



Unforeseeable Freedom

E.R.: Now that we have spoken of the genetic or biological trace, we can logically address the question of contemporary scientism, that is, 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.¹

In order to combat the growing influence of this point of view, which goes hand in hand with the transformation of the human into a machine, I have wondered if it isn't necessary to restore the ideal of an almost Sartrean conception of freedom—one that, however, would not be emptied of unconscious determinations.

J.D.: Of course scientism isn't science. And the men and women who are scientists recognize each other by the fact that they are never, almost never, adherents of scientism. If scientism consists in illegitimately extending the field of scientific knowledge or in giving scientific theorems a philosophical or metaphysical status that doesn't belong to them, it begins at the point where science ends and where a theory is exported beyond its field of pertinence. Scientism disfigures what is most respectable in science.

However, I would be more hesitant than you to use the word "experimentalism" or "experimentation." The experimental gesture is not necessarily dictated by scientism. But it is true that when experimentalism is pushed as far as possible, it has to be adjusted to the rational specificity in which it is being deployed. There can be experimentation in the natural

sciences, in biology, in research on the genome, but also in a different way in psychology.

Do “neurons” think? This is a very old question and one that is in general posed very poorly by the official representatives of “neurological” science, who lack any philosophical culture. This is well known. However competent they may be in their respective domains (although the delimitation of such a “domain” is sometimes difficult, and does not fall entirely within the competence of the “specialist” as such; as for the institutional evaluation of such a competence, that too is problematic), “scientists” sometimes say just anything at all when they try to involve themselves in philosophy or ethics. So in fact it is in the name of science that we must be vigilant against scientism and scientific positivism.

As for confusing (I would rather say “articulating”) thought (as it is called—but what is called thinking?), “human behavior,” or “psychic life” with mechanical phenomena, this would trouble me if we were dealing with a systematically reductive and simplifying approach. I even think it is necessary to have an interest—and I share this interest—in machines and in the complexity of their functions. 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 or 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). In my opinion, the most “free” thought is one that is constantly coming to terms with the effects of the machine. That’s why I rarely use the word “freedom” as I know you do.

On certain occasions, however, I will defend freedom as an excess of complexity in relation to a determinate machinelike state; I will fight for specific freedoms, but I will not calmly speak of Freedom [*la liberté*]. Didn’t Lacan say somewhere that he never uses this word?²

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 subject³—a sovereign independence in relation to drives, calculation, economy, the machine. If freedom is an excess of play in the machine, an excess of every determinate

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.

E.R.: But which machines are you referring to?

J.D.: There is *some* machine everywhere, and notably in language. Thus Freud, our common and privileged reference, speaks of economy, of unconscious calculation, of principles of calculation (reality principle, pleasure principle), of repetition and repetition compulsion. I would define the machine as a system [*dispositif*] of calculation and repetition. As soon as there is any calculation, calculability, and repetition, there is something of a machine. Freud took into account the machine of economy and the product of the machine.⁴ But in the machine there is an excess in relation to the machine itself: at once the effect of a machination and something that eludes machinelike calculation.

Between the machinelike and the non-machinelike, then, there is a complex relation at work that is not a simple opposition. We can call it freedom, but only beginning at the moment when there is something incalculable. And I would also distinguish between an incalculable that remains homogeneous with calculation (and which escapes it for contingent reasons, such as finitude, a limited power, etc.) 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. What it would be necessary to try to think, and this is extremely difficult, is the event *with* the machine. But to accede, if this is possible, to the event beyond all calculation, and therefore also beyond all technics and all economy, it is necessary to take programming, the machine, repetition, and calculation into account—as far as possible, and in places where we are not prepared or disposed to expect it.

It is necessary to track the effects of economic calculation everywhere, if only in order to know where we are affected by *the other*, that is, by the unforeseeable, by the event that, for its part, is incalculable: *the other* always responds, by definition, to the name and the figure of the *incalculable*. No brain, no neurological analysis, however exhaustive it's supposed to be, can render the encounter with the other. The coming of the other, *l'arrivance de l'arrivant*—the “arriving-ness” of the arrival—this is

what happens, this is the one *who or which arrives*⁵ as an unforeseeable event. Knowing how to “take into account” what defies accounting, what defies or inflects otherwise the principle of reason, insofar as reason is limited to “giving an account” (*reddere rationem, logon didonai*), and not simply denying or ignoring this unforeseeable and incalculable coming of the other—that too is knowledge, and scientific responsibility.

E.R.: Today, the notion of unconscious determination and the Freudian thesis of the three narcissistic wounds⁶ are a part of our discourse. They have been accepted. Everyone today knows that he or she has an unconscious, and in this sense psychoanalysis has taken up where the philosophy of consciousness, the philosophy of the subject, left off. It became the philosophy of the “decentered” subject. It succeeded in bringing together two antagonistic traditions, by modifying both of them, each through the other: the neurophysiological model and the “spiritual” model (introspection, self-invention, exploration of inwardness). It added to this a clinical heritage coming, on the one hand, from psychiatry (classification of illnesses) and, on the other, from the old therapeutics of the soul (treatment through transference).

But what is even newer today, it seems to me, is that this modern, decentered subject doesn’t want to know anything about this unconscious whose existence he’s aware of. He prefers to fall back on machines, neurons, organic processes, over which he has no hold. Hence my idea to restore a space of freedom to this subject who is determined or closed in on all sides by machines (social, economic, biological). For if we are really determined in every way, and no breach is possible, we risk replacing the psychical by the cultural and establishing something that, far from universal, would resemble not difference or exile but “roots,” some origin anchored in a territorial sovereignty, however imaginary it might be. Not to mention that in the political domain scientism is always quite sinister.

I would recall, with regard to a domain I know well, that it was always in the name of an alleged scientific neutrality—and therefore of a form of scientism—that the directors of the World Psychiatric Association refused, twenty years ago, to denounce the abuses of their discipline in the former Soviet Union. It is in the name of this same alleged scientificity, in their practice and in their theory, that psychoanalysts made themselves complicit with the Latin American dictatorships by claiming that their ethics required them to remain neutral regarding the torture and human

rights abuses that were occurring. Under the Nazi regime, the argument of scientific neutrality was abundantly exploited in this way.⁷ And today we're seeing a "softer" version of this attitude. In psychiatry, for example, one often evokes the supposed scientificity of its approach to mental illness, which amounts to nothing more than the psychic exploitation of its subjects.

As for the current return to a purely traumatic or organic causality, or to a trace, to explain neurosis—even though Freud abandoned this thesis in 1897⁸—I see this as a regressive attitude. Without denying economic, biological, or social determinations, one can leave a certain space for psychic life and for the idea of subjective freedom.

J.D.: Of course, but it is less clear to me what you are calling "a certain space," and what it is we would indeed want to save. The difficulty we have to confront lies in the words "subject" and "freedom." I would call what resists or ought to resist this determinism—or this imperialism of the determinist discourse—neither subject, nor ego, nor consciousness, nor even unconscious; rather I would make it one of the sites of the other, the incalculable, the event. Singularity is indeed exposed to *what comes*, as other and as incalculable. Singularity as such (whether it appears as such or not) can never be reduced, in its very existence, to the rules of a machine-like calculation, nor even to the most incontestable laws of any determinism. What to call it? It's a very difficult problem. In calling it *freedom*, I am always afraid 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, will of the "cogito," and even the freedom of *Dasein*, etc.).

The only attempt, the most convincing effort to open a passage by which the word or concept of "freedom" might be given a postdeconstructive virtue—and this often seems to me indispensable, in particular for welcoming or giving rise to what is coming, to what will come, under the name of another ethics, a repoliticization capable of approaching another concept of the political, a progressive transformation of international law, etc.—I believe I perceive this, at least perceive it, in certain passages of *The Experience of Freedom*, by Jean-Luc Nancy.⁹

It has often happened, in recent years, when I had to give a name to things of this order—the "free," the incalculable, the unforeseeable, the undecidable, the event, the arrival, the other—that I speak of "what comes."

E.R.: What comes?

J.D.: Yes, what arises unforeseeably, what both calls upon and overwhelms my responsibility (my responsibility *before* my freedom—which it nonetheless seems to presuppose, my responsibility in heteronomy, my freedom without autonomy), the event, the coming of the one who or which comes but does not yet have a recognizable figure—and who therefore is not necessarily another man, my likeness, my brother, my neighbor (you see all the discourses that would thus be called back into question again by the one who or which comes in this way). It can also be a “life” or even a “specter” in animal or divine form, without being “the animal” or “God,” and not only a man or a woman, nor a figure sexually definable according to the binary assurances of homo- or heterosexuality.

That is what an event worthy of the name can and ought to be, an *arrivance* that would surprise me absolutely and to whom or for whom, to which or for which I could not, and may no longer, *not respond*—in a way that is as responsible as possible: what happens, what arrives and comes down upon me, that to which I am exposed, beyond all mastery. Heteronomy, then—the other is my law. What thus comes down upon me does not necessarily come to me in order to elect me, as me, by presenting itself before me, in such a way that I *see it coming* horizontally, like an object or a subject that can be anticipated against the background of a horizon or a foreseeable future. There is no *horizon* for the other, any more than there is for death. The other who or which comes upon me does not necessarily *present* itself before me in a horizontal perspective; it can fall upon me, vertically (not from the Most High, and yet from so high!) or surprise me by coming at my back, from behind or from below, from the underground of my past, and in such a way that I don't see it coming, or even such that I never see it, having to content myself with feeling or hearing it.¹⁰ But barely.

E.R.: Something like the dimension of the tragic?

J.D.: We can call it tragic with a few precautions. “The one who or which comes” exceeds any determinism but exceeds also the calculations and strategies of my mastery, my sovereignty, or my autonomy. This is why, even if no one is simply a “free subject,” there is in this place something “free,” a certain space of freedom is opened, or in any case is presumed open by the one who or which comes, a *spacing* that is liberated,

dis-engaged (before and for the pledge [*le gage*], the engagement, the response, the promise, etc.). That is why this figure is linked to all the political questions of sovereignty. It is there that I am exposed and, I dare say, happily vulnerable. Whenever something other [*de l'autre*] can arrive, there is a "to come," there is something of a "future-to-come." With the determinism you spoke of, there is no future.

E.R.: Because everything would be closed down?

J.D.: Everything is already past or present, and there is no future. But whenever the one who or which remains to come does come, I am exposed, destined to be free and to decide, to the extent that I cannot foresee, predetermine, prognosticate. This can be called freedom, but with the reservations I just indicated. The condition for decision (the decision that *it is necessary* [*il faut*], which it is necessary to presuppose everywhere) 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. This is a scandalous proposition for common sense and for philosophy, but I believe I can rationally demonstrate (though I can't do it here) its ineluctable necessity and its implications. When I say "rationally," I am obviously appealing to a history of reason, and therefore also to its future, its "future-to-come." To the one who or which comes under the name of reason.

E.R.: For you, then, the possibility of freedom would be what comes, what would be unknowable: the unforeseeable, incalculable event.

We could then think of the question of the advances made in biological science not as a determinism preventing the exercise of subjective freedom but as something that ought to be included in this incalculable moment. I'm thinking of cloning in particular, which we've already discussed. I don't share the opinion of those who demonize science without understand-

ing that it is scientism, and not science, that is so violently attacking humanism, philosophy, Freud and psychoanalysis. I think that the fantasy of fabricating a human being (reproductive cloning) is a product of scientism, a scientific imaginary that, in the current circumstances, there is little need to fear.¹¹ Even if such reproduction is technically possible, the status of the clone will not be what we imagine today, precisely because in order to exist, a clone will have to be a subject and find a singular identity. In this regard, I think that Freud would have found the current problems very exciting.

J.D.: It's very complicated, of course; we must begin by recognizing that. Given a certain imagery, a certain theatricality of the identical, serial reproduction of human individuals, I understand why people would be terrified, and it's in this light that I explain to myself the immediate and passionate reactions of certain individuals and political leaders at the highest level, the official so-called "sages" of the Comité d'éthique, for example.¹² The philosophical, ethical, political, or juridical "competence" of these "sages," their supposed knowledge (and we should recall that wisdom is, precisely, not simply a form of knowledge, a knowledge supposed by others, here less than ever)—that is precisely where the problem is located. Even if (just as a hypothesis) we did not question the scientific competence or the supposed lucidity of these "sages," we are here entering zones of decision in which the very idea of competence, knowledge, or wisdom has—for reasons I gave a moment ago—a pertinence that is rigorously insufficient and essentially inadequate. But from the point of view of the imagination, I understand their terror, and I can also share it. Upon reflection, I believe that in any case there has been, is, and will be *some* cloning. Legislation will not prevent cloning.

And then, if we examine closely the concept of cloning—the reproduction of two identical individuals, two identical structures of living beings—this has always existed; it occurs all the time in reproduction in general. Reproduction in general cannot be controlled or forbidden; we cannot deny that something identical is always returning and multiplying. The identical returns all the time. In one way or another, whether in the family, in language, in the nation, in culture and in education, in tradition, one seeks to reproduce by giving oneself alibis. Without an identifying reproduction, there wouldn't be any culture either.

Finally, we must acknowledge—and here we are approaching more realistic, more effective, concrete and practical considerations—that the possibility of cloning will not necessarily be exploited for terrifying ends.

E.R.: Nonreproductive cloning, designed to cure certain genetic illnesses, obviously signals an incontestable scientific advance.

J.D.: Absolutely. For all these reasons, we should not let ourselves be too impressed by images when we address such a problem. We must also analyze this imaginative compulsion to expect the worst, the monstrous (of which we have had many examples in the history of science and technology), and not to treat the question as if it were monolithic. There are different problems that fall under the name of *cloning*. One cannot speak out for or against cloning in general. Here, too, it is better to prepare a differentiated, progressive approach, without letting oneself be paralyzed, without giving in to a fearful legislative reaction, to a reactive political response in the form of “all or nothing.”

E.R.: It seems that this is what people did.

J.D.: The important decisions are still to come. Who does what, and with what? From a concrete and legislative point of view, it is necessary to address with great care, case by case and sector by sector, the problems related to this or that possibility. Who does what with this considerable power? I am not against cloning *in general*, but if the threat of reproducing human beings emerges, I mean an effective, massive *threat*, etc., according to criteria to be determined, it will be necessary to wage a political war, as people have done in other situations. It would not be the first time. There has always been *some* reproduction.

Let's consider, for example, the notion of training. I'm thinking of the training not only of animals but also of certain political militants. One tries to “reproduce” individuals who think the same thing, who conduct themselves in the same way with respect to the leader and within the group, according to well-known patterns. There, too, it is a question of cloning. Not to mention all the techniques, all the prostheses, all the grafting, for example, and not only in military matters and in the classic and modern methods of conducting warfare.

E.R.: But today we are dealing with something different, the introduction of a mechanism of identical reproduction in the biological order!

J.D.: But where does the biological begin? How is it delimited? What is going to be reproduced?