective freedom is annulled by subjective reappropriation, as well as to Schmittian decisionism, for which the deciding subject is the sovereign. In his latest work, Derrida further develops his project of dissociating presubjective freedom from sovereignty by engaging in the task of thinking unconditionality without sovereignty. As we see later, for Derrida, the fragility and difficulty implicit in this task consist in the fact that presubjective freedom shares with sovereignty a certain character of unconditionality, which, as it occurs in classical decision, is neutralized by sovereign reappropriation.¹⁶

In *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2001-2002) §11, Derrida explicitly identifies his Nietzschean-like project of a nonclassical thinking of freedom, as divorced from sovereignty, with the task of thinking an unconditionality without sovereignty (Derrida, 2009: 302). Throughout his seminar, he demonstrates that a freedom worthy of the name, in classical term, is indissociable from sovereignty. Let us reread, for example, the passage from §3 in which Derrida examines this indissociability. Drawing on Benveniste’s work on the shared linguistic filiation of power and ipseity, Derrida explains that “the concept of sovereignty will always imply the possibility of this positionality, this thesis, this self-thesis, this autoposition of him who posits or posits himself as *ipse*, (*the self*-)same, *oneself*” (2009: 67). Now, freedom precisely consists in that experience of unconditionality that is implicit and, as we know, annulled, as sovereign freedom, in the auto-position and decision of the sovereign. Derrida writes:

That [the implication of auto-position] will be just as much the case for all the ‘firsts,’ for the sovereign as princely person, the monarch or the emperor or the dictator, as for the people in a democracy, or even for the citizen-subject

15. It is worth recalling that, in his late work on animality, Derrida calls into question the humanist conception of the abyss between animal autorelation and human self-reference by appealing to his analyses of freedom in decision (2008: 95).

16. On unconditionality in Derrida’s late work, see Naas (2008).

in the exercise of his sovereign liberty [*liberté*] (for example, when he votes or places his secret ballot in the box, sovereignly). In sum wherever there is a decision worthy of the name, in the classical sense of the term. (2009: 67)

From this passage, we may wonder if, by calling for another thinking of freedom, as the unconditionality without sovereignty, Derrida does not aim to highlight what he had designated earlier on as the ghost lodged in every decision, which the latter can annul but not sublimate, namely, unconditionality, the other's freedom, and so forth. But let us go back to §11, to see how Derrida elaborates his project of another thinking of freedom step by step. First, building on the indissociability of sovereignty and freedom, Derrida argues that it is not possible to think of freedom without sovereignty unless we think of another experience of freedom, a freedom in general or without limits (with all that this implies).

We can't take on the concept of sovereignty without also threatening the value of liberty. So the game is a hard one. Every time, as seems to be the case here, at least, we appear to be criticizing the enclosure, the fences, the limits, and the norms assigned to the free movement of beasts or the mentally ill, we risk doing it not only in the name of liberty but also in the name of sovereignty. And who will dare militate for a freedom of movement without limit, a liberty without limit. And thus without law? For anybody, any living being, human or not, normal or not, citizen or not, virtual terrorist or not. (2009: 301)¹⁷

Second, he argues that we can dissociate from sovereign freedom another experience of freedom by "thinking of an unconditionality without indivisible sovereignty," that is, by thinking of the presubjective freedom that is neutralized by and yet exceeds a sovereign decision. He acknowledges that this is a difficult task "given that sovereignty has always given itself out to be indivisible, and therefore absolute and unconditional," namely, because of the character of interruption implied by sovereign decision (2009: 302).¹⁸ But this is precisely the task of thinking unconditionality without sovereignty: unearthing the experience of unconditionality neutralized and yet excessive with respect to sovereign decision.¹⁹

As Derrida himself recalls, this task of another thinking of freedom (as the fragile and difficult dissociation between unconditionality and sovereignty) constitutes the endpoint of the two essays included in *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (2003).²⁰ In his preface to *Rogues*, Derrida points out that, despite their shared character (this time he speaks about absoluteness), there is a kind of experience that allows us to think the dissociation of unconditionality from

17. On freedom "in general," see Derrida (2005: 40-41).

18. On the interruptive meaning of indivisibility, see Derrida (2005: 17 and 100-101).

19. Here Derrida refers to *L'Université sans condition* [The University without Condition] (2001) as the text in which he formalizes his task of thinking an unconditionality without sovereignty.

20. For another interpretation of the thought of freedom at stake in *Rogues*, see Gratton (2012: 211-220).

sovereignty, of presubjective from sovereign freedom. It is not by chance that it amounts to the experience of the event evoked in his short treatise on decision when he accounts for the meaning of interruption that, in the classical decision, is annulled by subjectivation.

But through certain experiences that will be central to this book, and, more generally, through the experience that lets itself be affected by what or who comes [(*ce qui vient*), by what happens or by who happens by, by *the other to come*, a certain unconditional renunciation of sovereignty is required a priori. Even before the act of a decision. (Derrida, 2005: xiv)

I argue that this a priori renunciation of sovereignty stands for the fact that the experience in question is heterogeneous and excessive with respect to subjectivation and sovereignty and interrupts any subjective and sovereign reappropriations. Furthermore, this experience is annulled in classical decision as a subjective and sovereign freedom and yet is retained like a ghost. Therefore, as Derrida suggests, it does not require a decision; rather, as we know, it is the condition for a responsible decision, which is passive or of the other in me.

In the first essay from *Rogues*, Derrida detaches the conception of freedom as an experience indissociable from sovereignty from the conception of a more radical and originary freedom as presubjective freedom (or freedom without sovereignty). As for the former, which consists in the neutralization or annulment of the latter, he offers the following definitive explanation:

Freedom is essentially the faculty or power to do as one pleases, to decide, to choose, to determine *oneself*, to have self-determination, to be master, and first of all master of one-self (*autos, ipse*). A simple analysis of the “can,” of the “it is possible for me,” of the “I have the force to” (*krateō*), reveals the predicate of freedom, the “I am free to,” “I can decide.” There is no freedom without ipseity and, vice versa, no ipseity without freedom—and, thus, without a certain sovereignty. (2005: 22-23)

As it regards a more radical and originary freedom, Derrida has recourse to a definition that resonates with those that he gives of the undecidable, in the second aporia of the just decision, and of the incalculable, in his conversation with Roudinesco. Like in these two cases, here Derrida demarcates the other freedom from any homogeneity with the order of subjective and sovereign freedom. Furthermore, he recalls that, although heterogeneous, this other freedom is lodged in sovereign freedom. Therefore, he writes, that “the freedom” that identifies “the faculty of decision self-determination, as well as the license to play with various possibilities, ... presupposes, more radically still, more originally, a freedom of play, an opening of indetermination and indecidability” (2005: 25).

Finally, in chapter 4, Derrida draws the attention to a contemporary example of the other thinking of freedom that he had been searching for since the late '80s: Nancy's book on *The Experience of Freedom*. He thus develops the reference

to Nancy that he had made in his conversation with Roudinesco. Above all, he relaunches the political stakes implicit in Nietzsche's call for another freedom of spirit (interpreted as the other's freedom), which he had put forward earlier on. In the opening pages of this chapter, Derrida explains that he will build neither on Heidegger nor on Levinas but on Nancy's book to elaborate his thinking of freedom without sovereignty. He justifies this choice as follows. Nancy dares to call into question the political ontology of freedom (understood as sovereign freedom), which undergirds the dominant discourse on democracy, by retaining the name of freedom and thus by detaching from sovereign freedom another, presubjective, experience of freedom, which he develops into a book.²¹ This justification offers Derrida the chance to recall his reservations towards the classical conception of freedom and yet the urgency of the other thinking of freedom that we have been tracing in his work. Here I reread Derrida's words as a conclusion to my article:

I, who have always lacked his temerity, have been led by the same deconstructive questioning of the political ontology of freedom to treat this word with some caution, to use it guardedly, indeed sparingly, in a reserved, parsimonious, and circumspect manner. I've always done so with some concern, in bad conscience, or so as to give myself, from time to time and in very delimited contexts determined by the classical code, politico-democratic good conscience. (2005: 44-45)

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21. On "presubjective freedom," see Derrida (2005: 47).

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