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Sovereignty: An Infrapolitical Question

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> *Tu autem, . . . in cuius oculis mihi quaestio factus sum, et ipse est languaor meus.*
> (And you, . . . in whose eyes I am made a question, and this itself is my languor)
> – Augustine

Predicated on indivisibility,[1] erected upon the spatiality of the nomological earth,[2] lodged within the punctuality that separates the time of an exceptional decision,[3] grounded on the principle that decrees that being itself is one and the one is being as such,[4] elevated in monotheism to the keystone of the politico-theological[5]—Sovereignty will have always been inviolable.

Is it *possible* to write *another* history of sovereignty? A history of the political that would not merely reaffirm the unconditional character of sovereignty's inviolability? A history of sovereignty that would not boil down to a narration of sovereignty's hegemony across the political realm? A *critical* history of sovereign power that would configure politics *otherwise*, leading to an experience of what is perhaps otherwise than political? Perhaps an infrapolitical history of sovereignty?

Before these questions could be raised—let alone answered—it would be necessary to interrogate the concept of the question that informs these phrases and programs their reading to elicit the answer that is already implanted in their grammar. And yet, if interrogating the question is an exigency, this task certainly lags behind the expedient urgency that ordains that the question of the question ought to be neutralized, that the ground upon which our thinking stands must be prevented from slipping away under our very feet.

Examples of the resistance to this per-verse coiling of the question upon itself abound in contemporary thought, but perhaps nowhere as much as in the political terrain. This is an obvious fact, and justifiably so. After all, political thought is supposed to be the place where theoretical inquiry confronts the experience of interpellation. Political reflection thus requires bringing to a halt the aleatory ambivalence that keeps questions open to further questioning. Politics orders that a stand be made and sides be chosen. The neutralization of what remains a question in every question becomes even more palpable in the case of intensely "political" questions like the ones I raised above concerning the possibility of *another* history of sovereignty—a history that would not reassert the primacy of sovereign power as the inviolable *arkhē* of the political. Indeed, to insist on inquiring

into the presuppositions of a political question is likely to be taken as a sign of the inquirer's depoliticization. And yet, if we assume for a moment that tarrying with these questions and treating them *as* questions does perform a certain kind of "work" that is not simply apolitical, we would then have to ask why it is so difficult to acknowledge the "labor" of radical questioning within hegemonic configurations of political thought and action. If it is the case that putting political questions in question remains at best a political eccentricity, if not a blind spot of politics, then what does this situation tell us about the limits of the political and the status of radical questioning?

My wager in this essay is that politics' blindness to the force of radical interrogation tells us something about the *closure* of politics, namely, that the political *as such* constitutes itself as a field by eradicating any traces of the an-archy of the question. Conversely, this political blindness also suggests that the radicality of the question cannot be given its due in the terrain of politics. The experience of questioning the questions that constitute the horizons of the political is instead to be seen as a crucial dimension of what Alberto Moreiras calls "infrapolitics."[6] Moreiras himself has recently suggested that if infrapolitics were to have a "proper" place, it would be the non-place from which the place of politics is radically interrogated (Castillo et al. 126). Taking a cue from Moreiras, this essay contributes to the ongoing theoretical elaboration of infrapolitics by outlining the "structure" of the kinds of questions that what we might call infrapolitical. The first section of this paper thematizes the relation between infrapolitics and the question through a reading of a recent interview of Moreiras—which is included in this dossier—and the opening pages of Jacques Derrida's "Violence et métaphysique: Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas" ("Violence and Metaphysics: Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas"). Working through Derrida's thinking on the question allows me to further explicate the radicality of infrapolitical questions. At the same time, reading Derrida's essay with Moreiras's notion of infrapolitics in mind casts a different light on this text. Derrida's reflections on the status of the question in fact move towards a thinking of the *an*-archic, a-principial interrogation that is presupposed by any commandment and any law. Derrida gives at least three names to this an-archism *of* the law (a genitive that *must* be read in a strictly objective sense): the question of the question, the freedom of the question, and the possibility of the question. My claim is that something like infrapolitics is already at work in Derrida's thinking of the improper freedom and the weak possibility of a question that is free from any determination. This *other* liberation coincides for Derrida with the radical questioning of the legitimacy of any law—including the law of the question—and thus with the powerlessness of the question in the face of the dispersion of its own questioning.

The second contribution that I hope to make to the theorization of infrapolitics takes us into a more explicitly political terrain. How does infrapolitics stand with regards to the ongoing theoretical efforts to draw a limit around sovereignty? Contemporary political thought abounds in affirmative responses to the question of whether a *critique* of sovereignty is possible. Recall Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's notion of the "constituent" power of the multitude, Jon Beasley-Murray's theory of "post-hegemony," Roberto Esposito's call for an affirmative biopolitics, or Giorgio Agamben's politics of "destituent" power; these theories criticize sovereignty in the name of a politics that would not be structured by the phantasm of the indivisible one and its biopolitical ensnaring of life's potencies.[7] Still, the affirmative relation that these theorists entertain with the lexicon of power—whether constituent or destituent, Spinozist or Nietzschean—betrays the fact that their critiques of sovereignty continue to be structured by a *political* demand, which also ordains that the possibility of the critique of sovereignty should not be questioned.

The second half of this essay proposes an infrapolitical approach to the possibility of sovereignty's critique by interrogating the political charge that has already determined in advance the *sense* of the concept of "possibility" and which these political theorists take for granted. To formulate infrapolitics' way of approaching this question, in the second part I analyze briefly three texts that interrogate sovereignty from *without* the political: Emmanuel Levinas's lecture "Au-delà du possible" ("Beyond the Possible"), Maurice Blanchot's *L'écriture du désastre* (*The Writing of Disaster*), and Derrida's *L'Université sans condition* (*The University without Condition*). Each in their own singular way, these thinkers suggest that any critical history of sovereignty must interrogate the link that binds sovereignty and possibility and thus confront the problem of *its own* possibility. But whereas Levinas's "other" and Blanchot's "neutral" are still attempts to name the limits of sovereignty, Derrida ups the ante by insisting that the question of sovereignty ought to remain an open question. For any answer to this question presupposes the dissociation of sovereignty from unconditionality, a distinction that is paradoxically impossible.

The third and last section of this paper explores Derrida's claim concerning the paradoxical impossibility that keeps the question of sovereignty open. To do so, I turn to *Voyous: Deux essais sur la raison* (*Rogues: Two Essays on Reason)*, where Derrida comments on Aristotle's arguments for the "existence" of the Prime Mover in Book XII of the *Metaphysics*. My reading of this passage suggests that Derrida's turn to Aristotle should be read as an attempt to clarify the aporia that any deconstruction of sovereignty must confront. This aporia could be stated in the following terms: if sovereignty at its "core" is nothing other than sheer exceptionality, then any attempt to delimit the

proper space of sovereignty is bound to fail. The deconstruction of sovereignty cannot coincide with the effort to draw the proper boundaries of sovereignty, since such a project misrecognizes the essentially ecstatic character of sovereign power. Aristotle's way of understanding the relation between the Prime Mover and the first heaven provides an allegory of the closure of the political in the identification of sovereignty and unconditionality. If sovereignty has already shaped its supposed other in its own self-image, then it would seem as if the deconstruction of sovereignty is impossible. However, this impossibility is not the *terminus ad quem*, but rather the *terminus a quo* from which the deconstruction of sovereignty may *perhaps* begin. The experience of the im-possible names the exigency that traverses the *chance* of another history of sovereign power that would question sovereignty's claim to inviolability from the "non-site" of *infra*-political solicitation.

I. An Infrapolitical Question?

In an interview published in this dossier,[8] Moreiras gives several preliminary definitions of "infrapolitics." Perhaps the most crucial to my argument occurs in the middle of a discussion about the relation between infrapolitics and "posthegemony." For Moreiras, these two notions have to be approached as implying a radical questioning of the political:

> Neither infrapolitics nor posthegemony are goals to be achieved, but conditions of life, or of practice, and of thought, and one must reach them, perhaps, or if at all possible, through a certain labor of destruction. They require, to enter into themselves, a certain destruction whose end result is never assured. In my previous answer I said that real politics is not usually found where it seems to be but in a different place. Wherever it is, whoever finds it, neither infrapolitics nor posthegemony claim to occupy that place, rather they occupy the place that allows for making the place of politics a question in each case. (Castillo et al. 130)

Moreiras's engagement with the notions of "infrapolitics" and "posthegemony" constitutes one of the most sustained theoretical efforts in contemporary political thought to submit politics to a radical interrogation. Infrapolitics exceeds even the reputed radicalism of postfoundationalist approaches to politics insofar as the questioning *of* politics that the infrapolitical enables prevents reading this genitive as a subjective genitive.[9] In other words, infrapolitical questions are not *strictu sensu* political questions; they are neither questions that could be answered from within the political realm nor are they questions that interrogate politics exclusively for the sake of establishing *another* politics. We could get a better sense of how the questions that infrapolitics pursues are not reducible to political questions by developing further Moreiras's claim concerning the "critical destruction"

that the notions of infrapolitics and posthegemony must undergo in order to "enter into themselves." What kind of critique and what kind of destruction would enable these names to thematize the radical force of interrogation that has a claim over them?

For these terms to be understood infrapolitically and posthegemonically we would have to displace the settled semantic values and the stabilized referential forces that turn infrapolitics and posthegemony into words that relate to self-evident concepts and realities. To do so, we would have to suspend the normative lexicology that immediately determines infrapolitics and posthegemony as specific spatio-temporal modifications of politics and hegemony. If we reread the "infra" and the "post" against the grain of their spatialization and temporalization, we begin to see that infrapolitics does not designate what would be merely *below* or *beneath* the political, just as posthegemony is not a name for the mode of politics that emerges *after* hegemony's exhaustion. Rather than taking the *topoi* of politics and hegemony as the reference points that enable us to determine the time-space of the infrapolitical and the posthegemonical, we would have to rethink the "infra" and the "post" in terms of the "time-space" that would belong to a radical interrogation of politics. This would be neither an epochal time nor a neatly-defined space; instead, something like the instance of a dia-chronic instant in which an *epokhē* irrupts that turns off the politics of hegemony, which is grounded upon the principle of sovereignty. Furthermore, the weak, minimal form of ideality that would correspond to infrapolitics and posthegemony requires not only rethinking the time-space of the "infra" and the "post," but also reverting the relation of semantic and syntactic dependence that normally subjugates "bound" morphemes like "infra-" and "post-" to their "independent" roots. Although the latter are supposed to constitute a semantic whole unto themselves, to think infrapolitics infrapolitically requires reading the -politics of infrapolitics as being in fact subjugated to its "prefix:" the "infra-" and the "post-" are the sites of an excess that is free from its determination by the politics of hegemony and the hegemony of politics. It is only through the destruction of the transcendental lexicology—indeed, the transcendental grammar of politics—that already determined the infra- as relative to political that infrapolitics may come to its own *as* a mode of interrogating the political that calls politics infinitely into question.

Finally, Moreiras's claim about the need for a critical destruction to think infrapolitics and posthegemony suggests that no dialectic obtains between these four names. In other words, neither the infra- nor the post- are to be read as indexing two modalities of what would amount to an essentially *negative* relation to the political. Rather than having the status of negativity vis-à-vis the positivity of politics and hegemony, infrapolitics and posthegemony "in each case" configure unique

a-topologies that are only determin*able* by the irreducible singularity that marks each moment in which the politics of hegemony and the hegemony of politics is put into question.

Earlier in the interview, Moreiras gives another preliminary definition of infrapolitics that establishes a strong connection between this notion and deconstruction: "But we can make an attempt: let us say that infrapolitics refers to deconstruction in politics, or that it is deconstruction of politics or politics in deconstruction" (Castillo et al. 125). If we read this tentative definition alongside the characterization of infrapolitics *as* the interrogation of politics, we begin to get a better sense of the kind of interrogation of the political that animates Moreiras's efforts to theorize *otherwise* the notions of infrapolitics and posthegemony. Indeed, we might even say that these two definitions say the same thing: *as* the interrogation of politics, infrapolitics *is* also the deconstruction of politics.

We could therefore gain some clarity on what infrapolitical questions entail if we turn to deconstruction's radicalization of the experience of the question. Such a radicalization is at work from the opening of Derrida's "Violence et métaphysique." Derrida is concerned in these pages with the question of philosophy's finitude. Is philosophy *now* dead or was it already *essentially* defunct? Will it continue to die again in the future (Derrida 117)? Derrida is not interested in this question because philosophy could one day solve it; for him, the very *un*answer*ability* of this question teases out an aspect of the experience of interrogation that is necessarily elided whenever a question is posed. What is reduced through the form of interrogative statements is the very unanswerability of the question. In the case of the question of philosophy's death, this neutralization has crucial consequences, insofar as, according to Derrida, only this question could give a *sense* both to philosophy as such as well as to the community of philosophers dispersed throughout the world. It is only from philosophy's finitude—from what philosophy *cannot* ask while hoping to find a final answer—that the philosophical *as such* could be constituted. To inquire after philosophy's death therefore amounts to an infra-philosophical interrogation. The totality that determines the sense of the philosophical and the identity of the philosophers can only be achieved through an impossible inquiry into the impossibility of ever achieving this totality (Derrida 118). And yet, it is precisely because the question of philosophy's death cannot be answered within philosophy that both the philosophical as such and the community of philosophers remain constituted as it were through their destitution, through their incapacity to master impossibility by answering the question concerning "their own" limits. The community of philosophers and philosophy as such are thus marked by an essential precariousness: their coming together only takes place in the time-space of a "fragile" and infinitely open self-questioning:

> Communauté de la question, donc, en cette fragile instance où la question n'est pas encore assez déterminée pour que l'hypocrisie d'une réponse se soit déjà invitée sous le masque de la question, pour que sa voix se soit déjà laissé articuler en fraude dans le syntaxe même de la question. Communauté de la décision, de l'initiative, de l'initialité absolue mais menacée, où la question n'a pas encore trouvé le langage qu'elle a décidé de chercher, ne s'est pas encore en lui rassurée sur sa propre possibilité. Communauté de la question sur la possibilité de la question. (Derrida 118)[10]

The question of philosophy's finitude is fragile due to its radical indetermination, which eludes even the minimal determination of the question by the syntactic form of an interrogative statement. Derrida calls these kinds of statements hypocritical because they introduce the response into the question surreptitiously; they already answer the question as soon as the question itself is raised. Interrogative propositions thus neutralize the question's question*ability*. Later on in the essay, Derrida links this suspension of the syntactic form of the question to the preservation of the question *as* a question: "la question doit être gardée. Comme question" (Derrida 119).[11] Rather than reaffirming the question in its fixed essence, this preservation of the question *as* question releases the question into its freedom: "La liberté *de la question* (double génitif) doit être dite et abritée" (Derrida 119).[12] A question that would be preserved *as* a question would have been *liberated* from the necessity of its inscription as an interrogative statement; as such, it would also be a question that is *free* from the answer that its inscription has already prescribed to it. At the same time, at stake in the freedom of the question is also the question of freedom. But can this two-fold inter-rogative freedom be attained? And, if so, who could achieve it? How could the liberation of the question from its syntactic pro-gram also preserve the freedom of the question and the question of freedom?

To begin to approach this issue we would have to take stock of the fact that Derrida's statements regarding the freedom *of* the question are marked by a "*doit*" or a "must;" they have the character of an injunction. Indeed, the opening pages of Derrida's essay thematize the duty that falls upon those who claim to belong to the community of philosophers by virtue of the sole fact that they partake in the history of the question, a history inaugurated by the subtraction of the question *as such* from the entire field of factual interrogative statements. As we saw above, this duty commands questioners to preserve the question *as such*, demanding the extraction of all questions from their emplotment within the homogeneous linearity of syntax, itself informed by a linguistic *morphē* that determines the very sense of any question in relation to the telos of *answer*ability.

Unfree—that is, answerable—questions must be destroyed in order to be safeguarded *as* questions, in order to be restored to their freedom. Thus understood, the law of the question appears to command the entire field of philosophy, determining the conditions that enable any philosopher to be admitted to the philosophical community. The law of the question would amount to the very *arkhē* of philosophy and the *principium* of the philosophical *subject*. As such, the law of the question would found the historical *topos* in which the question abides *as such* and is transmitted in its abiding: "Demeure fondée, tradition réalisée de la question demeurée question" (Derrida 119).[13]

And yet, the law of the question functions *otherwise* than it appears to do. For this duty does not confirm the archontic and principial supremacy of the law of the question. Nor does it determine the very subjectivity of the philosopher or the questioner in view to the constitution of an an *actual* community of questioners ruled by the pure relation between the law and the subject:

Si ce commandement a une signification éthique, ce n'est pas d'appartenir au *domaine* de l'éthique, mais d'autoriser—ultérieurement—tout loi éthique en général. Il n'est pas de commandement qui ne s'adresse à une liberté de parole. Il n'est donc ni loi ni commandement qui ne confirme et *n'enferme*— c'est-à-dire qui ne dissimule en la présupposant—la possibilité de la question. (Derrida 119)[14]

Derrida's implicit reference to Levinas's thinking of ethics in this passage can help us to understand the extent to which the law of the question does not enable the constitution of any *subject* or *ipseity* of the question. According to Derrida, the order of the question is not essentially ethical because every instantiation of the question's command ultimately addresses both itself (the question) and the questioner *as* possibilities. What kind of notion of possibility is at stake in the possibility of the question? If the law of the question prescribes the questioner to preserve the question *as such* and if the latter coincides with the question's freedom, and furthermore if these two are to be understood as possibilities, then the law of the question itself incites and welcomes its own transgressive deposition. For every law and every commandment dissimulate the possibility of coming into question, the chance of being interrogated as to their legitimacy. It is here, in what Derrida calls "freedom of speech" ("*liberté de parole*") that we ought to locate the site from which the possibility of the questioner and of the question themselves can be experienced *as* free. This is the reason why the disclosure of the possibility of the question requires something more than the mere destruction of its dissimulation *as* an interrogative statement. All appearances to the contrary, the question *as such* is not to be seen as the expression of the phenomenological essence of the question, just as much as the freedom of the question and of the questioner are not to be immediately understood in terms of the freedom of an ego-logical consciousness that constitutes the world as a

totality of essences. Rather the "essence" of the question as well as its freedom lies in its an-archic questioning of every and any *arkhai*, including the very commandment that would have presumably produced this anarchic excess, namely, the order to free the question as such into *its own* possibility. Therefore, the freedom of the question and of the questioner irrupts uniquely and most intensely whenever the very law of the question's preservation comes into question, whenever one may approach the aporia of the question of the possibility of the question or whenever the question itself, *as such*, comes to the question. It is only from this *aporia* that the possibility of both the question and the questioner can be measured *as* free: freedom would lie in the infinitely singular experience of the inter-rogation of the question itself. It is only in this questioning that the question loses its "own" possibilities and its "proper" freedom, destroying every propositional iteration of itself and becoming free from the very notion of freedom as ground and subject, experiencing freedom only in the interrogation of *its own* freedom. The questioning of the question therefore opens unto an infinity that calls into question any law—including the law of the question—as well as any question—including the question of the law and even the question of the question. Since such a free, possible question is itself a response to a law, the question cannot claim to be an *arkhē* or a *principium*, rather it is an infinitely finite prosthesis. And yet, the law that supposedly brings about the question is, in turn, *questionable* and to such an extent that it cannot master its own being-questioned, and thus its own dispossession.

II. Infra-Ipseity? Other, Neutral, Im-possible

If something like infrapolitics is already "at work" in Derrida's outlining of the infraphilosophical question of philosophy's death, this is because infrapolitics is an attempt to affirm and thematize the destabilizing movement of inter-rogation that deposes the auto-positionality of the law, interrupts the self-referentiality of ego-logy, and suspends the constitution of any inter-subjective community. At the same time, it is worth noting once more that the expropriating effects of infrapolitical questions are not due to their *hyper*-primacy—their status as the first and/or last instance of judgment and critical authority. Instead, infrapolitical questions live and die as *questioned* questions that are *incapable* of mastering ~~their own~~ questioning. Hetero-~~auto~~-affected; there is no ipseity of the question. The possibility of the question coincides with its impossibility. Not unlike the question of philosophy's finitude, infrapolitical questions have to be raised *otherwise* than as an interrogative statements, which secure the question in its possibility and thus in its answerability.

In the introduction, I argued that the same political demand that informs the efforts of theorists like Negri, Beasley-Murray, Esposito, and Agamben to draw a limit to sovereign power

forces these theorists to neutralize the questionability of this demand.[15] After an excursus through Moreiras's interview and Derrida's essay we are now in a better position to see why this is so. The demand that a mode of non-sovereign power be *thought* and *enacted* turns the question of sovereignty into the site for the self-affirmation of a political *ipseity*: a self that is assured about the *possible-possibility* of the questions that it raises and about its own *power* to *pose* and *answer* these questions. We can see here the workings of the ruse of sovereignty, a ruse analogous to Hegel's "ruse of reason:" the same demand that structures the efforts of these thinkers to theorize another, post-sovereign politics ends up reinscribing sovereignty as the *arkhē* of the political field through the reaffirmation of the power of possibility and the possibility of power as the structuring principle of an inquisitorial politics.

What would it mean to raise the question concerning the possibility of writing a critical history of sovereignty *as* an infrapolitical question? To read this question with an ear for what remains recalcitrant to its pre-determination as a pro-positional statement and thus as an *answerable* question? Approaching the question of sovereignty obliquely, infrapolitics does not adjudicate whether such an endeavour is possible or impossible. Instead, infrapolitics thematizes how sovereign power has already brought the political to a *close* by determining the identity of ipseity, possibility, and "politicity" as the structuring principle of the politics of hegemony. From the non-place of infra-politics, rethinking politics without interrogating the power of the possible amounts to nothing but another effort to relaunch the political gigantomachia, another attempt to substitute one sovereign—one possible, one power—for another.

In order to think through what is at stake in the suspension of the movement of possibilitization that turns the question of sovereignty into the site for the reaffirmation of the sovereignty of possibility, I want to turn quickly to two texts of Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot. "Au-delà du possible" ("Beyond the Possible") is a lecture that Levinas gave at the Collège Philosophique in Paris in 1960 and which remained unpublished until 2009. This text contains a brief account of the origin of sovereignty's inviolability in the power of the will:

> La volonté, principe des pouvoirs, unit donc une contradiction: immunité contre toute atteinte extérieure au point de se poser incréée et immortelle, douée d'une force au-dessus de toute force quantifiable (rien de moins n'est attesté par la conscience de soi où l'être se réfugie inviolable : 'je ne chancellerai pas pour l'éternité' {psaume 30}) et d'une permanente faillibilité de cette *inviolable souveraineté*

devant la suprême violence au point que l'être volontaire se prête à des techniques de la séduction, de la propagande et de la torture. (Levinas 306-07, emphases mine)[16]

Levinas's characterization of the will (*la volonté*) thematizes the contradiction that tears this concept asunder. On the one hand, the will is a sovereign principle: it is the *arkh* and the *principium* of any mode of power. As such, the will has the power above all to pose itself *as* itself—as the will to will that is also the will to power—constituting itself as an absolute and ungenerated interiority that is impervious to exteriority. The parenthetical remark in this passage introduces the motif of sovereignty's inviolability through a citation from "Psalm 30" that betrays the structural bond that Levinas sees between the politico-theological and ontology understood *as* the philosophy *of* the sovereign will. Composed by King David, Psalm 30 addresses YHWH directly, singing his praise for sparing David from death. Levinas quotation of verse 7 could be read as pointing to the structural analogy that characterizes the relation between the will and self-consciousness and the human and the divine: "When I was untroubled, I thought, 'I shall never be shaken'" (Psalms 30, 7 1444). Self-consciousness is the refuge of all being; it is the form that enacts and preserves the absolute immunity of the will. Its originary transformation as self-consciousness extricates the will from the entire fabric of sensibility and appetite, of action and passion, endowing the ego-logical will with the dignity that corresponds to it as the origin of the world.

On the other hand, in spite of its claims to eternity and ungenerability, the will is finite. Indeed, Levinas understands death as an impossible experience in which impossibility itself becomes impossible:

> Etre temporel c'est être à la fois pour la mort et avoir encore du temps, être contre la mort, avoir des possibilités. Dans la façon dont la menace m'affecte, dans l'imminence, réside <u>ma</u> mise en cause par la menace et l'essence de la peur. C'est une relation avec un instant dont le caractère exceptionnel ne tient pas au fait qu'il se trouve au seuil du néant ou d'une renaissance, mais au fait que dans la vie il est l'impossibilité de toute possibilité (et non pas la possibilité de l'impossibilité ~~de toute possibilité~~ {comme le veut Heidegger)} [*sic*.]. Dans cette relation se révèle la passivité {totale à côté de laquelle la passivité} de la sensibilité qui se mue en activité n'est qu'une pâle imitation de la passivité. (Levinas 306)[17]

Levinas departs from Martin Heidegger's interpretation of death in *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), where Heidegger argues that death—on the condition of being experienced in the mode of "running ahead" (*Vorlaufen*), is the *non*-phenomenon that grants *Dasein* access to "*die Möglichkeit der maßlosen*

Unmöglichkeit der Existenz" (Heidegger 262).[18] But for Levinas, death as the impossibility of the possibility of impossibility reveals something beyond the mere impossibility of the self. The experience of the imminent fear of death discloses what Levinas calls "total passivity," which exceeds the traditional opposition between passivity and activity and the category of sensibility (Levinas 306). This passivity not only constitutes the true sense of finitude, but also enables Levinas to turn the will's submission to the "supreme violence" ("*suprême violence*") of death into the very opening through which the will is disclosed not only as impossible but as always already in relation to the other (Levinas 307).

This explains why, in spite of recognizing that death reveals "the impossibility of the possibility of impossibility" and thus marks the limit of the sovereignty of the will, Levinas insists in the need to go beyond the impossible: "Réclamer l'impossible c'est d'ailleurs encore s'accrocher au pouvoir en espérant transformer l'impossible en possible" (Levinas 303).[19] For Levinas, the only exit from the determination of subjectivity *as* sovereignty is to be found in the experience of the an-originary relation to the radical alterity of the other. This relation necessitates the emergence of the self in the purity of its subjectivity: a self that no longer coincides with the principial will; a subjectivity that no longer has its refuge in the ego-logy of auto-thetic consciousness and is thus deprived of the power to transform every experience—including the nothing of death *as* impossibility—into a *correlate* of its potency of possibility.

Towards the end of *L'écriture du désastre*, Blanchot issues a warning regarding sovereignty's power that echoes Levinas's precaution concerning sovereignty's capacity to transform even the impossible into *its own* possibility:

> '*La souveraineté n'est RIEN.*' Ainsi prononcé le mot rien n'implique pas seulement la souveraineté dans sa ruine, car la ruine souveraine pourrait être encore une manière pour la Souveraineté de s'affirmer en rehaussant le rien majuscule. *La souveraineté, selon le schéma de la négativité toujours à l'affût, se déploierait alors absolument en ce qui tendrait à la nier absolument.* Mais il se pourrait que le rien ne soit pas ici au travail et, sous sa forme outrancière et tranchée, dérobe seulement ce qui se dérobe en ce qui ne peut être nommé, le neutre, le neutre toujours se neutralisant et auquel il n'est rien de souverain qui, par avance, ne se soit déjà rendu : soit en la négligence de l'UN, soit par la scansion négative de l'autre, négation qui ne nie ni n'affirme, et, de par l'érosion infinie de la répétition, laisse l'Autre se marquer et se démarquer et se

remarquer comme ce qui n'a pas rapport avec ce qui vient en présence, ni non plus avec ce qui s'en absente. (Blanchot 200, emphases mine)[20]

Citing Georges Bataille's famous dictum, "La souveraineté n'est RIEN" (Bataille 300),[21] Blanchot warns us that Bataille's insistent gesture throughout *La Souveraineté* (*On Sovereignty*) and elsewhere to capitalize the word "*rien*" and write it as "RIEN," runs the risk of reintroducing the principle of negativity into the thinking of the "NOTHING" of sovereignty. The result of this transmutation would be that the "RIEN," the "NOTHING" that sovereignty "is," would become the medium of sovereignty's self-enactment, transforming this nothing into the principle of sovereignty's *ergon-tology*.[22] Drawing from Bataille's thinking of "désœuvrement" ("inoperativity"), Blanchot then proposes that sovereignty's nothing be read instead as inoperative. But it is precisely at this point that Blanchot deviates from Levinas: an inoperative nothing leads to a thinking of the neutral that understands the alterity of the other as a movement of neutralization. The neutral deprives the self of its ipseity and subjectivity and pluralizes the other in such a way that the other cannot anymore be construed as the an-archic *basis* for any ethical relation. Any such attempt would amount to a reduction of the other's neutrality and thus a restoration of the other and the self in the position of sovereign bodies, even if their sovereignty takes the form of a god without essence, a self *without* ego, or of volitionless subjectivities. For Blanchot, it is only by releasing the other into the infinite multiplicity of neutralization that other becomes the sole instance in front of which all sovereignty— even the possibility of the sovereignty of the other and of the self held hostage by the other—must have already surrendered itself (Blanchot 200). The infinity of sovereignty for Blanchot could only be measured by the immensurable in-finites of the neutral's neutralization.

Is another history of sovereignty—a history in which not even the other could sustain itself in its transcendental position—now *possible*? Is this question finally settled? If so, would not the neutral become another surreptitious sovereign, in spite of or perhaps because of *its* neutralization? The last tribune to which even the sovereignty of alterity *must* pay tribute? Rather than radicalizing/neutralizing alterity in order to locate sovereignty's *outside*, Derrida's efforts to deconstruct sovereignty in his later work constitute an attempt to shift the terms in which the question of sovereignty is posed even by Levinas and Blanchot. For Derrida, the deconstruction of sovereignty remains an unfinished task and the reasons why this is so demand an infinite elaboration.

In Derrida's later writings since at least *L'Université sans condition*, Derrida undertakes an analysis of the aporia that keeps the question of sovereignty open by reinscribing the notions of

"sovereignty" and "unconditionality" in order to preliminarily designate the sovereignty of the theologico-political and something that would be subtracted from this determination:

> Et s'il se décline selon le mode verbal du conditionnel, c'est aussi pour annoncer l'inconditionnel, l'éventuel ou le possible événement de l'inconditionnel impossible, le tout autre—que nous devrions désormais (cela non plus je ne l'ai pas encore dit ni fait aujourd'hui) dissocier de l'idée théologique de souveraineté. Au fond, ce serait peut-être cela mon hypothèse (elle est extrêmement difficile et presque im-probable, inaccessible à une preuve): une certaine indépendance *inconditionnelle* de la pensée, de la déconstruction, de la justice, des Humanités, de l'Université, etc., devrait être dissociée de tout fantasme de *souveraineté indivisible* et de maîtrise souveraine. (Derrida 76)[23]

The peculiarity of Derrida's double gesture in this passage is worth noting: on the one hand, he opposes what he calls "the impossible unconditional" and the "unconditional independence of thought, . . . etc." to "the theological idea of sovereignty" and to "all phantasm of indivisible sovereignty and of sovereign mastery." Derrida thus mobilizes the terms "sovereignty" and "unconditionality" as an opposition. On the other hand, Derrida himself makes clear that this gesture is illegitimate since the dissociation between sovereignty and unconditionality remains to be accomplished. Indeed, Derrida not only emphasizes the fact that his own use of this opposition has the character of a hypothesis, but also insists that task of justifying this opposition is "extremely difficult and almost improbable." Derrida's double gesture begs the following question: if unconditionality is already available as the name for a mode of "independence," "autonomy" or even freedom *without* sovereignty, if unconditionality is the horizon for any deconstruction of sovereignty worthy of its name, then why does he insist so much on remarking that the task of distinguishing sovereignty from unconditionality is potentially impossible?

III. Another History of Sovereignty: Ipseity in Aristotle's Prime Mover

My task for the remainder of this essay is to attain some clarity on the reasons for Derrida's reticence concerning the possibility of separating sovereignty from unconditionality. However, my goal is not so much to clarify an important aspect of Derrida's later work, but to show that Derrida's insistence on keeping the question of sovereignty open betrays a proto-infrapolitical commitment to submitting the sovereignty of politics and the politics of sovereignty to a radical interrogation. To get a sense of why this interrogation must in a way begin and end by putting itself to question and remaining uncertain as to its answerability, I want to turn to "La roue libre" ("The Free Wheel"), the

first chapter of "La Raison du plus fort" ("The Reason of the Strongest"), published as the first essay of *Voyous* (*Rogues*). It is here that Derrida engages with Aristotle's "derivation" of the Prime Mover that is found in Book XII of the *Metaphysics*. In my reading, Derrida's turn to Aristotle in *Voyous* provides an allegory of the aporia that the deconstruction of sovereignty must face. This aporia becomes manifested through the double-bind of a mutually-exclusive imperatives: 1. Sovereignty *must* be deconstructed (or its translation: "Unconditionality *without* sovereignty must be thought.") 2. A felicitous, *actualized* deconstruction of sovereignty would reaffirm what it has deconstructed by positioning the name in which this deconstruction is enacted—i.e., unconditionality—in the position of the sovereign.

To begin to unravel the two sides of this double-bind, let us turn now to Derrida's engagement with Aristotle in *Voyous*. Derrida paraphrases Aristotle's arguments about the Prime Mover in the *Metaphysics* in the context of a discussion of the relation between the movement of turning and re-turning and the structure of ipseity:

> Sans se mouvoir ni être mû, l'acte de cette énergie pure met tout en mouvement, un mouvement de retour à soi, un mouvement circulaire, précise Aristote, car le premier mouvement est toujours cyclique. Et ce qui l'aspire ou l'inspire, c'est un désir. Dieu, l'acte pur du Premier Moteur, il est à la fois érogène et pensable. Il est… désirable (*erômenon*), le premier désirable (*to proton orekton*) en tant que premier intelligible (*to proton noeton*) qui se pense lui-même, pensée de la pensée (*e noesis noeseôs noesis*). (Derrida 35)[24]

The political allegory that *is* the Prime Mover can be read off from this passage of Derrida's commentary, if we pay attention to the difference between the Prime Mover and what Derrida calls the "first movement" ("*premier mouvement*"), a reference to the first heaven in Aristotle's cosmology. Briefly stated, the political significance of this allegory consists in its isolation of two distinct modes of sovereignty, which are analogous to two different exceptional modes of movement: whereas the first heaven moves in a circle and thus is capable of remaining itself and returning itself to itself in its own movement, the Primer Mover does not *move* at the same time as it moves everything else that is movable. As I will try to show in this section, what is at stake in this distinction is nothing other than the opposition between a notion of sovereignty determined by the movement of specularity and the economic return of the self to itself, and a "prior" determination of sovereignty as an unconditional, hyperbolic, incalculable excess from the entire ontic-ontological realm.

But in order to make this case, we have to consider how Aristotle articulates the difference between the Prime Mover and the first heaven in Book XII of the *Metaphysics*:

> But since it is possible for it to be this way, and if it is not this way things will come from night and from 'all things together' and from not-being, these questions could be resolved; and there is a certain ceaseless motion that is always moving, and it is in a circle . . . so that the first heaven would be everlasting. Accordingly, there is also something that moves it. And since what is in motion and causes motion is something intermediate, there is also something that causes motion without being in motion, which is everlasting, an independent thing, and a being-at-work. . . . Now if something is moved, it admits of being otherwise than it is; and so, even if the primary kind of change of place is a being-at-work, insofar as something is moved, it is in that respect at least capable of being otherwise, with respect to place even if not with respect to thinghood. But since there is something that causes motion while being itself motionless, this does not admit of being otherwise than it is in any respect at all. For among changes, the primary one is change of place, and of this the primary kind is in a circle, but this is what this mover causes. Therefore it is something that has being necessarily, and inasmuch as it is by necessity it is beautiful and in that way a source. For the necessary has this many senses: what is by force because it is contrary to a thing's impulse, that without which something will not be in a good condition, and that which does not admit of being any other way other than in a simple condition. (Aristotle 1072b 10, 241-42)

The Prime Mover moves everything—but itself. Its activity constitutes the source of the sphere of *physis*, where everything is determined by mutability in the form of displacement, alteration, coming to be and passing away. And yet the Prime Mover remains absolutely excepted from the natural realm that it nonetheless inaugurated by setting the first heaven forth into its proper cyclical movement. The mode of being of the Prime Mover is thus pure *energeia*, pure actuality, pure "being-at-work." The Prime Mover is the name for the transcendental activity responsible for the first heaven's circular motion, which, in turn, can only be described as the mode of movement that admits displacement while being absolutely foreign to any other mutation.

To understand what is at stake in the distinction between the Prime Mover and the first heaven I want to take a step back and dwell for a moment on Aristotle's more detailed analysis of motion and change in the *Physics*. From the outset, we must note that the Prime Mover's excess with

regard to the first heaven marks the former's mode of being as absolute in-transitivity. This in-transitivity is opposed to Aristotle's analysis of the essential transitivity of *metabolē*, of change, which usually takes the form of the following formulation: "every change is from something to something" (Aristotle 225a, 135). In different moments in the *Physics*, Aristotle defines motion and change in terms that are often contradictory. Nonetheless, it is possible to grasp the internal logic of these contradictions. Early on in the *Physics*, Aristotle uses motion and change interchangeably to talk about any modification in a being's ontic or factic structure.[25] But in Book V, he introduces a crucial distinction between *kinesis* and *genesis* that allows him to grasp the ontological significance of these different kinds of change by recourse to the logical distinction between contrariety and contradiction. Motion, in the sense of displacement, quantitative change, and qualitative alteration, is a movement between contraries. For instance, something hot will become something cold if it ceases to be exposed to a source of heat; likewise topological motion can be grasped in terms of above or below. What is important for Aristotle here is the fact that changes between contraries—which defines *kinesis* properly speaking—do not exclude the middle terms that lie in between these contraries. There is thus a relative continuity between these changes, since, as Aristotle puts it, "grey is white in relation to black and black in relation to white" (Aristotle 224b 30, 135). Aristotle thus concludes Chapter 1, Book V of the *Physics* by delimiting motion to quality, quantity, and place, since these are the only categories that admit contrariety.[26]

The specific kind of change that Aristotle calls *genesis* is a kind of movement that can only be gasped in terms of contradiction, that is, in terms of a logical relationship between extremes that excludes the possibility of any middle term between the opposition and, for this reason, excludes any mediation. *Genesis* is therefore understood to be a radically discontinuous form of *metabolē*. Although *genesis* is still structured in terms of a fundamental transitivity—it is, after all, still "a change from something to something"—it is different from *kinesis* inasmuch as the latter allows for a continuity that the former excludes. This explains why Aristotle begins Chapter 2 of the *Physics* declaring that motion does not belong to *ousia*, or, for that matter, to the categories of relation, action, and affection: "There is no motion with respect to thinghood since there is not among beings a contrary to an independent thing. Nor indeed is there a motion of relation . . . Nor is there one of acting and being acted upon, or of moving and being moved, because there is not a motion of a motion, or a coming into being of coming into being, or in general a change of a change" (Aristotle 225b 10, 136). "There is no motion with respect to thinghood," Aristotle says, inasmuch as the category of existence—*ousia*, "thinghood"—does not admit any contrary. The only logical possibility to talk

meaningfully about the opposite of being is to invoke its radical contradiction, its *privation* or *its absence*: not-being. There are no intermediate degrees between existence and non-existence, no motion between not-being and being, no mediation that might ensure the possibility of a continuous passage from one term to the other. Aristotle's distinction of *kinesis* from *genesis* identifies in a being's simple emergence out of not-being a discontinuous mode of change that exceeds the categorical declinations of being in terms of quantity, quality and place. In fact, the latter presuppose the former, since only a being that *is* can be said to have the capacity to change location, or to undergo quantitative and qualitative alterations. The immobile movement of existence punctures the continuity of motion, inscribing singularity and asymmetry into the very fabric of *physis*.

The distinction between *metabol*   as *kinesis* and *genesis* becomes even sharper by Book VIII of the *Physics,* where Aristotle circumscribes continuous motion only to circular movement. This decision corresponds to two necessities of his philosophy: On the one hand, the first heaven's circular motion must be determined as the only mode of absolutely continuous movement, since only the first heaven could be the moved source of motion of every other motion, providing the measure for the entire realm of *physis* as *kinesis*. On the other hand, Aristotle must account for the first heaven's everlastingness by safeguarding its ungenerability, which we should understand in ontological terms as the incapacity for the first heaven's being to undergo *genesis* and, by extension, the *steresis* of genesis, coming to being's privation: passing away. Thus Aristotle's task is to identify a mode of motion that would constitute the mode of being of an everlasting, natural being. This modality of motion is isolated in Book VIII of the *Physics* over the course of a long refutation of Zeno's paradox, where Aristotle shows that the geometrical figure of the circle provides the identity of beginning and end that is necessary in order to account for the mode of being of the first heaven as immutable, continuous mobility without running into contradictions, without positing a movement that generates discontinuity, or without falling into an infinite regress: "Therefore neither in a semicircle nor in any other circumference is it possible to be moved continuously, since these would need to be moved over and over and to change in contrary changes, since the end does not join up with the beginning. But those of the circle do join up, and only it is complete" (Aristotle 264b20; 221). Only in a circle would motion from point A to point C be at the same time motion from point C to point A without any interruption of the movement, since only in a circle would the beginning point and the end point of said movement be identical. The identity of beginning and end in a circle grounds the mode of being of the first heaven and constitutes another *exception* within the very realm of *physis* as *kinesis*. The first heaven can thus move without compromising not only its

identity and its self-presence, but most importantly its capacity to sustain itself in its being throughout eternity.

I have taken this detour through some of Aristotle's arguments in the *Physics* because I think they can help us to understand what is at stake in Derrida decision to turn to Aristotle's Prime Mover as providing an *exemplary* instance of *pure energeia*. The necessity of something like the Prime Mover follows from the split at the heart of *metabolē* itself, its twofoldness as *kinesis* and *genesis*. This division is addressed in terms of the category of *ousia* at the very beginning of Book XII of the *Metaphysics*, where Aristotle distinguishes between three different modalities of *ousia*. The category of presence is different for beings that are perceptible and imperishable, perceptible and perishable, and simply imperceptible (Aristotle 1069a30, 231). It is clear that the first mode of *ousia* refers primarily to the absolute *kinesis* of the first heaven, whereas the second is the mode of being of all beings that are generated and can also be destructed—that is, those beings that have the capacity to undergo *genesis* and *steresis*. The third categorical declination of *ousia* as a mode of imperceptible *tode ti*, an imperceptible independent or separable being, would correspond to one of the questions that determine the specificity of Aristotle's inquiry in the *Metaphysics*, namely, what is the being of *eidos*, the being of form *as* a mode of *ousia*. The distinction at the heart of *ousia* begs the question concerning the possibility of securing the unity of the knowledge of *metabolē*—as *kinesis* and *genesis*—and of *eidos*, whose imperceptibility and priority marks it as the proper "matter" of *prima philosophia*, of first philosophy.

The Prime Mover is Aristotle's response to this problem, which touches on the very possibility of Aristotelian philosophy *as* the articulation of first and second philosophy into a "system" of knowledge. The Prime Mover solves this problem by providing an unconditional instance of activity and power that accounts for the unity of *metabolē* as *kinesis* and *genesis* while at the same time safeguarding the manifold ways of *ousia* as perishable, imperishable, and imperceptible from any essential contamination with not-being.[27] The Prime Mover is the unity of continuity and discontinuity, the keystone that closes the edifice of philosophy, the activity that gathers *absolute motion* and *absolute emergence* into their *formal* unity and secures the possibility of physical knowledge *as* the intelligibility of *metabolē*. But the Prime Mover can only function as such within Aristotle's framework due to its absolute intransitivity. This is what distinguishes it from the first heaven: the Prime Mover does not even come out of itself in the way in which the first heaven exposes itself to a mutation that is immediately negated by the circularity of its motion. If the first heaven's motion could be described in terms of the sublation of alteration itself—the circular movement that marks

the self-overcoming of finitude itself—the Prime Mover's activity could only be described as the non-circle within the circle of the first heavens that, in turn, accounts for the endless movement of all beings.

Derrida's engagement with Aristotle allows us to locate in the doctrine of the Prime Mover a foundational moment in the history of political theology. An understanding of sovereignty in terms of unicity and autocracy would have already been articulated at least since Aristotle's thinking of the "first heaven" as a perfectly spherical movement. But more radically still, I want to argue that Derrida's paraphrasing of Aristotle suggests that the latter implicitly determines the essence of sovereignty as hyperbolic, incalculable excess. This determination comes to the fore in the *Metaphysics*, where Aristotle singles out what Derrida calls a pure mode of actuality, "pure *energeia*," as the very mode of being of the Prime Mover. The return to itself that characterizes the most minimal instance of the first heaven's movement provides the schema for all conceptions of sovereignty as an economy of self-possession. The Prime Mover does not comport to this schema insofar as it is radically excepted from the first heaven's circle, which it nonetheless established. Thus we can argue that the Prime Mover is an absolutely an-economical principle, a mode of activity, energy, actuality and power in which unconditionality and the excess of hyper-sovereignty coincide. For this reason, the Prime Mover has no identity and no existence. It is not a subject or an essence, just as much as it is not a *hypokeimenon*. Since it is not a subject, since its proper mode of being lies in its radical excess with regard to the circle of beings, the Prime Mover is outside the circle in which the first heaven secures its immutable mobility and causal potency. The Prime Mover is incalculability itself in the form of an unconditional nothing. To be more precise, the Prime Mover is the almost nothing of a pure activity that can only secure its proper unconditionality through its radical subtraction from the realm of being *as physis*. Absolutely withdrawn from the world that it nonetheless sets in motion leaving in its wake the celestial trace of a heaven whose perfect, continuous, cyclical movement nonetheless pales in comparison with its absolute simplicity: the Prime Mover is Aristotle's name for the absolute effacement of the simple origin.

Before concluding with some remarks on the implications of my reading of the Prime Mover as hyper-sovereign figure for Derrida's task of separating unconditionality and sovereignty, I want to highlight another important aspect of Derrida's engagement with Aristotle's Primer Mover. As Derrida reminds us, Aristotle thinks the Prime Mover within the horizon of the concept of *life*. In fact, the Prime Mover is for Aristotle a "form of life;" as such, it should not be regarded as exempted from the realm of the living:

> Ce premier principe, Aristote le définit aussi, et cela comptera pour nous, comme une vie, une genre de vie, une conduite de la vie, comparable à ce que nous pouvons vivre de meilleur pendant tel bref moment de notre vie. C'est donc une vie qui déborde la vie des hommes, une vie que vit le Premier Moteur de façon constant, toujours, continûment, ce qui pour nous est impossible. (Derrida 35-36)[28]

Derrida himself does not develop the profound implications of this remark, although he refers to this moment later on in *Voyous* as crucial for an understanding of democracy's autoimmunity, democracy's constitutive suicidal tendencies: "La démocratie a toujours été suicidaire et s'il y a un à-venir pour elle, c'est à la condition de penser autrement la vie, et la force de la vie. C'est pourquoi j'ai insisté tout à l'heure sur le fait que l'Acte pur est détermine par Aristote comme une vie" (Derrida 57).[29] I read Derrida here as suggesting that any serious engagement with the political history of the concept of life should take into account this moment in Aristotle where the unconditional instance of activity that accounts for *genesis*, for the emergence of finite being, is paradoxically defined as an imperishable, supra-natural, form of life. Although I do not have enough space to really develop this argument, I think this moment in Aristotle is important for Derrida because it challenges the very foundations of contemporary approaches to bio-politics. Insofar as the Prime Mover's force, this nothing that secretly acts the very world itself, is determined as a mode of life, then at the very least the distinction between pure or bare life and form of life, as well as the opposition between life and death, living and dying, and furthering life and killing and sacrificing, must be reconsidered.

The inscription of the life of the Prime Mover within the text of metaphysics forces us to contend with the thought that life and living are not simply names for the persistence of beings that are essentially limited by their originary mortality. The history and the structure of the concept of life would have to be thought of as including a mode of activity that is not simply delimited as it were from the outside by its possible finitude. As Derrida suggests by invoking the life of the Prime Mover in his discussion of democracy's suicidal tendencies, the mode of life that belongs to the force of pure *energeia* should be thought on the basis of the logic of autoimmunity. We could even argue that the Prime Mover provides an instance of a more radical logic of autoimmunity than the one at work in the suspension of the Algerian elections—a more nuanced, more originary, and incalculable autoimmunity, which Derrida describes in chapter four of *Voyous*. If in the case of the Algerian elections autoimmunity designates the aporetic situation in which democracy itself was targeted by self-avowed democrats in order to precisely defend democracy from its enemies, then the life of the Prime Mover perhaps goes one step further. As Derrida puts it, "l'auto-immunité est

plus ou moins suicidaire, mais c'est encore plus grave: *l'auto-immunité menace toujours de priver le suicide lui-même de son sens et de son intégrité supposée*" (Derrida 73, emphases mine).[30] The Prime Mover's life perhaps marks a break with the auto-referential logic, with the principle of calculation that would be still at work in all *sui*-cides. For the kind of life that this pure energy leads can only be described as immediate transcendence, as a living force that cannot even own its own life and therefore cannot calculate its own death. The Prime Mover would be thus the name for the most heightened instance of both auto-immunity and survival. A life that does away with the circle of economical calculation, where death is another occasion for the reaffirmation of subjectivity. A life that lives above, below, and beyond life and death. A life that begins and ends in sur-vival.

To conclude, I want to return to my initial question concerning the separation of unconditionality and sovereignty. If the story about the Prime Mover and the first heaven were to end here, then one could say that Derrida's engagement with Aristotle has given us the tools to begin to dissociate unconditionality from sovereignty. The Prime Mover would allow us to isolate a concept of unconditionality that is on the side of incalculability, excess, absolute transcendence, whereas the first heaven provides the mode for all conceptions of sovereignty that index the circular movement of in which the self returns to itself. As Aristotle's *epikeina tes ousias*, the Primer Mover in its withdrawal determines the entire realm of *ousia* as the economy of a self in self-possession of its self. And yet, things are more complicated. For we must take into account the fact that the Prime Mover's excess with regard to being *as physis* is nonetheless, in a certain way, *given*—that is, inscribed in Aristotle's text precisely as the supra-natural, non-phenomenological principle that accounts for the manifold being of *metabolē*. In its subtraction from every determination of perceptible *ousia*, the Prime Mover erects itself as the condition of possibility of any knowledge of *physis* as the unity of *metabolē* and *kinesis*. But how is this mode of unconditional, incalculable, pure life given? How is this figure of transcendence, of sheer exteriority inscribed in the world as the condition, as the very intelligibility of movement, alteration, coming to be and passing away?

The Prime Mover constitutes an *illegible* mark in Aristotle's text—a name for that which can only be *read off* from the text of *ousia* as *physis*, whose movement is determined by the perfect movement of the first heaven. The subtraction of this unconditional life determines its inscription in Aristotle's text as a "concept" for a mode of transcendence that *must be* even if in principle it remains imperceptible. But the meaning of this concept lies in event of *physis* itself: its withdrawal from the realm of *metabolē* is meant to account for the existence of the reign of the first heaven and the sovereignty of *ousia* as the principle of all becoming. Therefore, the Primer Mover's unconditional

life is only given through its deferral and its passage through its other. It is only by giving place to the circle of the celestial bodies, to the sovereignty of an eternally moving—and thus, in a certain way, unmoved—power, that the Prime Mover's necessary hyper-being comes to light. At the level of the *ordo exponendi*, the first heaven is in fact *prior* to the force and pure energy that is supposed to have caused it. This ontic priority is not merely ontic, but touches upon the very ontological structure of the concept of the Prime Mover. Therefore, the chance of the Prime Mover's necessary unconditionality requires the presence of the first heaven and the economy of its sovereignty over the cosmos. The Prime Mover can only *be* on the condition that it gives rise to the sovereign heaven that conditions the movements of the cosmos. Unconditionality *is* sovereign.

By the same token, the originary relation of non-relation between unconditionality and sovereignty forces us to rethink the latter's supposed finitude, its existence as an economical principle. For as we saw there is an exceptionality to the first heaven, which is due to the fact that that its movement marks the frontier that delimits the proper realm of *physis*, constituting a source of movement that is moved without ever passing away. The quasi-transcendentality of the first heaven suggests that the Prime Mover's unconditionality also in a certain way belongs to the first heaven, whose sovereignty does not simply lie in its movement of self-appropriation, but also in the *exception* that constitutes any such movement in the first place—allegorized in this case by the first heaven's immortality. Sovereignty would therefore be set to its proper movement of self-appropriation by its own unconditional, hyperbolic, subtraction. Sovereignty *is* unconditional.

However, the essential contamination between sovereignty and unconditionality appears to confront a limit as soon as we see the Prime Mover as a mode of life. We saw that Derrida's take on of this life characterizes it as a radical form of auto-immunity. The life of the Prime Mover is such that its living does not take the form of a strategic suicide—a suicide that has already calculated its own killing in order to better preserve and *own* its own self. Instead, this pure energy lives precisely by suiciding *the* self or suiciding *its* self. It follows that this way of life is deprived of any *proper* relation to itself. Having begun to live by killing its self, this mode of life cannot be said to be able to even *own* its own suicide, that is, to be capable of internalizing the suspension of its life as a moment of *sui*-cide, as a decision that would belong to the self. This incalculable life of unconditionality is therefore radically improper. And yet, the impropriety of this unconditional life is precisely what cannot but be *economized*, transformed into the proper property of the Prime Mover. Aristotle himself enacts this re-economization as soon as he takes the Prime Mover as the an-economical *principle* of *physis*, stabilizing its excess by turning it into the *telos* of every mode of intra-cosmic life.

The Prime Mover is ultimately the *eidos* of the *ergon* itself, the pure *energeia* that provides the ultimate measure for the very goodness of the life of any entelechy. This re-economization is the structuring principle of the ethical and the political in their ergontological constitution.

To return to my original concern, this impropriety is also economized as soon as unconditionality is construed as the foundation for a critique of sovereignty. By insisting that unconditionality *is* unconditional, the impropriety that pluralizes *ad infinitum* unconditionality is reduced to the sheer transcendence and the hyper-sovereignty of the one. The very attempt to secure the unconditionality *of* unconditionality yields the opposite, auto-immune effect: unconditionality *becomes* sovereignty. Aristotle's Prime Mover proves that Western philosophy has never ceased to understand the undecidable space that relates life and death, as well as the withdrawal that essentially relates presence and absence, as an instance of *power*. Indeed, Aristotle could even be read as already anticipating Agamben's notion of a "form-of-life" ("*forma-di-vita*") that would be structured by "*un 'potere puramente destituente*'" (Agamben 2014).[31] Not only is there no *ergon* without *energeia*, but also the very attempt to think of a power that would be *purely* destituent is to endow this instance of power with the power over its *acts* of destitution. From Aristotle to Agamben, the place of what Derrida calls unconditionality has already been saturated by the excessiveness of a wholly transcendental form of life that constitutes the first and last *arkh* precisely because of its own destitution. Since at least Aristotle's Prime Mover sovereignty and unconditionality—constituent and destituent power—are ultimately indistinguishable. The identity of sovereignty and unconditionality suggests that the task of the deconstruction of sovereignty remains incommensurable. *Another* history of sovereignty would have to begin and end by destroying each and every name that have been and continue to be used in order to draw the limits within which sovereignty exercises its power. For these names not only dissimulate their own status as metaphors of sovereignty. Their dissimulation is so complete that they render illegible each time their own claims to be *the* unconditional sovereign of any other sovereign metaphor.

We are now in a better position to understand why Derrida regarded the task of dissociating unconditionality from sovereignty as "presque im-probable," as almost im-probable (Derrida 76). Unconditionality's Shibboleth not only turns unconditionality into sovereignty but also covers up their irreducible co-belonging, preventing us from being exposed to the aporia that marks the essence of sovereignty as sheer excess, what Derrida in *La Bête et le souverain II* designates with the name "hyper-souveraineté" or hyper-sovereignty (Derrida 397). Seeking to make transparent the movement of self-dissimulation of sovereign metaphors, another history of sovereignty would also

have to interrogate the "hyper-," that excess which names the coincidence of sovereignty and unconditionality.

Infrapolitics is a name for such an interrogation. Questioning the "heliopolitical" determination of excess as hyper-sovereignty (Moreiras), infrapolitics seeks to thematize the impossible experience of a non-self that insists and persists in the non-space of the freedom to question every name and every form of power, including the power that belongs to the question as soon as the question becomes secure in itself as a possibility. The hyper-politicity of the infrapolitical unfolds in the renunciation of the power of possibility and the possibility of power: in its loss of the very form of "its own," i.e., in the loss of its ipseity. Just as there is no ipseity of the question, there is no infra-political ipseity. Each time anew, the infrapolitical task requires to be taken up—or not, for such is the freedom of this renunciation, always on the verge of *self*-betrayal precisely through the appropriation of a self for itself. This task is an exigency modulated through the Nietzschean "dangerous perhaps," which Derrida, among others, has taken up as a emblem for the experience of the unconditionality of thinking, which is never *present* as such but rather belongs to the "*Zu-kunft*," the German word for the "future," but which is rendered best in English as "to come." Infrapolitics is an attempt to submit politics to a radical interrogation in order to contest the certainty of sovereignty and the sovereignty of certainty, which has already structured in advance the closure of political thought. Hardly *a* politics, some may say. But hardly anything *less* political, either.

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Notes

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[1] See Bodin (1992), in particular his discussion about the absoluteness of sovereignty in page 49.

[2] See Schmitt (1974) 13-20.

[3] For the classic exposition of sovereignty's relation to the exceptional decision, see the first chapter in Schmitt (1979). On the relation between the time of the instant and the decision, see Derrida (1994) 97. For Derrida's most sustained engagement with Schmitt's thinking of the sovereign decision, see chapter three in Derrida (1994). For a lucid exploration of Derrida's longstanding engagement with the time of the decision *as* madness, see Bennington (2011) 103-27.

[4] For the *locus classicus* of the identity of being and the one, see fragments III and VIII in Parmenides (1998). For an interpretation of Parmenides's poem relevant to the concerns at the core of this essay, see the first part of Schürmann (1996). For an early instance of the politicization of the series being-one-thinking (*einai-hen-noein*) see the last lines of Book XII in Aristotle (2002). For the passage that Aristotle cites in his conclusion to Book XII of the *Metaphysics*, see Homer (1961) II 203-6.

[5] For a history of the concept of "political theology," see de Vries (2006) 25-47.

[6] The word "infrapolitics" has been a constant of Moreiras's work on political thought and Latin American studies since at least the publication in 2002 of his essay, "The Villain at the Center: Infrapolitical Borges." For a recent attempt to account for Moreiras's thinking of the infrapolitical in relation to Roberto Esposito's notion of the "impolitical," see Yagüez (2014). For an earlier attempt to link Moreiras with Esposito, see Bosteels (2010) 225-29. For a recent engagement with Moreiras's thinking of infrapolitics that accuses infrapolitics of political passivity, see Ascherl (2013) 179-201.

[7] See Hardt and Negri (2011) and Beasley-Murray (2011). For Esposito's "affirmative biopolitics," see Esposito (2004) xvi. On the notion of "destituent power," see Agamben (2014).

[8] See Castillo et al. (2015).

[9] For an influential attempt to establish a post-foundational, left-Heideggerian political ontology, see chapter seven in Marchart (2007).

[10] "Community of the question, thus, in this fragile instance in which the question is not yet determined enough for the hypocrisy of a response to have already invited itself under the mask of the question, for its voice to have already allowed itself to be articulated fraudulently in the very syntax of the question. Community of the decision, of the initiative, of the absolute initiality but threatened, in which the question has not yet found the language that it has decided to seek, it has not yet been reassured in itself about its own possibility. Community of the question on the possibility of the question."

[11] "The question must be preserved. As question."

[12] "The freedom *of the question* (double genitive) must be said and sheltered."

[13] "Well-found abode, the realized tradition of the question remained a question."

[14] "If this commandment has an ethical signification, it is not that of belonging to the *domain* of the ethical, but of authorizing—ulteriorly—every ethical law in general. There is no commandment that is not addressed to a freedom of speech. There is thus neither law nor commandment that does not confirm and confine—that is to say, that does not dissimulate by presupposing—the possibility of the question."

[15] For the exception that proves the rule, see Agamben (1995) 55. The fact that Agamben's genealogy of sovereignty ends by proposing the concepts of "*form* of life" and "destituent *power*" as ways of undoing sovereignty shows how far away Agamben has moved from his own acute intuitions concerning aporia of sovereignty and the bond that unites sovereignty to potency and ipseity. My question is whether the categories of "form" and of "power" can be extricated from their inscription in the *ergon*tology that is established through the sovereign ban.

[16] "The will, principle of powers, thus unites a contradiction: immunity against all external breaches to the point of positing itself uncreated and immortal, endowed with a force above any quantifiable force (nothing less is attested by self-consciousness where inviolable being finds its refuge: 'I shall never be shaken' {Psalm 30}) and a permanent fallibility of this inviolable sovereignty in front of the supreme violence, to the extent that voluntary being lends itself to the techniques of seduction, propaganda and torture."

[17] "Being temporal is at the same time being towards death and still having time, being against death, having possibilities. In the way in which the threat affects me, in imminence, resides <u>my</u> accusation by the menace and the essence of fear. It is a relation to an instant whose exceptional character is not due to the fact that it finds itself at the threshold of nothingness or of a rebirth, but to the fact that, within life, it is the impossibility of all possibility (and not the possibility of the impossibility of all possibility {as Heidegger wants}). [*sic*] In this relation, {total} passivity reveals itself, {with respect to which the passivity} of sensibility, which changes itself into activity is but a pale imitation of passivity."

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[18] "the possibility of the immeasurable impossibility of existence."

[19] "To reclaim the impossible is indeed to cling still to the possibility in waiting to transform the impossible into possible."

[20] "'Sovereignty is NOTHING.' Thus pronounced, the word nothing does not only implicate sovereignty in its ruin, for the sovereign ruin could be still a way for sovereignty to affirm itself by lifting the majuscule nothing. Sovereignty, according to the schema of negativity—always on the lookout—would thus deploy itself absolutely in that which would tend to negate it absolutely. But it could be the case that the nothing here may not be at work and, under its outrageous and cutting form, it subtracts only what subtracts itself in that which cannot be named, the neutral, the neutral always neutralizing itself and to which there is nothing sovereign that in advance has not already surrendered itself."

[21] "Sovereignty is NOTHING."

[22] On the notion of ergontology, see Hamacher (2002) 155-200.

[23] "And if it declines itself according to the verbal mode of the conditional, it is also to announce the unconditional, the eventual or the possible event of the unconditional impossible, the wholly other—which we should from now on (that neither I have not said or done today) dissociate from the theological idea of sovereignty. At the bottom, that would be perhaps my hypothesis (it is extremely difficult and almost im-probable, inaccessible to proof): a certain *unconditional* independence of thought, of deconstruction, of the humanities, of the university, etc., must be dissociated from all phantasm of *indivisible sovereignty* and sovereign mastery."

[24] "Without moving or being moved, the act of this pure energy puts everything in motion, a movement of return to itself, a circular movement, Aristotle clarifies, for the first movement is always cyclical. And that which aspires or inspires it, is a desire. God, the pure act of the first mover, is at the same time erogenous and thinkable. It is … desirable (*erōmenon*), the first desirable (*to proton orekton*) inasmuch as it is the first intelligible (*to proton noeton*) that thinks itself, the thought of thought (*e noesis noeseōs noesis*)."

[25] For Aristotle's notion of *metabolē* as *kinesis* and *genesis*, see Book III, Chapter 1 in Aristotle (2011).

[26] See Aristotle (2011) 225b; 136.

[27] However, it would be incorrect to conclude that Aristotle radically separates being and not-being. *Genesis* as the name for the movement of pure, simple existence incorporates not-being into its very essence. As Aristotle himself puts it, "what passes into being is what is not . . . not being belongs to what comes into being *simply*" (Aristotle 225b 20;136, emphasis mine). Still, not-being does not threaten the unicity of *ousia*, since is no possibility for the not-being and the being of a being to obtain *at the same time.*

[28] "Aristotle also defines this first principle, and this will matter for us, as a life, as a kind of life, a conduct of life, comparable to the best that we can live for a brief moment of our lives. It is thus a life that overflows the lives of men, a life that the First Mover lives constantly, always, continuously, which for us is impossible."

[29] "Democracy has always been suicidal and if there is a to-come for it, is on the condition of thinking life, and the force of life, otherwise. That is why I insisted just now on the fact that Aristotle determines the pure act as a life."

[30] "auto-immunity is more or less suicidal, but it is even more serious: auto-immunity threatens always to deprive suicide itself of its supposed sense and integrity."

[31] "a 'purely destituent power.'"