

Do We Know How to Read Messages in the Sand?

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A Range of Meanings

Let us begin by making a rather obvious remark: the meaning of the question of 'what we do not know' varies according to whether or not the word "yet" is explicitly or implicitly included. It comes as no surprise that it should be in physics, the science in which, ever since Galileo and Newton, the quest for knowledge has been so amply and unexpectedly rewarded, that we find the most dramatic examples of both possibilities: one in which theory points to knowledge not yet acquired, knowledge which is still to be conquered, but which, once attained, should constitute its final triumph; and one in which "we do not know" may be taken as the conclusion of established knowledge. We do not (yet) know how to unify the four fundamental forces of interaction in a single theory, and yet that eventuality is already being called the theory of everything (TOE). Since interaction is the principle on which physics now bases all its explanations, and since physical explanations are in principle valid for everything that exists, the unification of the forces of interaction must therefore be the science of the principles of everything that exists. On the other hand, we do not know at what moment a particular radioactive nucleus will disintegrate. In this case, our knowledge of physics makes it impossible to use the word "yet": radioactive disintegration is described in terms of a "lifetime," which means that each nucleus within a given population has, at any one moment, the same probability of disintegrating, and that this probability is not a function of any variable which we can identify and manipulate. In this case, our

knowledge asserts that we cannot know now and will not be able to know for as long as our present knowledge remains valid.

Apart from these two extreme cases, the phrase “do not know” can be understood in as many ways as one likes, each of which corresponds to a further meaning of the word “know.” Obviously, I do not know what the weather will be like in a week’s time, but I “know” today that if I am still alive next week, and if I think back to my uncertainty today, that I will then be able to say I “know.” In this case, can one rightly use the word “know”? And can one, at the other extreme, rightly use it to declare, as do agnostics, “I do not know if God exists”?

Even in the context of activities whose purpose is to obtain knowledge, meanings continue to be multiple. Readers can be fairly sure that as they read this article there is a researcher somewhere in the world who is thinking or saying “I do not know yet, but tomorrow, or in six months’ time, or if my application for a grant is approved, I will know.” No doubt that “not knowing yet” applies to what Thomas Kuhn has aptly called puzzles, whose capability and method of solution appear to be guaranteed by the discipline of the researcher concerned. With regard to other problems, we do not know “yet” what their solution will involve, even if we are confident that one will eventually be found. Such, for example, is the case of the “solar neutrino anomaly,” which is the discrepancy noted between the actual measurement of the flux of neutrinos emitted by the sun and the theoretical predictions. We do not know how, or at what price, this discrepancy will be resolved—whether, for example, the solution will be sufficiently ingenious to win the scientist who finds it a Nobel prize—but we do not think that this discrepancy will still exist in 50 years time. On the other hand, when we say that “we do not know yet whether a vaccine against the AIDS virus will be found,” we are still in the domain of scientific research, but the “do not know” is less fraught with consequences for science, which in any case is bound to increase its sum of knowledge about the virus, than it is for our collective future. Will AIDS one day be just a bad memory, or will we, one way or another, have to learn to live with it? Will it eventually be seen as having spurred yet another triumph by the inheritors of Pasteur, or rather as having drawn the final curtain

on this triumphant age in which we were confident of our ability to bring the world of micro-organisms under our control? Finally, when confronted by such issues as the celebrated “mind/body problem” described by the philosopher Bernard Williams in the inaugural lecture of this forum organized by UNESCO, we have to recognize that the very idea that there is “something to be known” is open to question. If, as Thomas Nage maintains, like Leibniz long ago, we have no way of imagining how we might “explain” consciousness on the basis of transformations in the “nervous system”, is it not because we define what we call the “nervous system” on the basis of considerations in which consciousness a priori can play no part?

This last question leads us from what we do not know to the question of what we do know. We “know” many things about the nervous system; should we not also say that we do not know what we know? It is not so much a matter of proclaiming that our knowledge is illusory, as of recalling—unless we take ourselves for Baron Münchhausen, who managed to extricate himself from a quagmire by pulling on his own bootlaces—that we cannot “get outside” of our own knowledge to appreciate its significance and implications. What is the meaning of the fund of knowledge we have accumulated on the physical, chemical, electrical and other processes with which we identify the brain? At what precise moment did the questions we ask about the brain become capable of defining their subject?

We must therefore extract ourselves from the crucial abstraction, the one that allows us to evade the knottiest problem of all: the nature of this “we” that does or does not know, conceals its identity beneath a cloak of generality. Who is the “we” that seems to be speaking on behalf of all human beings? And who, indeed, is the “we” that poses the problem of psychological experience? Traditional therapists know how to read messages in the sand or in the pattern made by cola nuts. Ought we to say that we do not know how to do this, or rather that there is nothing to know, because such practices are not “scientific”, “rational” or “verifiable”? But is it true that they are not “verifiable”, at least in the sense of not being open to refutation? Specialists tell us that divinatory practices do indeed include a test dimension. It is the ther-

apist who is "tested" for his ability "to produce discourse that relates only to the interaction he has just established with an individual, and thus to manufacture usable clinical material."¹ In this view, the message is an operator which is capable of "placing the text of the symptom within the theoretical context of the healer."² So do we or do we not know how to read messages in the sand? All we can say with certainty is that we do not know how to use sand to manufacture thought; in other words, that our official "theoretical contexts," those recognized as being rational, give no meaning to such an endeavor. Once again, independently of the theoretical and cultural context which gives meaning to the word "know", "we" can define neither what we know nor what we do not know.

The Ethics of Complementarity

The example I have just given comes from ethnops psychoanalysis, and it is worth noting that the founder of that discipline, Georges Devereux, associated it with the complementarity of Niels Bohr.³ Indeed, the calling into question by ethnops psychoanalysis of the concept of "we" echoes, within the field of knowledge relating to the human psyche, the lesson Niels Bohr drew from quantum mechanics; and that lesson is transferable precisely because it is more concerned with ethics than with physics. Its message is that no knowledge can become independent of the question which gives it meaning, and hence that no question can in turn become autonomous with respect to the selective choice underpinning it.

Niels Bohr was able to formulate his concept of complementarity with respect to quantum mechanics because that discipline deals with what are defined in classical mechanics as variables, apparently capable of describing a body objectively as it "is" (where is it?, what is its speed?), and because in quantum mechanics such "variables" are in fact "operators", which no longer describe, but rather correspond mathematically to the "production" of a specific description (the thing observed). In quantum mechanics, complementarity may be formulated mathematically (in terms of indeterminacy relations), since it reflects the need to renounce a claim which also had a mathe-

mathematical formulation. Transferred to other domains, complementarity engenders no specific resemblance to physics, but it does prompt an explicit formulation of the risk and the responsibilities inherent in the questions posed. Thus, just as the physicist does not know "what" he is measuring when he determines a position, the therapist of ethnoanalysis does not know what the psychological system "is" outside of the therapeutic operators he uses to project muddled, painful, and uncertain symptoms into a specific context. Nor can the psychologist or the sociologist know "what" their respective fields actually correspond to: "... at the outset, a 'raw fact' belongs neither to the field of sociology nor to that of psychology. It is only when it is explained (within the framework of one or the other of those sciences) that the raw fact is transformed into a datum, whether it be a psychological or a sociological one."⁴

In connection with complementarity I mentioned ethics. The difference between ethics and morality is extremely blurred and fraught with consequences; however, it is clear that we have here a field in which they can be distinguished. It would occur to no one to claim that classical mechanics, which elaborated a complete representation of its object in terms of position and speed, contravened morality. On the other hand, one could say that by setting itself up as an ideal science which formed the basis for such ideals of omniscience as Laplace's demon (who, by observing the position and speed of all the bodies in the universe, can deduce their past and future), Newtonian mechanics committed what I would call the ultimate ethical fault: it disregarded the uniqueness from which the power to describe and predict which it proposed as an ideal was itself derived. This is not the same as disregarding a body of knowledge. We do not need to know what determines the uniqueness of those situations in which the laws of mechanics are relevant. Physicists can of course shed light on this uniqueness by placing it within a more general context, which is what they have done with relativity, quantum mechanics, and the study of chaotic systems. We now know that the dynamic systems which provided a model for Laplace are composed of bodies which are slow (compared with the speed of light) and massive (compared with the orders of magnitude determined by the Planck constant) and which exhibit stable dynamic behavior. This means that physicists

are now in a position to describe other types of situation, and that we must henceforth bear in mind that such situations are also unique precisely because they allow physicists to do so. We do not need to explain the uniqueness of a situation in order to take it into account, because taking it into account implies first of all not considering the power it makes possible as a right whose limits are purely practical; in other words, not using it to judge and disqualify whatever is opposed to it: "If I were Laplace's demon, if I could observe the tiniest particle in the universe as an astronomer observes the moon: everything which stands in the way of the subjection of natural phenomena to the laws of mechanics would disappear."

To speak of ethics rather than of epistemology, for example, or to speak of a "fault" rather than a "mistake", is to assert that the question is not whether or not a body of knowledge is valid, but that it involves a relationship with power. And indeed, we know that epistemology often takes on an ethical coloring when it is more concerned with resisting temptation than with identifying the proper method to adopt. Such was the case when Karl Popper, in his *Logik der Forschung* (Logic of Research), criticized those who used "conventionalist strategies," which were logically perfectly admissible, to protect their assertions against any threat from facts, or when Pierre Duhem argued, against realist beliefs, for a kind of asceticism which recognizes in theories no other value than that of a useful tool. The uniqueness of the notion of complementarity introduced by Niels Bohr is not that it has an ethical dimension, but that it conferred an ethical dimension not only on a discourse held with respect to science, but also on the interpretation within the field of physics of a theoretical formalism.

The Arrogance of Power

The fact that physicists now claim to be searching for a theory of everything does not mean that some unforeseen solution has made it possible to restore the ideal of classical mechanics. Rather, it reflects a redefinition of the object of theoretical physics, which makes it possible to circumvent and disregard that question. Once again, we "do not know yet"; once again, in the view of Stephen

Hawking in particular, we are on the threshold of discovering the secret of creation. Naturally, this secret is no longer the one which Laplace's demon was endeavoring to penetrate; it no longer concerns the behavior in space-time of observable objects, but rather abstract principles of symmetry. These principles none the less restore to science, which seeks to establish them, the power to forget its own dependency on human questions and practices, and on the uniqueness of the situations that give such questions and practices their power (this uniqueness, however, is extremely costly, since it is only in the environment created by increasingly powerful accelerators, such as the "supercollider" which the Americans have just decided not to build, that events which are relevant to the unified theory of interactions can take place).

There is something beautiful in this capacity of physics to redefine its object, but it is a disconcerting beauty, for it has restored to physics, as if by magic, its status as a body of knowledge poised for conquest. Once again, physics attributes to its object, to that which it proposes to conquer, the power to define itself, without any regard to practice, tradition, or culture, as that which should impose itself as what is to be known. Beauty gives way to arrogance when the same sort of domineering attitude is adopted for instance in the definition of psychological activity in terms of "states" and transformations of the nervous system. While knowledge of the nervous system remains largely instrumental, and is determined more by new means of observation than by pertinent questions, the only "possibility" of obtaining knowledge about the nervous system, by the very fact of referring to it, confers on those who do so the power to sit in judgment on conscious experience, to claim that the nervous system does or does not possess such and such a characteristic. One might also mention, among many others, that "as yet unconquered" body of knowledge known as rational pharmacology. When it eventually becomes possible to deduce what a medicine is on the basis of a rational body of knowledge relating to physiological, cellular, and metabolic processes, etc., the field of medicine will finally be rid of the ambiguities and uncertainties which reflect its links with traditional methods of healing. Then there will be no more fumbling in the dark in the guise of research; no more awkward questions raised by untidy "placebo

effects." Doctors will heal on the basis of a body of knowledge whose power will be explicit and which will no longer risk being mistaken for that of the "charlatans." We need hardly say that this definition of knowledge would establish the "great divide"⁵ once and for all, drawing a line between objective knowledge and all the rest, which would then be seen as no more than a cultural belief, perhaps to be preserved, but rather as one preserves endangered species: with the paternalistic tolerance of those who know, and have nothing to learn from what they wish to protect.

Why have such propositions as Niels Bohr's complementarity not enabled us to "resist" the naïve arrogance of this domineering view of knowledge? This question, like all questions relating to history, is largely speculative, and the search for an answer may be pursued along a great number of paths which have widely divergent implications. The implication of one of these paths might be that in writing this article I am wasting my time; other paths might suggest the existence of futures in which contributions of this nature might have a not insignificant role to play. Feeling that the second possibility cannot be entirely ruled out, I take courage and continue to write.

Let us begin by describing two types of analysis which imply an a priori rejection of Bohr's proposition. One stems from the so-called "theories of knowledge"; the other from the social politics of fields of knowledge.

Is the way in which we obtain knowledge determined by the naïve arrogance I am attempting to investigate, to such an extent that any proposition which might seek to escape that arrogance is quickly forgotten and discredited? Emile Meyerson is no doubt the author who has devoted the greatest number of pages to illustrating this "tendency" in our approach to cognitive endeavor, which in his view is nurtured and reinforced each time the slightest advance is made.

The starting-point for Meyerson's great book, *Identité et réalité* (1907), is a distinction between "laws" and "causes." While traditional epistemology prided itself on following Hume in his critique of causality, which should be reduced, rationally, to empirical regularity (whose law would provide the rule), Meyerson showed that scientists are not in fact satisfied with such regulari-

ties, even if they enable them to anticipate and to verify. They want to understand, and understanding means to "identify", to reduce change to permanence. Reason looks forward to the day when it will be possible to explain change in terms of something that does not change. According to Meyerson, the eagerness to identify does not dominate science to the point of making it blind, but it does put it under strain. Every time a possibility of identifying something arises, no matter how far-fetched or speculative the eventuality, that possibility will automatically receive favorable consideration. Scientists have a propensity to regard it as real; they find it "plausible." Meyerson wrote that plausibility is neither apriorital nor empirical. Although it may not stand the test of time, it holds for the scientist's mind an attraction that cannot be explained by any empirical fact.

To say that it is obvious that the material brain must hold the explanation of thought is to make a "plausible" statement by Meyerson's definition. Being neither apriorital nor empirical, this statement can comfortably subtend all work in neurophysiology. On the other hand, to be plausible in physics, one must take risks and accept challenges. Physics is a domain in which the passion for identification (even today, with the unification of the forces) has never ceased to be fertile, nor to come up against obstacles which force it to reinvent itself, and to invent new types of permanence and new principles of change. And that, for Meyerson, is inevitable: because nature "exists," and because it is perpetually changing and evolving, it cannot be totally subservient to the demands of identification. Nature manifests itself through its "irrationality," through the resistance all attempts at explanation inevitably encounter.

Meyerson's interpretation has grave consequences. If it is correct, knowledge and the abuse of power are indissociable. At the time he was writing, he himself recognized the abuse only with respect to nature, which enabled him to remain serene: nature would always be able to offer resistance, and what we define as "what remains to be known," what has yet to be conquered, would surely be the focus of our attention again some other time. His model was in fact the history of physics and chemistry, in which the abuse of power seems to be able to function as a force for

progress (like Thomas Kuhn's "normal science"). But we must take a more realistic, and less reassuring, view today. This abuse of power is exercised with regard not only to nature, but also to the various cultures and bodies of human knowledge, which do not offer the same kind of resistance as nature: we can destroy them with our contempt and mockery, without even giving them the chance to "resist" and show us how naïve we are. I have already spoken of the divinatory practices that ethnopsychology asks us to take seriously. Naturally, we can regard them as no more than a form of suggestion, an age-old practice of influence, and then put the question of suggestion in the category of what we do "not yet" understand very well. And even if not fully understood, we can then use the term "suggestion" to reach a plausible conclusion regarding such practices: the "details" of these beliefs, the way in which the jinn, ancestors, or gods impose their will, matter little—these things are anecdotal, merely the instruments of suggestion; what we are seeking is a much more comprehensive explanation. And if, one day, we realize just how arrogant and naïve we have been to think that such concepts as suggestion and influence could in themselves explain anything at all, what, in the meantime, will have become of the practices that transmitted the bodies of knowledge whose legitimacy we may finally have recognized? How many monuments to the memory of the victims of conquests made in the name of "reason" should we not already have raised?

But were they really victims of "reason"? Should we make human reason responsible for what we do in its name? This leads us to a second type of analysis, carried out from a socio-political standpoint, which results in a very different distribution of cause and effect.

What if the power which derives from knowledge as conquest was the first term? And what if identification made it possible, above all, to disqualify all practices and questions involving references which are branded as illusory by the act of identification? One might then be able to give a very different version of the history of fields of knowledge from that proposed by Meyerson; one might demonstrate that each time an identity is recognized as "plausible," it becomes possible to silence or to relegate to an inferior status practices with which one would otherwise have had to reckon. Identification is in fact an instrument of warfare: it does

not leave the "appearances" it explains intact, but is used to justify an active process of selection and rejection. Power is always dual: the attribution of the power to explain (experience in terms of bundles of neurons; mystery cures in terms of the power of suggestion; "normal" healing in terms of the physiologically intelligible effect of medicines, etc.) always goes hand in hand with the power to judge, which is assumed by the explainer. The distinction proposed by Meyerson between identification which is merely plausible and identification involving risk and invention becomes quite secondary. Physicists, chemists, and others who are in a position to test a plausible identification may be considered fortunate. But what they are doing is gilding the lily. Plausibility alone suffices.

There are many arguments that support this analysis, in particular historical arguments. While Meyerson's analysis, and indeed all the analyses since Kant which posit a direct link between scientific knowledge and human understanding, take modern bodies of knowledge as the basis for their construction of a general theory of knowledge, socio-political analysis draws attention to the historical uniqueness firstly of such bodies of knowledge and secondly of the tradition from which they have sprung. Is not what we call "reason" or philosophical invention born of the urge to silence the "sophists" and discredit the magicians?⁶ Do we have another definition of rationality, whether philosophical or scientific, which is more appropriate than that which represents it as a struggle against "opinion"?

If this analysis were to be the last word on the subject, the question of "what we do not know" would be resolved, and the meaning of the word "we" would become perfectly clear. "We" would refer to all those who, one way or another, are involved in a process of conquest in which "what we do not know" refers first and foremost to positions occupied, or likely to be occupied, by populations still to be conquered. This definition would explain the relative nature of "not knowing", too, since what is "known" in psychoanalysis, for instance, is defined as a territory yet to be conquered by neurophysiology. Only when a body of knowledge belongs to a tradition which does not aspire to conquest would all the conquerors unanimously define it as "non-knowledge," as, for example, in the case of divination. The fact that our knowledge is aggressive, polemical,

arrogant, and reductionist would no longer be a problem, but rather a definition. Our sciences would not be subject to the temptation of power; they would be defined by the implications of power. All propositions, such as Niels Bohr's complementarity, bearing within them the possibility of peace and reconciliation would be swept away, because they enable no one to destroy or to conquer.

What We Do Not Yet Know

Are our various bodies of learning no more than masks for the exercise of power? In order to be able to go on thinking and writing we must take a gamble on the situation being more complex; on the inventive, adventurous nature of certain bodies of knowledge being not merely an optional extra, which, however agreeable, is of secondary importance. So far. One can certainly imagine futures in which the identification of learning with power might be true, even if it is not true today. In order to resist such futures, we must say "we do not yet know," and be willing to bet on other possibilities. I think we can be sure of only one thing: the question is not which of those other possibilities is the one to bet on, since they are all relatively faint. What force they may have, if any, lies in their proliferation. The hypothesis guiding me requires that other hypotheses should be guiding other actors who have also been willing to gamble against despair. It requires a new type of "we" which would not demand of their own questions and hopes the power to discredit others.

My hope and my questions concern the possibility of breaking up the *de facto* solidarity between those practices that do produce knowledge and the others, which I have no hesitation in describing as totally dependent on power. To take an example with which I am familiar, it is not impossible to "imagine" a Galileo who discovers a mathematical way of explaining the law of gravity,⁷ but who is equally capable of pointing out the uniqueness of gravitational attraction with respect to other types of movement, rather than proclaiming the new power of mathematics for our understanding of nature. This is in fact more or less the same idea as that advanced by Arthur Koestler in *The Sleepwalkers*, when he contrasted the style of Galileo with that of Kepler: the invention of

elliptical orbits had no place for arrogance or polemics. Similarly, that masterpiece of scientific literature, *Les Atomes*, by Jean Perrin (1912), is a celebration of the fact that atoms, since they can be counted, at last really exist for physicists and chemists, and expresses joy and a poetic sense of wonder, rather than the triumph of an identification which confers the power to explain. My hope has its roots in the fact that "we are able to count atoms" gives the word "able," with its connotations of power, a positive, affirmative sense, which has no need to deny, to discredit, or to break down in order to exist.

Are we, who belong to that tradition that dares to ask "what we do not know," capable of giving a stable meaning to words which celebrate the production of knowledge as the creation of new relationships, new meanings, which supplement other meanings rather than elbowing them out? Are we able to free ourselves from the words which see knowledge as the occupation of a domain from which all previous occupants must be expelled, which see truth as a struggle against opinion? Are we capable of resisting our own post-modern despair, which although rejecting this idea of truth, in no way rejects polemics, but turns the weapons of mockery and irony on any assertion of knowledge?

Let us return to the complementarity proposed by Niels Bohr, and to ethnopschoanalysis, which was in part inspired by that concept. Most physicists have identified Bohr's position with an epistemology of renunciation, of a positivist or instrumentalist type: we can only know what we can observe, what we can read from our instruments. Few theorists paid any serious attention to the "war of words" between Bohr and Heisenberg: should one say uncertainty principle or indeterminacy principle? And yet those words were standard-bearers for a debate on the meaning of renunciation, on the meaning of the ambitions and the dreams that were to be surrendered. Uncertainty maintains a positive reference to a dream which has become inaccessible: if we could gain knowledge without interfering with reality, our knowledge would be perfect. Indeterminacy implies that we are following the wrong dream, since gaining knowledge presupposes the creation of a link. This interpretation can be explained more easily, by reference to one human being's knowledge of another. Can I aspire to any

knowledge of another person "as such," independently of my relationship with that person, independently of our respective capacities to form relationships, with each other and with other persons? If I discover firstly that all the words I have at my disposal to describe that other person are dependent on the contexts of meaning within which the other person and I myself find ourselves, and secondly that getting to know the other person better means finding more and more such contexts, rather than discovering which is the only true, or legitimate context, will it be with a sense of irretrievable loss? Do we not know that in those situations in which we demand the truth "about themselves" from another person, we are in fact creating a most artificial situation, which could have the most unforeseeable effects? To say that something is indeterminate does not mean that it is unknowable, it creates a link between knowledge and determinacy. It implies that every act of determination produces a link which bears meaning, and engenders a capacity to make a difference for the person who is seeking to determine.

It is understandable that inasmuch as the principle of complementarity affected only the interpretation of quantum mechanics, physicists should find the distinction between uncertainty and indeterminacy supererogatory. Quantum mechanics "worked" perfectly well as it was. Such considerations might well be of ethical or aesthetic interest, but how could they be taken seriously if they made no difference in practice? Complementarity, as restricted to physics, could be taken as just one of a number of possible interpretations, perhaps more demanding and disconcerting than the others, simply because it forced the physicist not to forget his own determining role and to refrain from speaking for nature itself, as if from a position of neutrality. It is precisely this demanding and disconcerting aspect which appears to me to have become vital today, because what is at issue is the capacity of our tradition to generate other "we's" than the "we" of conquerors reflecting on what they "do not (yet) know." In this context, the requirement of complementarity does indeed give rise to practical differences, because it implies the question of the relevance of the determination, or of the quality of the link.

Emile Meyerson was right, I believe, to assert that our "modern" knowledge, if it is to be living knowledge, requires much more than a list of observable regularities. However, in a manner per-

factly consistent with his own thesis, he allowed himself to be taken in by the plausibility of the identification of a very singular science, physics, with a more general model, on the basis of which the identity of this requirement might be deciphered. To refuse to be taken in by this plausibility is not to assert that each science "creates" its object more or less autonomously, in other words to abandon the attempt to find some intelligible consistency between our fragmented bodies of knowledge, but rather to endeavor to define requirement and consistency otherwise, to endeavor to define them against the satisfactions of power. To assert that the conditions which make it possible to obtain knowledge are methodological or epistemological (objectivity, etc.) in nature is to speak as from a position of power, because one is arrogating the power to decide which bodies of knowledge do not meet those criteria, at best regarding them with paternalistic tolerance or awarding them the dubious privilege of assignment to the order of "culture" or "spirituality" rather than "knowledge." On the other hand, to assert that the conditions which make it possible to obtain knowledge have to do with a process of becoming "worthy" of a body of knowledge, becoming able to enter into a type of relationship which can give rise to relevant information, becoming able to recognize and accept the demands imposed on us by those relationships is to place the consistency we are seeking, and the requirements which we set ourselves and which make us unique, within a field which imposes on us, and on no one else, the corresponding obligations. In this field the pursuit of knowledge does not mean conquest, but invention, the establishment of new relations, which supplement already existing ones and can transform them, make them branch out into unexpected dimensions, rather than deny them, or discredit them as manifestations of opinion, illusion, "culture."

Ethnopschoanalysis sets an example in this respect. It expects its practitioners to become worthy of 'healing' people who do not share their own cultural background (on which psychoanalysis, for instance, relies heavily). By doing so, ethnopschoanalysis asserts two things: first, that our own therapeutic knowledge, like our other forms of knowledge, is part of a culture which, far from being measurable against the requirements of objective knowledge, itself

gives our criteria of objectivity their meaning; and secondly, that the challenge facing a practice which seeks to establish a meaningful relationship with human beings from other cultures is that it must first of all renounce any tendency in our disciplines to claim the power to define human beings 'in general'. However plausible it may seem to us, this type of power leads us to destroy those very people, whether Bambaras, Kabyles or Yorubas, whom the therapist must become capable of meeting on their own ground.

Ethnopschoanalysis is not a special case; the challenge to which it is responding in fact confronts all sciences which claim to have the power to study "psychological" experience as such. That challenge consists in posing the problem of such experience without taking advantage of, or rather (since this is a matter of gaining knowledge, not healing) without abusing the facility provided by the submission of both the researcher and the person being studied to the interests of science. One might, for the sake of argument, imagine a psychology laboratory in which the persons being studied, far from being "willing subjects," took it upon themselves to discuss the situations, interpret the questions, consider what it meant to be a psychologist, what rules psychologists obeyed, what they believed or felt they ought to believe, in short, subjects who did not allow themselves to be defined by the power relationship that, under the guise of method, each laboratory establishes between the person asking the questions and the person "providing" the answers. Normal scientific procedures do not allow that person to "answer" in the sense of participating in the culture which makes questions and answers meaningful.

Can we hope one day, following the example of quantum mechanics, to articulate the various questions raised by psychological experience in a coherent manner? The aim would not, of course, be to discover what psychological experience "is," in the sense that it would become the subject of a theory, but rather come to understand what we have to learn from a contrastive exploration of what such experience can become. One thing seems certain to me: the only researchers who will be able to participate in the elucidation of this question are those, so rare today, who are capable of giving up the power relations which such an exploration precludes. For the ability to understand and the "we" are inseparable here. What co-

herence will “we” be able to establish among ourselves? What links can we create—through cross-breeding or hybridization—between “our” different practices? To what new practices will these links give rise? How much will the practices which we describe, in terms of opposites, as modern and traditional be capable of learning from each other? The practical and political value of these speculations is that they remind us that the real test of such understanding would be its reciprocity. This does not mean that “we” will one day be able to understand the person who knows how to read messages in the sand; it obliges us as of today to acknowledge that person’s potential for understanding us and accepting our way of understanding him, if we become worthy of it.

This prospect is perhaps Utopian, but in a positive sense, in the sense that a Utopia implies obligations for the present. It forces us to recognize the trap inherent in asking ourselves what we do not know. Since this question appears to presuppose that we know who “we” is and what “knowing” is, it places the person who endeavors to answer it in the only historical context which is today in such a position of power that it can presume to confer on those two terms a clear identity—“ours.” In order to avoid that trap, and refuse to be defined by that historical context, one must be prepared to interrogate it from the point of view of its future development. One thing we do not know is, precisely, how our own historical context is likely to develop. However, the very fact of learning to ask this question, of learning to think of history from the point of view of its continuation into the future, in itself forms part of the only knowledge to which we can aspire in this regard. Hope may well lack plausibility; questions may well concern only a part of the whole; but if they make one capable of resisting, they make one capable of developing.

Notes

1. Tobie Nathan, *L'influence qui guérit*, Paris, 1994, p. 18.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
3. Georges Devereux, *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentaire*, Paris, 1972.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

5. See Bruno Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*, Paris, 1991.

6. Cf. G.E.R. Lloyd, *Demystifying Mentalities*, Cambridge, 1990.

7. See Isabelle Stengers, *L'invention des sciences modernes*, Paris, 1993.