

Doing Battle at the Frontiers

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For more than forty years, *Diogenes* has been striving, with the limited resources at its disposal, to mark the progress of the human sciences around the world. The journal emerged from the encounter between an institution and a person. The institution was the *Conseil international de la philosophie et des sciences humaines* (CIPSH) that was founded under the auspices and on the initiative of UNESCO with the aim of regrouping a variety of different international associations in the field of *Geisteswissenschaften*; the person was Roger Caillois, then an international civil servant with UNESCO. The CIPSH wanted to equip itself with an organ of international scholarly communication that was capable of serving as a bond and link between its various member associations.

Roger Caillois had a very clear idea: he wished for the creation of an interdisciplinary journal that would reflect his notion of "diagonal sciences." He had been struck by the fragmentation of scholarly work after World War II. To be sure, he was conscious of the need for a high degree of specialization in the sciences. But he also felt that the time had come, if not for an impossible synthesis, at least for a rapprochement among isolated disciplines that pursued their advance on deliberately separated paths, arrogantly ignoring one another. He dreamed of a journal in which archaeologists would present their problems for the benefit of economists and historians could reach an understanding with philosophers. He was convinced that the rapprochement between disciplines and problems that were apparently very remote would generate new and fertile perspectives. He wanted to enrich scholarship by exposing it to the impact of approaches that were specific to each of the disciplines concerned. Thus he presented his project to the general assembly of CIPSH which subscribed to it with enthusiasm. It named the new journal *Diogenes*, not in reference to that philoso-

pher's cynicism, but because he had dangled his lantern in search of a human being.

Like so many human endeavors, and perhaps even more than other ones, a journal is first and foremost just one person. For twenty-five years, until his death in 1978, Roger Caillois became identical with *Diogenes* and *Diogenes* did not exist except through Roger Caillois. He saw clearly that his journal navigated between two rocks, i.e., between hasty generalization and arid erudition. He took as his motto a formula that he liked to repeat: "No facts without ideas; no ideas without facts." All that smacked of monography was pitilessly dismissed from the pages of *Diogenes*. To my frequent regret—Caillois had chosen me as his assistant in my position, at this time, as adjunct secretary general of the CIPSH—excellent studies on Kantian philosophy or on Frederick II of Hohenstaufen were thus rejected. Scholars of the member organizations of CIPSH were gritting their teeth. Today those debates have become part of the intellectual history of our age. Nor is it certain that Caillois was always right. But for him there was the coherence of his project. In this way *Diogenes* gained international prestige and its reputation.

In an epoch when this notion was more highly regarded than it is today, interdisciplinarity was the hallmark of *Diogenes*. The idea of "diagonal sciences" pervaded all its contributions. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the journal's ideal was to publish, for the benefit of economists and psychoanalysts, an article that dealt with the influence of mythology upon numismatics or one examining the connections between medicine and archaeology. This is also why the editors of *Diogenes* warmly welcomed the idea of collaborating in the plan for a colloquium, initiated by UNESCO, on the subject of "What do we not know?" With it one regained at once interdisciplinarity, the theme of the "diagonal sciences," and the results, at least to some extent, did not come from just one field, but in a certain way from all those disciplines that were being embraced.

However, the gathering of March 1995 is related to a much larger project, put forward by the Director General of UNESCO and entrusted to Ayam Wassef who played a central part in its conception. What is this project about? It is about the preparation of a

series of meetings with the aim of securing for UNESCO its role as an international intellectual center. The uniqueness of this project lies in the establishment of a series of conferences to discuss some of the great problems of our age—problems that concern the future of all of us and that require the bringing together of the best intellects from all over the world. The characteristic of this body will be that those who attend, instead of defining its direction in perpetuity, will be replaced in line with the chosen themes; the aim is to avoid the kind of cumbersome administration attendant to all bureaucracies, particularly international ones. Another characteristic of this project is to provide for a range of other activities relating to each colloquium: publications in journals and anthologies—in France in the *Découvertes* series by Gallimard—subsidiary colloquia, debates in the media, etc. The topic of the first gathering is not merely predetermined by the interdisciplinary and “diagonal” tradition that was so dear to Caillois, but also opens up a field of research of exceptional originality and richness.

At first sight it looks as if what one does not know also means that there is nothing to say and hence to talk about. After all, it is already quite risky to talk about what one does know. How can we talk about what we do not know? Wittgenstein’s famous dictum that “one must remain silent about what one cannot talk about,” seems to apply to our situation with full force. Montaigne’s “What do I know?” was evidently aimed at what is known. Responding to “What do I know?” does not require us to say what we do not know. It means saying: “I don’t know” and to remain silent. In Book XI of his *Confessions*, which is devoted to the creation of the world and of time, St. Augustine wrote: “I do not know that which could well explain what I do know. Alas! Miserable as I am, I do not even know what I do not know.” The buckle is buckled. I am ignoring what I know; but at my own peril, at the risk of an error, it is always possible and permitted to talk about it. What I am ignoring, I ignore as well and even more so. And it is impossible and forbidden to talk about it.

The argument evidently revolves around the movement of knowledge. Like continuity and discontinuity, as illustrated by the flash of the cruel Zenon racing through space, like the hare trying to catch up with the tortoise, what we know and what we do not know

do not represent two immobile worlds confronting, and staring at, each other. There is continuous movement that, like the past encroaching on the future, extracts from the large knowledge that we have the fragments of what we do not know. What we know and what we do not yet know is united by a continuous flow, by a circulation that is generally one-way—generally, but not always: there is also traditional or artisanal knowledge that passes into oblivion. This circulation allows the observer, equipped with what we already know, to talk about the fringes of what we do not know yet.

The question of what is unknown is thus a question of proximity, of conquest, of rapprochement, of familiarity; it is a question of margins. What we do not know is illuminated by what we do know. The road is marked out by the chain of successive discoveries that await, invoke and call for the discoveries that are still to be made. What we do not know is attracted and magnetized by what we do know.

Research thus creates its own field, without respite and without end. The question that quite naturally poses itself is that of alchemy that allows us to transform into an expanding body of what we do know the body of what we do not know that is also always growing. This is the question that Plato saw himself faced with. And his reply is a classic one: what we do not know, we already know in a certain way and we only remember what we have been ignoring or what we have forgotten. As Plato wrote in *Menon*: “How can we search and understand?” And he continued: “The truth of what we shall never discover and know has always been our responsibility.” The aporia of the ignorance that is being ignored thus becomes resolved. In effect, there is nothing that we ignore completely and it is enough for us to remember what we think we are ignoring. What we do not know, after all, ceases to be rejected in the exterior darkness about which it is impossible to say anything. Working on the margins that we are now talking about, finds its resolution in unconscious knowledge and in *Maieutics*. The question is always to reduce as far as possible the apparently insurmountable discrepancy between what we know and what we do not know. As Plato put it in the *Symposium*, 204a:

You must understand that none of the gods are seekers after truth. They do not long for wisdom, because they are wise—and why should the wise be seeking the wisdom that is already theirs? Nor, for that matter, do the igno-

rant seek the truth or crave to be made wise. And indeed, what makes their case so hopeless is that, having neither beauty, nor goodness, nor intelligence, they are satisfied with what they are, and do not long for the virtues they have never missed.

There is always the paradox of the leap from what we do not know to what we know.

The paradox of what we do not know and what will yet be known resolves itself, like the path of the flash or the race between the hare and the tortoise, in daily research and in every-day life. It is in practice and application that the question of what we do not know cuts across all scholarly disciplines and, beyond the sphere of knowledge, all walks of daily life.

For what we do not know evidently relates to astrophysics, history, biology, archaeology, or art history, but also health, computer science, the stock market, politics, or love. In a famous scene of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Swann asks himself about what is happening behind the closed shutters where he suspects Odette is again meeting a lover. Swann scoffs at Platonic speculations about the recollection of what one does not know and of the work of science in its effort to put the realms of ignorance under siege. He suffers because he does not know. No doubt he would also suffer if he did know. Perhaps he would suffer even more if he saw. For, if we are to believe Roland Barthes, who in effect takes up a theme that was dear to Spinoza, jealousy is nourished more by what it sees than by what it knows. But what it does not know is already quite sufficient to stir the fires of hell. The desire to transform into knowledge what he does not know is even more irresistible for lovers and for the jealous person than it is for the researcher and scholar. The lover, too, would like to know what he does not know. What one does not know is, in matters of love, a suffering that demands, alas, almost always in vain, to be satisfied by knowledge.

There is no field that he does not aspire, more or less fervently, to transform into knowledge of what we do not know. More than the lover or the jealous person, the detective, for example,—and not to mention the collector, the handyman or the explorer—asks himself questions about what he does not know. More than any other person, he knows what he does not know: the name of the killer, the place where the treasure or the compromising letter are

hidden, the evidence that he lacks, etc. In this sense he shows the scientist the way: it is essential to know what one does not know in the sense of establishing necessary connections between knowledge and the lack of it in order to permit work on the margins. If the reply to the question: "What do we not know?" is: "We don't know," the labor of knowing is almost impossible.

In all areas, our question is on the side, not of ignorance, but of knowledge. It does not aim for the mass that is crude, silent, invertebrate, and amorphous about what it does know; it aims, within knowledge, at what escaped it by just a little; it aims at what is within reach but what cannot be grasped; it aims at the "not yet" on the point of "already." "What we do not know" means "what we do not know yet." Like charity in the Gospel, knowledge is concerned above all with what is immediate.

From medical research to astrophysics, what we do not know is merged with progress. The establishment of new scientific frontiers gives rise to a whole series of exercises which assume different forms, depending on the disciplines, and which will be studied at the first Philosophical Encounter of UNESCO by competent specialists but who are all bound by the general scheme of the progressive invasion of all fallow intellectual space and surrendering to ignorance through the rational process of determinism and necessity.

Let us take two random examples: the AIDS virus in biology and the black holes in astrophysics. More even than in the case of the detective who is investigating because this is his profession in the service of society or of the lover who is wringing his hands in pain, AIDS demands a reply to the question of "What we do not know," because people are dying in their thousands and tens of thousands. In the field of HIV research our question simply means: "What are we lacking in order to save those who will die because they are infected with AIDS?" It is quite clear that these are not airy speculations about what we do not know in regard to imaginary and possible illnesses, but represent a pointed effort in a field where we proceed patiently from one discovery to another. When AIDS has been conquered, other illnesses will appear on the horizon of which one does not have any knowledge. As in the case of AIDS, one is going to concentrate on those first about

which we know something because they have already wreaked havoc among humans.

Our contemporary fascination with black holes stems from the fact that these are celestial objects of which it is difficult to know what they are for the simple reason that we cannot see them. What can we say about what we cannot observe? However, we know many things about those black holes about which we know hardly anything. We know that we cannot see them because an enormous gravitational force prevents light rays from escaping from them. We also know that they exist from the effects that their hidden presence has upon their environment and upon other celestial objects. In other words, what we do not know and what is exceptionally important is being encircled by a multitude of things that we do know, that irritate us greatly and that stimulate us to know more about what we do not know.

The passage of time provides our question with solutions that for long have been unimaginable. Copernicus, Galileo Galilei, Kepler, Newton, Einstein, or—in other fields—Marx or Freud furnish answers that transform even the question. Throughout history there appeared persons who come up with psychoanalytic evidence. However, with psychoanalysis not yet in existence it was not enough to say that the questions remained without an answer; they did not even pose themselves in the same way. Strangely enough, the more distant past of humanity had to wait for a long time for the appearance of questions that were being put with much delay. We know more about what happened thirty or forty thousand years ago than those who lived five thousands years back. The owl of Minerva flew up rather late as regards the question of “what is it that we do not know?”

This question does not always open up the path for a progressive conquest of ignorance through knowledge. There also exist in the universe and its history unresolved secrets, mysteries, and enigmas. Perhaps we can distinguish between enigmas that are essential and those that are accidental. An unresolved crime is an accidental enigma. Daily life offers many examples of enigmas that remain without resolution due to the lack of a novel element that is capable of overturning the situation. The accidental enigma occurs throughout history (who has unleashed the Ruandan mas-

sacres by assassinating President Habyarimana?); in prehistory (what are the links between the Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon man?); in art history (where do the works of Zeuxis and Apelle come from?). The essential enigmas are represented by the famous aporias of philosophy: What was there before time? What is there after death? Is the Big Bang something more than a seductive hypothesis? To these questions there exists no more an answer than to the global question.

What is not gradually subjected to work on the margins and to rational investigation will have no solution. The question of "what do we not know?" may, over time, find answers in the exact sciences, whether natural or human, but not in metaphysics.

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These are some of the themes, among others, which may be broached during the colloquium of March 1995. There will be other questions that will appear as the debate evolves. *Diogenes* has no other ambition than to provide some of the elements of the problem at hand and to serve as a point of departure for the discussions.

The whole colloquium, all discussions, and this entire special issue deal with a special problematic that returns, by degrees, to the totality of knowledge. Here it is more the opposite: the huge proportions of the project touch upon a paradox and a provocation. What do we not know? Everything! Knowledge is a small island battered by the floods of our ignorance. The question is not about a narrow loophole of knowledge from which we embark upon the conquest of ever larger fields. Rather it places us right in the middle of an ocean of uncertainty where we must try to orient ourselves in order to regain familiar lands.

I imagine that Caillois who so loved the chess-board, the rivers that disappear in the sea before they reemerge in an island, the mysteries of the cities, the jelly-fish, the octopuses and the praying mantis, would have liked this subject. He would have treated it with sarcasm, with paradox and in the end perhaps with silence. He would have shown—this after all was the idea of the diagonal sciences—that all we know is communicated, and what we do not know is an unknown realm and a reservoir of energy. A world

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about which everything is known would be a bad dream that will end within itself and will suffocate from its knowledge. We do not know, thank God, what the colors on the wings of butterflies mean, nor the asymmetry of the world that always turns in the same direction, nor the ponderous silence of rocks. But we have the desire to have this knowledge and to know what lies behind the question of “what do we not know?” This is the impetus, the curiosity, the quest of men in the search of themselves and of other things like them. What we do not know is, above all, what we would like to know—and what we shall perhaps know some day. There is anxiety in what we ignore, but rather than being a threat, that what one does not know turns into a declaration, an expectation, a promise. Much more than what we know, it is what we do not know that gives the human adventure its grandeur and its meaning—whether transient, we do not know.