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The Question of Common Sense

The citizens of Athens never imagined that Socrates was going to transform them into his patsies, allowing him to justify the adventure of this strange undertaking that has been called philosophy ever since. Nor did I imagine that Alfred North Whitehead, such a radically atypical philosopher, would resort to such an utterly typical remark about the origins of philosophy as this: "Socrates spent his life in analysing the current presuppositions of the Athenian world. He explicitly recognized that his philosophy was an attitude in the face of ignorance."[1] This sort of commonplace remark is not in itself noteworthy. It is common enough in Whitehead's texts, and each reader must decide on their own whether to find a reason to ignore it and to move on to the next phrase with a smile, or to stop and puzzle over it. I have opted to grant it the power to put me to work.

Does Philosophy Confront Ignorance?

When I imagine how Socrates's peculiar questions caught the citizens of Athens off guard, what first come to mind are the posters that caught my attention in one of the corridors of the European Commission building, which houses the offices of civil servants tasked with questions about "science and society." The posters reproduced the results of public opinion polls dealing with what European citizens think about science. In light of the absurdity of the opinions expressed, the results seemed to have been posted as a reminder to civil servants about what sort of attitude would be suitable when

dealing with a band of unabashedly ignorant people, whom one must pretend to respect, but above all, must manage—all for their own good, of course.

As everyone knows, pollsters count on the agreement of those whom they kindly call "average citizens" to provide responses to questions without wondering what sort of trick is being played on them, even though they have never before had the opportunity to engage with such issues. Pollsters show no scruples about relying on the weakness of those whom they trap, which simply makes them crooks. But of course, Socrates was not a crook. He went to great lengths to make the citizens whom he questioned see the ignorance evidenced in their answers. This is what Whitehead calls an attitude, and the term "attitude" takes on a good deal of weight. The attitude of Socrates is itself a philosophical theme. There are as many possible Socrateses as there are readings of his attitude toward ignorance, and as many ways of facing the beginnings of philosophy.

One Socrates is a master of aporia, claiming not to have any answer himself but seeking only to make his interlocutors confront the difficulty, possibly insurmountable, of formulating the answer. He is the one who knows himself ignorant. There is another Socrates, master of Plato, for whom aporia is a form of propaedeutics, preparing citizens to welcome a knowledge that transcends the divergent answers they have proposed. He is one who invents philosophy to pacify disagreements, giving to the city his orientation toward what is truly good, just, and beautiful, above and beyond illusions. Yet the historical Socrates was condemned for poisoning the public peace, for instilling the poison of doubt, and Wittgenstein may well have ratified this condemnation, Wittgenstein the anti-Socrates who passed his life posing questions not so much of ordinary citizens as of his fellow philosophers, who stood accused of spreading the disease of false problems.

There can be many possible Socrateses, yet those whom he addresses are always construed as ignorant citizens. Asked to define truth, justice, or courage, they offer cases and examples that, as Socrates shows easily enough, lead to divergent definitions. A veritable stingray, Socrates sparks them awake in an attempt (it is said) to share with them his only privilege, of knowing he does not know. It could also be said that he stuns them. He leaves them stupefied, con-

vinced of their incapacity to know what they are saying, and ready to leave it to the philosopher to guide them. Or else he confronts them with a challenge that is also a trap. If the meaning of words indeed depends on making reference to circumstances or a particular language game, the citizens of Athens were not ignorant. They knew everything there was to know.

What would Whitehead's attitude in the streets of Athens be? In *Modes of Thought,* he praises the practice of assemblage, to be taken up time and time again from era to era. He associates assemblage with what for him is the task of philosophy: "Philosophy can exclude nothing."[2] Assemblage changes everything. The different answers the philosopher gathers, however divergent and partial they may be, are not to be disqualified or reduced to attesting to a speaker's ignorance on the part of a Whiteheadian Socrates. They are part of an assemblage that puts the philosopher to work. What characterizes the assemblage is the *problematic.* The problematic is not a problem to be resolved, for even if an answer proves correct, it will continue to vie against others. The problematic implies a terrain to be shared under the aegis of perplexity activated by the philosopher. If Socrates had not positioned himself as an arbitrator, judging and excluding, he might have been able to make the divergence revealed by his requests for definition into a source of collective concern. He might have welcomed the perplexity he aroused, not as a symptom, but as a question, which he might have shared with what Whitehead calls common sense: "Common sense brooding over the aspects of existence hands [them] over to philosophy for elucidation into some coherence of understanding."[3]

Ignorance here shows an entirely different face. The citizens "awakened" by Socrates will not have to abandon their initial propositions as worthless. Socrates's questioning caught them off guard. They know that they have let themselves be surprised by an unusual question, and in this respect, their ignorance has been demonstrated. Even if they expressed them only partially, their propositions attest to a knowledge that need not for all that be cancelled out. Another Socrates must be imagined, one who needs the brooding of the citizens of Athens. This Socrates needs citizens who accept that there is no need to lend authority to the commonplace propositions bedecking their thought, but neither is it necessary to disavow those aspects of

existence that matter to them. On the contrary, their brooding should activate the sense of importance that they attached to their answer, which related it to an aspect of existence. Belonging to existence itself, this aspect would be irreducible to what is habitually attributed to the "subjective" and relativized. So it is that Whitehead eschews using the divergence of answers to deny their value: "The philosophic attitude is a resolute attempt to enlarge the understanding of the scope of application of every notion which enters into our current thought. The philosophic attempt takes every word, and every phrase, in the verbal expression of thought, and asks, 'What does it mean?'"[4]

In *Modes of Thought,* Whitehead relentlessly activated words. His mode entailed reimmersing words in situations that were part of common experience without letting common experience define them. Instead, common experience takes on the power to engage words in a *speculative* adventure. Neither metaphoric nor literal in meaning, "speculative" here means dramatizing what goes without saying when we say something. It deploys what is presupposed and assumed by the most limpid and banal of statements, even to the point where we lose our bearings, so long as the statement is not reduced to *a* statement, but envisaged as *this* statement, always engaged in *this* situation, answering to *this* mode of engagement in the situation: "Philosophy begins in wonder. And, at the end, when philosophic thought has done its best, the wonder remains. There have been added, however, some grasp of the immensity of things, some purification of emotion by understanding."[5]

When philosophy has done its best, the sense of the word "wonder" has somehow changed. At first, as the philosopher encountered a discordant multiplicity of meanings demanding elucidation, "wonder" signaled perplexity. After she has endeavored to *comprehend,* what remains is closer to wonderment, for she has grasped something of the immensity presupposed and claimed by each aspect of existence. Philosophy does not respond to the brooding of common sense with procedures of selection and hierarchy to eradicate discrepancy. Nor will philosophy pacify common sense by assigning a meticulously bounded territory to each aspect of existence. Such solutions do not inspire wonder. They sadly accept limits that commit them to thinking under surveillance—the triumph of critique: "The strength of the critical school lies in the fact that the doctrine of evo-

lution never entered, in any radical sense, into ancient scholarship. Thus there arises the presupposition of a fixed specification of the human mind; and the blueprint of this specification is the dictionary."[6]

If the citizens of Athens had been armed with a dictionary to provide a fixed answer, or to define the rules of good usage, or to trace the more or less arbitrary philological evolution of a meaning, then they might have answered Socrates's questions. But they would have done so as if at school. Such a mode would have shielded them from any perplexity and from any grasp of the immensity of things. The ability to respond to the Socratic question "what is . . . ?" with a definition of what we mean by "courage," or "the good," or "justice" produces a statement stripped to its bones, stripped of its sensuous flesh, soft and corruptible. The dream of the ideal dictionary is to extract only what proves resistant to critique, intent on what belongs to the human mind as such, independently of shifting and diverging sensibilities. Stripped of all reference to passions, appearances, and circumstances, such a mind would for Whitehead be nothing but an automaton, incapable of error perhaps, yet incapable of understanding as a result. What proves resistant to critique would be nothing more than dead abstractions, to be passively accepted because they do not arouse any stirring of thought or of imagination.

In contrast, to accept the doctrine of evolution in a radical manner is to accept a form of empiricism that embraces change as primordial. Evolution does not produce species that remain fixed. The designation of a species, including the species called human, is based on the relative stability of a handful of traits permitting characterization and classification. It does not set limits on what the individual realities thus identified are capable of. Accepting evolution means agreeing to abandon the idea that thought needs fixed references to avoid confusion and arbitrariness. Evolution strips critique of its power when it strives to hold us accountable by demanding guarantees and discounting what it calls beliefs. For Whitehead, there is no stable definition of common sense any more than there is a fixed identity to the human species. There is no way to define a common sense that would allow us to ground consensus, nor one that we would have to resist.

The aim here is not to define common sense, much less to envisage some sort of philosophy of common sense, and still less to make

common sense an attribute of the human. Whitehead made common sense a constraint for philosophy. Common sense is a constraint for philosophy because it is the task of philosophy, as Whitehead understands it, to refuse the kind of freedom specialists claim when they rule out or exclude what is incompatible with their presuppositions, even taking pride in scandalizing common sense. To respect a constraint, however, is not to respect a limit. It is to refuse what comes easy. What comes easy would be to accept variability with nothing at stake, to assume that the question "what does that mean?" is entirely arbitrary, depending on the moment.

Evolution for Whitehead is not a matter of progress toward the human. Neither is it an arbitrary history, something merely observed. His key word is adventure. The calling of philosophy is to consent to adventure, which means participating in it. The task of philosophy thus requires, as Whitehead puts it, "a welding of imagination and common sense."[7]

The originality of Whitehead as a philosopher, then, comes of his speculative relation to common sense. Common sense is not only a constraint but also a wager. If it is to be welded to imagination, common sense must be capable of brooding. "Brooding" implies not being taken in, not docilely agreeing to disqualify what matters to it. Common sense cannot be reduced to what philosophers discuss or what they define. It cannot be reduced to playing a role in their thought, whether authority or patsy. The possibility of welding, which implies a genuinely metallurgical operation, is speculative. Its wager is adventure instead of progress. The possibility of welding implies that philosophy does not ultimately have to bring a satisfactory answer to the brooding of common sense. It has to nourish what makes for brooding. Such is Whitehead's attitude toward the ignorance that Socrates forced the inhabitants of Athens into admitting. Ignorance is our common lot as we face the immensity of things. The question, however, is not to know that one does not know. That is just another way of discrediting common sense. It is a matter of daring to imagine, contrary to the assurances of specialized forms of knowledge, that what mutely insists and makes us brood expresses a certain grasp of the immensity of things—even if we don't quite know how to put it into words.

The Defeat of Common Sense

The task Whitehead proposed for philosophy, welding common sense and imagination, came in direct response to what he considered to be the mortal, even fatal weakness of the modern world: discrediting common sense, especially through specialized theories that revel in persuading common sense to give way to the authority of "those who know." The task of philosophy, then, might be said to be one of *re*activating common sense, since we are familiar only with common sense as it has been defeated.

There are many ways to tell the story of its defeat. Some ways are political. Gilles Deleuze, for instance, proposed that between the left and the right there existed a difference not of sensibility or of priority, but of nature. The left has a vital need for people to think, while the right requires them to comply with a self-evident order of things, to agree to formulations of problems coming from elsewhere. To defeat common sense, then, is to render brooding powerless. Brooding is stripped of all capacity to object to the received order of things. Brooding is reduced to a plaintive imaginary, dreaming, if at all, of a world in which the so-called people would not be so egotistical, irresponsible, and so easy to influence.

Leibniz wrote that life is everywhere but not everything is living.[8] Similarly, the political may be found everywhere, but not everything can be reduced to a "properly" political register, at least not until we have the means to pose the question in this way. The political register must first become capable of taking on a proposition like Whitehead's, capable of translating in its own terms what is meant by welding imagination and common sense. There is no way to cut corners here. Many will find Whitehead's proposition meaningless, or they will immediately hear in it a call to make imagination comply with conditions imposed on it by a common sense that must be respected.

How, then, to respond to a physicist who raises these sorts of objection: "If we had respected common sense, neither Einsteinian relativity nor quantum mechanics would have seen the light of day! And Galileo! How could he have convinced people that the Earth moves around the sun without their being aware of it?" This latter

argument, it should be noted, is not a sound move. After all, Galileo published *Dialogues on the Two Chief World Systems* in Italian and not in Latin, and he had Sagredo, who presents himself as an enlightened amateur, play the role of arbitrator in his polemic with Simplicio, who represented his adversaries. Galileo thus placed himself on the side of common sense (Sagredo) against authority (Simplicio). The fact remains that everything changes at the start of the twentieth century.[9] Physics then takes on greater authority, and its authority is subsequently defined as revolutionary, as destroying the certainty of what is now, correlatively, characterized as common sense.

It is worth highlighting how strange this situation is. For physics to define itself against common sense, it first had to define common sense to suit its purposes. Through a strange sleight of hand, the certainties physics attributes to common sense are precisely those that characterized the so-called "mechanistic" view of the world prior to the revolution in physics. In other words, "people" had to be convinced that they "naturally" think in terms that in fact belong to what is now defined as classical physics. They had to be convinced, for instance, that they had always adhered to the idea of a physical reality consisting of particles in motion, each one characterized by a well-defined position and velocity. A great deal of instruction is needed to make what proves scandalous to physicists feel like a scandal for all of us, such that we indeed feel consternation when the physicists declare, "we can no longer claim a direct access to reality!"

A scene typical of this academic squabble: an enraged physicist challenges a critical thinker. The latter may be a philosopher, a sociologist, or a specialist of science studies or cultural studies. It does not matter to the physicist, who is not interested in such distinctions. What counts for him is what he has perceived: his interlocutor was likely to introduce the shadow of a doubt into the mind of the public as to whether the laws of physics really and truly describe reality. He cannot condemn this new Socrates to drink hemlock, but what he proposes has nothing amicable about it: "If you do not believe in the laws of physics, throw yourself out the window!" Especially distressing is that this ploy seems to work. The almost ritualistic character of this challenge—I can no longer count the number of times I have heard it, read it, or experienced it—testifies to the fact that physicists resort to it with impunity, apparently without fearing that

someone might reply in surprise: "Do you mean to say that, before Galileo and his law of falling bodies, people remained blissfully ignorant of the difference between doors and windows?"

Their adversaries, however, when they turn to deconstructing scientific objectivity, do not prove equal to the challenge. To counter the example of airplanes flying as proof of the objective existence of the laws of physics, one critical thinker even evoked the potential efficacy of prayer. He seemingly did not fear the shocked objection his argument could raise: a believer, however fervent, might reflect and then object that he would never choose an airline that replaced technicians with prayer circles; in other words, his trust in the safety of flight is not in the objective laws of aerodynamics when he boards a plane, but in the laborious work of airplane maintenance, pilot training, alertness of air controllers, and so forth.

The impunity they feel in rejecting common sense makes idiots of "those who know." The science wars took place in a land without people. A de facto situation defined the clash of the warriors: the defeat of common sense. And the defeat did not take place on any battlefield whatsoever. Strictly speaking, a battle never took place, because common sense has neither weapons nor a specific cause to defend when it comes to what was really of interest to scientists, in this case not the fact that heavy bodies fall, but the manner in which it is possible to define the variation of their velocity during their fall. Instead of a defeat, it was more of a *dé-fait,* a de-facting or undoing, a dissolution of the capacity to object, which also means the loss of what makes brooding possible.

Voicelessly perhaps, and without necessarily deploying a contradictory discourse, to brood is to refuse to lose confidence in the value of experience, even if experience is difficult to put into words, even if it is placed in a position of difficulty by a theory aiming to discredit it. What is undone is the possibility of a relation of hesitation with respect to theoretical claims. Hesitation differs from a relationship of distrust with respect to theories as such. Hesitation does not imply distrust, but the capacity for a positive appreciation of what a theory proposes, without for all that allowing the theory to deny what it leaves out or reduces to appearances. The corollary to the undoing of common sense, then, is the ignorant arrogance evident in so many theories. Theory without relation to common sense is

like a boat whose rudder has lost contact with the water, spinning in circles, unable to maintain its course, which is to say, unable to avoid stupidity.

While the mass media have lost interest in the science wars, the war goes on. The science wars, which spread their stupidity with impunity, are part of a past that has not passed. They surely would have captured Whitehead's attention. But the clash between scientists and critical thinkers would not have surprised him. For Whitehead, the transformation of philosophy into a specialization is evident in the incapacity of critical thinkers, from Hume and Kant, to "speak well" about what the sciences celebrate as triumphs. He notes: "The question 'what do we know?' has been transformed into the question 'what can we know?' "[10] This transformation sets up philosophy to judge human experience, to gauge what humans, including scientists, "know," even if they do not know how to put it into words. The broodings of common sense have been reduced to a form of confusion deemed inherent to questions that exceed the limits of what we may legitimately claim to know, of what we are entitled to know. If someone broods, it is because they are wandering in the labyrinth of their beliefs. As for those scientists who claim to have access to reality, criticism shows tolerance for their naïve realism. In response, Whitehead writes, "scientific faith has risen to the occasion, and has tacitly removed the philosophic mountain."[11]

Before he became a protagonist in the science wars, Steven Weinberg neatly expressed the amused scorn the philosophic mountain inspired in him:

> Ludwig Wittgenstein, denying even the possibility of explaining any fact on the basis of any other fact, warned that "at the basis of the whole modern view of the world lies the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena." Such warnings leave me cold. To tell a physicist that the laws of nature are not explanations of natural phenomena is like telling a tiger stalking prey that all flesh is grass. The fact that we scientists do not know how to state in a way that philosophers would approve what it is that we are doing in searching for scientific explanations does not mean that we are not doing something worthwhile. We could use help from professional

> philosophers in understanding what it is that we are doing, but with or without their help we shall keep at it.[12]

Weinberg waxes ironic without displaying any anger. Scientists and the majority of philosophers have, in fact, always been in agreement on the essential: sciences attest to human rationality. Everything changed when criticism ceased to be respectful, when certain critical thinkers made explicit the consequences of their deconstructive undertaking: "'Nature' does not play an active part in your agreement about the order you decipher from it, thus your agreement is merely human: you scientists come to an agreement among yourselves, and you do so in a manner that differs not the least from what holds for any other human agreement." Exeunt rationality. Yet rationality is not replaced by a genuine interest in the multiple ways in which humans are liable to come to an agreement. When the critic affirms that science is "nothing but a practice like any others," it is the "nothing but" that counts. The critic claims that agreement about facts have the same basis as any practical agreement. Reaching a verdict on facts is simply a result of relations of force.

What the science wars made apparent is that common sense is now nothing other than public opinion, subject to influence, readily seduced by the critics' proposition. Rather than treating them with irony as they once did, scientists accused critics of promoting irrationality. Suddenly, relativism was turned into a monstrous threat, the idea that all practices are equal in value, even those of quacks and primitive peoples! Apparently, the loss of authority of the laws of nature was taken as synonymous with an outbreak of arbitrariness. Indeed, scientists seemed always to return to these laws, to theoretical physics, even if it meant adding Darwinian evolution to designate creationists as the real enemies. Without these laws, nothing would hold back the most irrational passions. All would be permitted, each person with their truth, even flat-earth advocates.

It is now accepted that "people," descendants of the citizens of Athens, are no longer capable of questioning, of brooding. What Whitehead dubbed "common sense" is no longer something to be reckoned with, or to be counted on. It is now taken for granted that the man in the streets or the country dweller is mistaken. Indeed, this is the only thing specialists agree on unanimously. Worse, people are

seen as susceptible to more than being mistaken; they are accused of being ready to follow the first demagogue to come along. They are thus in need of shepherds. Since people are disposed to believe in anything and everything, any argument is permissible for the sake of denouncing bad shepherds.

Today this caricature has taken on life and entered in the political arena, or more precisely, the electoral arena, the only arena in which people are granted the right to make their voice heard. The defeated common sense, rendered incapable of brooding or even of taking offense, the perfect strawman, has rather suddenly given birth to the monster scientists evoked against those critics they treated as relativists. Of course, faced with the shameless proliferation of "fake news" and "alternative truths," faced with the resolute indifference to or virulent defiance of well-established facts, one might be tempted to settle accounts from twenty-five years ago: "As you can see, relativism, in its attack on the authority of facts that should have established agreement, has indeed given rise to irrationality. We were right, and you have let a terrible genie out of the bottle."

One may interpret what has happened from different points of view, obvious ones such as the role of social networks and disinformation campaigns of all sorts, but also the lived experience of seeing the progress in which we were asked to believe vanish from the horizon. But it seems to me that the daunting novelty of the event is overlooked when we resort to an image of the public that confirms its fundamental irrationality, for the sake of lending credence to the thesis that we must trust in those who know, or else anything goes. It strikes me that those who revel in fake news and other alternative truths seem less to manifest a blind credulity than a dark unwillingness to understand anything in order to take revenge on those who know. Who would have believed that Donald Trump, during his electoral campaign, would declare with impunity, "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose any voters"? His voters surely understood that Trump was offering them a splendid opportunity to further scandalize the intellectual elite.

What if such blind hate against this elite "who knows" was related to the cultural and political disaster which I am calling the defeat of common sense? The words of Bertolt Brecht spring to mind:

"We often speak of the violence of a river overflowing but less of the violence of the banks that confine it."[13] He was surely thinking of revolutionary violence and people in the streets, not of these crowds who so passionately applaud the most outrageous and openly absurd of statements, discovering that they count for something because they inspire fear in those who know. While the overflowing rivers tend to differ, the violence of the banks is similar. Our shepherds were wrong to believe that they could with impunity make those whose confidence they solicit feel they have absolutely no reason to take offense when promises are not kept. People cannot be humiliated with impunity.

We must not let the response of Trump supporters (and others who reject as falsehood and conspiracy anything that requires thought of them) obscure the existence of radically different responses to the mirage of progress. Other responses arise that produce a recalcitrant thinking, putting to the test reasons supposed to persuade. Increasingly numerous among the descendants of Athenian citizens are women and men who no longer brood yet do not turn into fools as a result. They know what they resist when they take to protesting in the streets, or mowing down contaminated fields (where GMO are grown), or camping in "zones to be defended," or going on strike against "objective" managerial redefinitions that destroy the meaning of their jobs. Or else, they experiment with alternative therapeutic practices regardless of data-based expertise. In all such cases, they call into question the definition of the object on which the experts base their authority, not with the violence of those who refuse to listen to reason, but with the intelligence of those who have learned to resist its authority. They contest an authority based on ignorance or rejection of what they know, what they feel matters. They insist on taking multiple interdependencies into account, entanglements of humans and nonhumans, which the experts insist on forgetting, and which they too had become accustomed to forgetting all too often.

To think in terms of the defeat of common sense is to resist the temptation to say that the first group, those who destroy the riverbanks, who have decided not to listen to reason anymore and to remain deaf to anything that would make them doubt, are in the wrong, while the second group, the activists, are in the right. Both

are products of the same disaster. We may, however, side with the manner in which the second group gives meaning to this disaster, in contrast with the manner of the first group. That is what I propose to do, while keeping in mind, as a philosopher, that we are no longer in the streets of Athens. Those who struggle will certainly not ask philosophy to help them shed light on what makes them struggle. It was not philosophers who opened the pathway for activists. Instead, philosophers may benefit from what the men and women who engage in activism have to teach them.

Philosophers can learn what it might mean politically to weld imagination and common sense. Knowledge that activates does so in the mode of resistance and struggle, which lends it importance and relevance, but which may equally well make it vulnerable, making them lay claim, for instance, to the legitimacy of the concrete in opposition to the usurpation of the abstract. The struggle to loosen the grip of definitions authorizing objective knowledge is justified when engaging the enemy. But the genuine force of activists comes of taking on the challenge of this question: how not to resemble the enemy? Implied in this question is another: how not to attribute the power of mobilization to a truth that we declare concrete, thus unifying everyone like good little soldiers? In other words, how not to unify the "we" that fights by reference to a knowledge that is ultimately veridical? How to ensure that the interdependences across different reasons for resistance remain discernable so that "we" remain woven and entangled?

From this point of view, the steadfast rejection of GMOs in Europe is an exemplary case of success. If the GMOs coming out of laboratories had continued to be defined in terms of a forward-looking innovation attesting to the capacity of humanity to master nature, we know all too well what would have happened when the consequences of their agricultural use had become undeniable. Efforts would have been made to sustain the compatibility between GMOs in the field and GMOs defined authoritatively in abstract terms under experimental conditions, even though the consequences of GMOs in the field reveal what GMOs in labs ignored: the patenting process; the increased usage of pesticides with their impact on biodiversity and health; and the proliferation of increasingly resistant "pests" (weeds, insects, fungi, etc.). The economic, ecological, or agricultural conse-

quences would have been noted, accepted, and lamented or dismissed, but in the mode positing them as secondary effects of a rational and beneficial innovation. Even in regions of the world where GMOs have been imposed, this scenario was thwarted, and opponents have proved able to interlace their reasons for resisting: welding imagination and common sense. Each reason in isolation—from the combat against capitalist grab, through the struggle against patenting, to the defense of nature or of health—would have remained too weak, because identifiable with an ideological refusal of progress. But imagination, becoming sensitive to the reasons of others, allowed opponents to make sense in common with respect to what GMOs would mean in the field, and in a mode that caused the experts to stammer. Once activated, imagination is contagious. Today, in the wake of the rejection of GMOs, the question of what will make for sustainable agriculture continues to push us to think, to imagine, and to fight.

Problematizing Abstraction

The question of common sense has changed. Welding imagination to common sense is no longer first and foremost a task for philosophy. Today it is what activists strive for: making sense in common. Instead of coming to an agreement, making sense in common is about knowing together that the reasons for resisting, as different as they may be, need each other. Only together did activists give meaning to the agricultural innovation called GMOs. Instead of a question for specialized knowledge alone, agriculture is a question with many stakes. Ever since the Neolithic era, agriculture has entwined human practices with nonhuman forms of life, earth, and climate in a mode of irreducible interdependence, incessantly rearticulated.

To return to the image of philosophy faced with the brooding of common sense, it is imperative for philosophers to abandon the image of common sense as an attribute, something in which each human would have or should have their share, something that each human entreats us not to hold in disdain. We must imagine that the descendants of Athenian citizens today are men and women who know that no unanimous truth will be established or restored beyond their entreaty. What makes them brood is the sense that what is common is irreducibly problematic, the sense of compositions to

be ongoingly revisited and always situated by what compels them to think here and now, and not in general. They feel compelled to think not as defenders of truth, but as participants in an adventure with neither destination nor heroic definition.

That said, we must also keep in mind that the image we took as a point of departure is itself situated. It is situated in terms of the descendants of Athenian citizens, who are inhabited by brooding, and they address a philosopher. We do not know what common sense might mean elsewhere. I will return to this question. At this juncture, however, I would like to share the terrain opened by activists, who have made it possible for us to make a wager against the dark will to avoid thinking, to avoid anything that might shake things up, because thinking, it is true, may inspire fear in us. The wager is that this dark will need not confront us with something we would have to acknowledge as the sad truth: that common sense would need to believe in the authority of those who know because it would be desperately incapable of distinguishing between knowledge and opinion.

This is why I wish to stress the value of experiences and knowledges that we can share with many others. When we are not in the grip of a theory, we are each and every one of us capable of juggling contextual resources, multiple practices, and semantics, according to the demands of the situation, and we are not overcome with confusion by the idea that these situations may be of importance to others in a different mode. On the contrary, that idea captures our interest, enters into our brooding, and activates our imagination. We hunger for novels that make us attentive witnesses to the passions, doubts, dreams, and fears of their protagonists. We are drawn to books about history, ethnology, and animal ethology that explore the manner in which human and nonhuman others relate to, or are related to, their world. Our imagination is indebted to fiction, which teaches us that a truth may always conceal another, and yet none of them is "merely relative."

Such an imagination is what those who have fallen into hatred have obliterated, which is why we can say they have lost common sense. This catastrophe has nothing to do with what is often held against so-called common people when they attest to what matters to them: they lack distance; they do not see the "big picture." Only the big picture would allow access to a so-called impartial conception,

which would lead to condemnation of attachments whose partiality blinds them. Indeed, we are relentlessly exhorted to learn how to extract—that is, abstract—ourselves from what we hold on to, and holds on to us. This capacity to render negligible what our abstractions are abstracted from is the yardstick by which we are measured. It is the meaning of apparatuses that separate us from what we know in order to inculcate us with docility, with respect for rules defining what we have the right to know.

It is here that Whitehead may help us, because, in his vocabulary, the capacity to abstract is not the mark of a particular sort of privilege. For Whitehead, perception is in itself a triumph of abstraction; it is selective and partial, orientated by the needs of action. But, contrary to abstract thought, it does not cling to its abstractions: "The first principle of epistemology should be that the changeable, shifting aspects of our relations to nature are the primary topics for conscious observation. This is only common sense; for something can be done about them. The organic permanences survive by their own momentum: our hearts beat, our lungs absorb air, our blood circulates, our stomachs digest. It requires advanced thought to fix attention on such fundamental operations."[14] This holds true for all those animals Whitehead defines as superior, capable of observing, paying attention, interpreting. Which is to say: it holds true before language gets involved. And language became a support for abstract thought within the world of letters, dominated by the ideal of the dictionary, only when it became a matter of learning that words ought to have significance independently of the changeable, shifting relations to the reality in which they participate (with the exception of poets, who are granted latitude).

The capacity for abstraction, then, is not the privilege of thought, which allows for its authentication. Whitehead resists the judgment whose premises date back to Socrates's attempt to convince the inhabitants of Athens (without great success) that they were incapable of extracting the meaning of terms such as "courage," "virtue," or "justice" from the concrete situations that illustrate them. In other words, they were incapable of abstract thought. The dictum inscribed, it is said, at the entrance of the academy founded by Plato, the dictum to "let no one ignorant of geometry enter here," has today become a pedagogical imperative. "No one should finish

primary school without severing the connection between a slice of pie (cut into equal parts) and a fraction, and the fraction should not be confused with a fractional number." When the teacher does not give students a sense of the adventure in which mathematicians are engaged, the ordeal undergone at school by children who must meet the strange demands of abstract thought is liable to produce what Stella Baruk calls "automaths."[15] Common sense is then torpedoed, blown away. Students may coolly come up with a solution for a problem in which five and a half sheep (fractional number!) are led to slaughter, "since it's all math."

Whitehead is not interested in abstract thought, but neither does he attribute concrete thought to children. Thought without abstraction does not exist for him. Thought presupposes abstraction. Of concern to him, then, are our *modes* of abstraction. In every era, writes Whitehead, a crucial task of philosophy is to *cultivate vigilance* toward the modes of abstraction that equip the thought of that era.[16]

For we never abstract in general, always in a determined mode. Thus, in the case of GMOs, their defenders see only the gain in productivity tied to genetic modification, and it is this abstraction that permits them to disqualify all opposition in one fell swoop: they have millions of mouths to feed before them. Still, it cannot be said that their opponents have access to a GMO that, for its part, would be concrete. If these opponents were able to make sense in common, it would be because their divergent modes of abstraction neither engaged in competition nor fought to establish the supremacy of one stance over another, but let each stance bring to bear a particular perspective. If modes of abstraction deserve vigilance, it is because, in every era, some of them lay claim to supremacy and relegate others to insignificance. Simply put, they lay claim to what Whitehead calls the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. This is what happened when laboratory biologists claimed to possess the scientific truth of GMOs by defining them in terms of the genetic modification that characterizes them.

The task of philosophy is not to criticize our modes of abstraction or specialized forms of knowledge mobilizing them as such. Nor is it the vocation of philosophy to oppose them with concrete knowledge. Philosophy must cultivate vigilance toward those modes of ab-

straction in each era that lay claim to predatory power and relegate what they omit to insignificance. To make philosophy capable of this duty, Whitehead asks that it *eliminate nothing* of what we experience, which is also to say it must never ratify the legitimacy of an omission. That does not mean defending the concrete, but rather making feel (*faire sentir*), heightening or intensifying dimensions of experience that silently insist, omitted by a mode of abstraction. In other words, Whitehead's philosophy is not militant (return to experience!), but activist, in the sense that it activates what our modes of abstraction can so easily silence.

This is why, according to Whitehead, argumentation and proof do not suit philosophy, because, whether they be scientific, juridical, or other, both rely on a particular mode of abstraction and owe their power to all that this mode of abstraction gives them the right to omit. Yet philosophy can never give itself such a right. It cannot take pride in the high fact of explanation through eliminating what its explanation needs to neglect. In mathematics, however, proof is nothing but a path for a type of comprehension bearing its own self-evidence: "The attempt of any philosophic discourse should be to produce self-evidence. Of course it is impossible to achieve any such aim. But, nonetheless, all inference in philosophy is a sign of that imperfection which clings to all human endeavor. The aim of philosophy is sheer disclosure."[17]

"Disclosure" does not correspond to "enlightenment," with its connotation of unveiling a truth that had till then been dissimulated (or repressed). Something becomes manifest, but it is not a matter of manifestation in the phenomenological sense (in the manner of "the appearing of the entity itself in its manifest being"). Manifestation is not in opposition to abstract capture. It establishes itself for itself, purely and simply, and another mode of capture is established with it that gives importance to what we habitually omitted and asks us to pause on what seemed anecdotal. In other words, the openly affirmed aim of philosophy should be to activate dimensions of experience that our modes of perceptual and linguistic abstraction omit, and it is not for nothing that, in *Modes of Thought,* Whitehead dares to speak of the kinship between philosophy and poetry. In doing so, he does not claim that philosophical statements are in need of poetic quality. "Philosophy is the endeavor to find a conventional

phraseology for the vivid suggestiveness of the poet,"[18] to craft statements "in prose," and even "prosaic" ones, that are liable to impart to what is usually omitted the power of making consciousness "flicker": "Our enjoyment of actuality is a realization of worth, good or bad. It is a value experience. Its basic expression is 'Have a care, here is something that matters!' Yes—that is the best phrase—the primary glimmering of consciousness reveals something that matters."[19]

The task Whitehead proposes for philosophy—vigilance toward our modes of abstraction—does not correspond to the indictment of a consciousness that would remain desperately imprisoned by ultimately inadequate modes of abstraction without the intervention of philosophy. To the contrary, it is when something suddenly demands us to pay attention (something that we had not felt important until then) that we feel ourselves conscious. For Whitehead, consciousness is not a stable attribute; it flickers, embarking on a permanent adventure in modes of abstraction distributing what matters and what may be omitted under such and such a circumstance. And it may be the taste for this adventure that the imagination, set in motion by fiction, translates. As for those who wish to enclose us within the finite framework of what we may legitimately know, whatever they may say, we know very well that a truth can always conceal another within it.

While the task of philosophy is to weld, welding does not necessarily happen between two disparate realities, common sense prisoner to its routines versus free imagination. In fact, after proposing the welding of imagination and common sense, Whitehead defines the aim of this welding: it should produce "a restraint upon specialists" as well as an "enlargement of their imaginations."[20] Restraint should not evoke the image of a foot slamming on the brakes, or the image of common sense relentlessly policing an excess of speed. It is more a matter of making evident the unrestrained advance of a form of knowledge demanding protection from anything that might slow it, harnessing the imagination of those who devote themselves to its advance. And here Whitehead takes very particular aim at those modern specialists whom he dubs "professionals." Recall the biologists who created GMOs. They knew very well that things might happen in the fields that they had not observed in the laboratory, but that did not activate their imagination. They insisted that every-

thing will be worked out, must be worked out, because these sorts of complication are not worthy of stopping progress. "Each profession makes progress, but it is progress in its own groove. . . . The groove prevents straying across country, and the abstraction abstracts from something to which no further attention is paid. . . . The remainder of life is treated superficially, with the imperfect categories of thought derived from one profession."[21]

The specialized modes of abstraction of our modern professionals give a great deal of importance to one of the order-words of modernity, "progress." While these modes of abstraction (not surprisingly) clash over the meaning of progress, they agree on one thing: the need to break with common sense. They function in a manner that can be qualified as predatory, for they lay claim to the power to disqualify and silence others. Yet they cannot be defined as inherently predatory, for it is the professionals who confer this predatory power on them, wherever these professionals are recognized as servants of progress, of course. A specialized mode of abstraction can never be said to be *inherently* guilty. Still, in the manner of Donna Haraway, we may say that they are *not innocent.* Vigilance is required vis-à-vis all claims to innocence and vis-à-vis all arguments presupposing that it is legitimate to eliminate or overlook whatever a mode of abstraction does not deem to be of importance.

If no mode of abstraction is innocent, it is not justified to consider them all suspect, all guilty, as if becoming professional were the inevitable destiny of the specialist. Whitehead often advises us not to exaggerate. He thus engages in a form of humor, a humor we might call prosaic. Humor does not disqualify its targets; its triumph lies in spurring the reader to laugh not only at herself but also at the manner in which she has become accustomed to (re)presenting herself. Humor is aimed at professionals who, although cognizant that their modes of abstraction dominate them, continue to think of themselves as paying the price demanded by their so-called vocation. This view of a vocation is rather exaggerated: in older articulations, the vocation does not imply blind engagement, but quite the contrary. We need not fear that, by asking specialists to acknowledge a world beyond their groove, we are destroying vocations. Whitehead stresses that the construction of professionals, or fixed persons with fixed duties, is a modern invention, no older than the

twentieth century. Obviously, fixed persons with fixed duties as such are nothing new. Antiquity had its professionals in scribes, officials, and astronomers, all figures of scrupulous and short-sighted precision. What is new, Whitehead notes, is the coupling of profession and progress. This coupling involves the invention of institutions in which entrepreneurial yet fragile imaginations are cultivated, which demand protection against questions that *must not* concern them.

Professionalization thus raises questions about the milieu it requires—that is, its associated institutional milieu—and about this other milieu that must let itself be kept at a distance, a milieu in which respect must be imposed for a knowledge whose authority constructs a void around it. For a mathematician like Whitehead, mathematics does not need to be authoritative, because the values it brings into existence do not need to deny anything at all; values are established through their very self-evidence. It is the educational milieu in which mathematics is inculcated that tends to produce "automaths" who are blindly obedient to definitions. The same is true of the facts mobilized for argumentation and proof. When facts are required for someone to be heard, their functioning can turn predatory: "where are your facts?" In French, the word fact, *fait,* can take on another intonation. When workers or artists stand back and consider their accomplishment, they say: "there, it's done"; *c'est fait.* Here, the fact is something done, and at stake is the difference between something done well or done poorly. This understanding of fact, however, runs into the ironic request for definitions. What is meant by "done well"? It is then readily accused of entertaining a reactionary and/or Romantic attachment to allegedly true values, or else of indulging relativism and subjectivism. Our milieus are toxic. Generally speaking, the predatory functioning of specialized modes of abstraction is a matter of milieu, and in particular, the milieu associated with the invention of the modern professional.

The philosophy of Whitehead is thus situated by a preoccupation with that which characterizes the milieus proper to the modern world, those that made philosophy itself into a professional activity (especially by producing pared-down statements haunted by the ideal of the dictionary). Whitehead's philosophy is not rooted in the ground of a truth to be deployed. Neither does it aim for an ideal transcending situatedness as the very vocation of thought. His phi-

losophy disavows the critical weapon allowing for the identification and denunciation of what corrupts thought. This philosophy dovetails with the radical meaning of the doctrine of evolution, which, as Whitehead puts it, knows neither foundation nor ideal, and which does not understand finitude in terms of limitation, because limitation always implies a reference to what it deems inaccessible, a reason that would demonstrate that what is had to be thus. To accept the doctrine of evolution is to affirm that what exists could have existed otherwise, but without falling into the unhappy irony of relativism, and without repeating the melancholic ideal of truth without attachment, ground, or history whose impossibility he announces. The naturalist who contemplates the marvels of a spider weaving its web may be intrigued, but he does not cultivate the least nostalgia for a creator God who wanted this spider to be what it is. Whitehead makes the wager that common sense may be intrigued by specialized knowledges without needing to lend them an authority to which it should bow. And of course, to avoid being a pious vow, this wager calls for a change of milieu.

Civilizing Modernity?

Obviously, Whitehead did not foresee what we live today. I chose to situate him in the ruins of Athens, an emblematic site for the origin stories of philosophy, but without any ambition to discuss this origin or any desire to give Whitehead's addendum to this philosophical scene the power to offer answers to today's questions. That would make him into a clairvoyant or prophet. In fact, we can say that reading Whitehead demands us at once to situate him and to situate us. Whitehead belongs to his era, with anxieties that are still our own, and with what may appear to us as blind spots.

Indeed, reading Whitehead, we may at times be tempted to adopt the stupid stance of superiority of the present over the past: we know better; we would speak otherwise. In this essay, I have chosen to impart greater density to what I share with him through more contemporary themes. As for blind spots, we would do well to remember that the issues that we are no longer supposed to ignore today are not necessarily ones we now prove capable of thinking in a coherent manner. Instead, what haunt us are debts that have till now remained

unpaid. Perhaps, as Étienne Souriau would say, we have not (or not yet?) paid the price for our passage. Perhaps the facility with which we are tempted to burn today what yesterday we adored is a translation of the temptation to consider critique as an accomplishment in itself, even when the problem has not been effectively or positively deployed.

We do not yet know, then, whether the possibility inspiring Whitehead to think—civilizing modernity—is feasible, or whether we are living through the collapse of this civilization. We do not know whether the stories to be told about us in the future will build on the continuities of a living heritage, or whether they will speak of us in the mode of "them," strange creatures who bequeathed a world in ruins.

To be sure, reading Whitehead today pushes us to accentuate the question mark hovering over the very possibility of civilizing modernity, but we do not need to teach Whitehead about the speculative nature of his wager; far from it. In fact, what pushed Whitehead the mathematician into philosophy was the conviction that modern civilization was in decline. This conviction might be called prephilosophical, forged by an academic who asked himself how and whether this civilization could ever recover from the terrible climate in which industrial society was born, an academic who knew full well that most of his lettered colleagues, prisoners of professionalized modes of abstraction, participated in this climate and responded to the question of working class misery with the answer Cain gave to God: "Am I my brother's keeper?"[22] As we have seen, the positive task Whitehead assigns to philosophy, the task of welding common sense to imagination, is aimed at these specialists whose unrestrained confidence in progress needs to be checked, and whose imagination needs to be enlarged.

It might be said that a brooding common sense has turned Whitehead into a philosopher, with the task of elucidating what specialized forms of judgment tear asunder, and of giving coherent meaning to it. The figure of philosopher, then, is not that of a revolutionary. Even though revolutionaries are right to denounce the relationship between the professionalization of knowledge and social oppression, to style philosophy as revolutionary would once again give a particular mode of abstraction the power to define the truth of a situation.

Common sense of the sort Whitehead highlights does not ask, "who is right?" Common sense asks for coherence where contradiction reigns. But what coherence can be wrought from these specialized modes of abstraction in dispute among themselves? Whitehead, the mathematician-philosopher, answers that coherence will not define any form of "correct thinking." In response to Socrates's question "what is . . . ?," it won't do to answer with the idea that, if each mode of abstraction remained within its proper field of application, they would work together, in accordance with a peaceful and courteous division of labor. Disagreements are not to be written off as losses, distortions, or defects. For a mathematician, coherence is not something to be retrieved. Coherence is to be created.

Just as welding is a metallurgical operation, Whitehead will take the creation of coherence as a technical operation. Such an operation has for its aim to endow philosophy with the capacity to activate the importance of what "we know," even if specialists refuse our right to let our knowledge matter. If we are to civilize the modes of abstraction that modern thinkers have dedicated to battling each other, their only common goal being to disqualify common sense, we must reevaluate what these modes of abstraction call for, in such a mode that they lose any relation to right or legitimacy. Such reevaluation will allow us to approach them in the manner of adventurous modes of capture that are always at risk of neglecting something that, here, in this case, might matter. A mathematician would ask no less, and Whitehead goes to great lengths to accomplish as much in his metaphysical work *Process and Reality.*

Civilizing modernity, then, means getting specialists to learn to situate themselves, to use Haraway's turn of phrase, or, to evoke Deleuze, to honor the truth of the relative (in contrast to the relativity of the truth), the truth of knowledges that know how to present themselves as relative to the questions they prove able to pose effectively. Both approaches urge specialists to make connections actively between what they know and what their knowledge must omit in order to be produced. That seems like nothing, you may say, but let's recall the GMO affair. Specialists speaking about GMOs knew quite well that they had omitted any questions that could not be addressed in their laboratories, but it took activist struggles to put an end to the presentation of GMOs as the key to such a decisive advance in

agriculture that other questions were more or less negligible, to be dealt with later. In this instance, civilizing modernity would have meant reuniting all the protagonists concerned to make sense in common about what was claimed to be coming out of the laboratory. Above all, it would have meant that, when presenting themselves or their specialized knowledge, everyone would have avoided claiming for themselves terms such as "universal," "objective," and "rational." In one way or another, such terms all consign those to whom one is speaking to the dark realms of anecdotal knowledge, particularistic habits, subjective attachments, irrational beliefs, and impassioned affect. Civilizing modernity is quite a worthy ambition, deserving of its question mark.

But those activists had not read Whitehead, you might say. It was their struggles that welded an enlivened imagination to the question of a sustainable agriculture, a question now shared by many. As we shall see later, Whitehead's metaphysics may be suited to the "making sense in common" generated by activists, which extends the notion of common sense not only far beyond the streets of Athens, but also far beyond the image of each human entitled to "his" opinion. Driven by the question of coherence, the singularity of Whitehead's metaphysical system forced him onto a literally experimental path where he made and unmade his concepts to the point where not one of them could hold independently of the others.[23] In doing so, he rid himself of the ways of posing problems and the economies of thought that his era authorized. This does not mean that he attained the universal above and beyond the limitations of his era. Whitehead's system is situated by the very thing it aims to create, coherence among our modern modes of abstraction. Thus, we might say that he is no longer situated by an era, but by the question of civilization to which his era belonged, and ours as well.

This civilization is in question, and not *civilization.* Whitehead was always attentive to the plurality of civilizations. He likes to contrast modern civilization, born in Europe, with that of the Greeks, the Egyptians, or the Semites. Yet he never develops the idea of a progress of *civilization* across civilizations that would only constitute stages of it. In *Modes of Thought,* the notion of civilization is presented as a generality, and in *Adventures of Ideas* as "difficult to define,"[24] which is true of all generality in Whitehead's sense. But he

never wavers on one point: there is no model civilization. To copy the Greeks, for instance, would have no meaning, because they themselves were not copyists: "They were speculative, adventurous, eager for novelty."[25]

What Whitehead means by civilization might be called a very special milieu of culture for the adventures proper to human life, within which traditions are not only cultivated but also put to the test and set out on adventures. Each civilization, writes Whitehead, "deposits its message as to the secret character of the nature of things,"[26] as to what it means to live, to act, to feel, and as to what meaning to give to order, as well as disorder, conflict, and frustration. Thus, each civilization proposes to human experience a manner of understanding itself that includes disagreements, imparting tension to civilization itself, as well as conflicts tearing it apart. Civilization in this sense is keeping with the stakes that constitute Whiteheadian common sense: common sense is not some fund of knowledge common to humanity, but a situated capacity to participate in the adventure of civilization to which it belongs.

It could be said that, for Whitehead, a civilization is an adventure that is thinking itself through those who are concerned with it. It is in this sense that he could write, "civilizations can be understood only by the civilized."[27] There is, then, a radical historicism in Whitehead's thought, but it is an historicism bearing on what matters for this civilization, what makes those who belong to it think, and what aspects of existence are liable to make them brood. Their civilization, its future or decline, *concerns* the civilized. For them it is a question that makes them think, hesitate, judge, hope, or slaughter each other. And as a philosopher, Whitehead does not claim to transcend the civilization to which he belongs. The challenge he assigns to philosophy, welding imagination to common sense, would undoubtedly have been quite difficult to explain to an ancient Greek. Yet, insofar as it seems to us at the very least debatable, we are contemporaries of Whitehead from this point of view.

It is important to emphasize that Whitehead's historicism does not at all imply that we should understand his thought as deriving from his historical situation. Rather, his historical situation forced him to think and to create concepts that activated his problematization of it. The conceptual adventure of Whitehead is, in this sense,

like a message in a bottle thrown into the ocean, or like an arrow shot into a future he will never know: this is what happened to us, this is how the civilization to which I belong has allowed me to understand its decline.

We may feel today that the modern world can no longer be characterized in terms of decline. Instead, we are faced with the question that historians of the present call "the great acceleration," in reference to the accelerated intensification of the impact of "development" on our environments and ourselves. But this fact is not, as such, liable to call into question what made Whitehead think. Capitalism, which drives what we call development, can certainly explain the manner in which this kind of development has been unable to think its consequences. But capitalism does not explain the fact that, until very recently, so many knowledgeable people have identified development with progress, even if it meant waiting for the end of capitalism for this progress finally to benefit the whole human race. Today we can but note that what such development has provoked in a sense verifies Whitehead's diagnosis against modern civilization: the art of imagining has been monopolized and harnessed by specialists become professionals, deaf to uneasiness and protest. Those who feel uneasy and protest have been accused of seeking to impede the inevitable march of progress—Pascal Lamy's statement still rings in my head: "You can't stop the clocks." Whitehead wrote that all societies (which is also to say, as we shall see, all that endures as it endures) rely on the patience of their environment as to the manner in which they affect it. The earth has lost patience, and the ticking of clocks has become ominous.

Walking this path with Whitehead, I have chosen to follow him wherever I could do so, in the mode of "I concur and would say even more." Where I feel my era has not only permitted me to say more but also asked me to speak otherwise, I will take up the baton from him. Taking up his baton does not concern his conceptual system, for as we will see, it functions through its own constraints in the manner of a machine to make think. Modifying it would mean reconstructing it, an undertaking for which I do not have the least ambition, since I owe to Whitehead my capacity to think with those whom I feel to be my contemporaries. It is Whitehead who let me dare to venture with them into this zone of indiscernibility where we no longer

know whether the language we speak is still that of the modern era. I will nonetheless focus on the texts, principally *Modes of Thought,* in which Whitehead, heir to his own conceptual adventure, addressed his own contemporaries, sought to share with them the taste of a thought that does not submit to what we have the right to know. Take these two passages:

> In mankind, the dominant dependence on bodily functioning seems still there. And yet the life of a human being receives its worth, its importance, from the way in which unrealized ideals shape its purposes and tinge its actions. The distinction between men and animals is in one sense only a difference in degree. But the extent of the degree makes all the difference. The Rubicon has been crossed.[28]

> The central organism which is the soul of a man is mainly concerned with the trivialities of human existence. It does not easily meditate upon the activities of fundamental bodily functions. Instead of fixing attention on the bodily digestion of vegetable food, it catches the gleam of the sunlight as it falls on the foliage. It nurtures poetry. Men are the children of the Universe, with foolish enterprises and irrational hopes. A tree sticks to its business of mere survival; and so does an oyster with some minor divergences. In this way, the life aim at survival is modified into the human aim at survival for diversified worthwhile experience.[29]

In his era, Whitehead must have scandalized those thinkers who defined the human as a thinking being, as *sapiens.* For him, if the Rubicon has been crossed, it is because an "outrageous novelty is introduced, sometimes beatified, sometimes damned, and sometimes literally patented or protected by copyright,"[30] which attests that what might be and yet is not has the power to insist and that the importance of unrealized alternatives has been introduced into the world. Whitehead never ceases to remind us that, without this sense of possibility transfiguring the "given" or "datum," there would be no morality, no religion, no technique; nor would there be science (a fact we too often forget). Nor, for that matter, philosophy. There

would be no common sense to brood over aspects of existence. After all, if common sense broods, it is because it seeks more than what is given.

To be sure, characterizing humans in terms of their foolish enterprises and irrational hopes presents an interesting departure from discourses on rationality proper to the one who is christened *sapiens,* but it is equally clear that Whitehead was not bothered by the questions haunting us today. The currently pressing question about human exceptionalism that arises in our relations to animals does not stop with them. It may also concern trees, which do a great deal more than merely survive. The very image of the crossing of the Rubicon once brought a furrow to Donna Haraway's brow. For all Whitehead's liberality in granting empirical knowledge and emotions to so-called superior animals, Haraway heard in it echoes of a separation without return, of the founding of Empire, and of History, whose only protagonists were now human beings. As for the foolish enterprises and sensibility for unrealized alternatives of these "human beings," we cannot and must not forget today that they demand much more than the vigilance of philosophy. Can we, even in a poetic fashion, characterize the human as such in terms that belong first and foremost to our civilization? Let us recall the ominous juridical thesis of *terra nullius* that defined certain lands as belonging to no one because they were inhabited by "lazy" people, strangers to the spirit of enterprise, who had not put their lands to work. It designated them as peoples whose "traditions" should be destroyed, since they stifled the insistence of unrealized alternatives that gives its value to human life. Can we say that it was the human who crossed the Rubicon, if that means separating *nature,* which *is,* from *culture,* which nurtures what *might be*? Or was it the colonizer, in charge of the "foolish" mission of civilizing humanity, while animated by the possibility of taking possession of worlds to exploit?

Still, we should not then conclude that we now know what Whitehead's belonging to his era allowed him to ignore. Our contemporary questions that his era did not pose are less what makes us think today than they are what puts us to the test. Denunciation of the past cannot serve as thought, nor can guilt serve as principle.

And, as always with Whitehead, we must not move too quickly. We must hearken to the call that impels him as a philosopher to

take the side of common sense against the absurdity of doctrines that take so much pride in relegating to arbitrary subjectivity not only that to which they owe their existence—faith in the possible—but also that which animates them when they preach the necessity of judging things objectively: the unrealized alternative of a humanity finally liberated from its illusions. His call is: "We are children of the universe." We have become so accustomed to thinking that the universe is indifferent to what makes us thrill that we recognize any thesis whatsoever as "undoubtedly objective" so long as it has the allure of a "truth that hurts," a truth translatable into the defeat of commonsense. It is Whitehead's metaphysical adventure that allows him to issue this call, and his metaphysics says nothing about the human. It is the universe itself, as his metaphysics conceives of it, that gives meaning to the possible, to the insistence on unrealized alternatives, to the link between existence and value, and all of it in a mode that may concern the oyster and tree as much as the human. "We have no right to deface the value of experience which is the very essence of the universe."[31]

"We are children of the universe" thus brings us into contact with a duty, an engagement against the absurdity in which modern philosophy has participated in the foolish enterprise of making modern entrepreneurs the very prototype for the human coming at last to the "age of reason." Whitehead himself did not go any farther. He did not inquire into those different manners of respecting the value of experience that belong to other children of the universe. But today as yesterday, his metaphysics can help us loosen the grip of the unavoidable dilemmas that are strangling us.