

Wisdom in the Virtual Age

Jean-Michel Besnier

There are at least two ways to dehumanize the world. The world can be dehumanized from the top or from the bottom. From the bottom up would mean letting a barbaric situation develop which would reduce us to an animal state. From the top down would mean striving to achieve and impose a wisdom appropriate to the angels. Two ways of ruining the sense of what is human. Neither angel nor animal, you will recognize there the 'in-between' which is the site of humanity and which it is tempting, when it is threatened, to assert, for in this dehumanizing process – whether this is meant from the top or the bottom – we are the losers in both scenarios. We lose what makes humanity itself, in other words moderation, the in-between, finiteness, chance, the propensity to communicate.

All these terms clearly merit fuller development. If you are used to reading philosophy, you will have understood Plato's *Philebus* in the word 'moderation', you will have associated Georges Bataille with 'chance', in 'finiteness' or the 'propensity to communicate' you will have recognized Kant. So many characterizations of humanity have in common precisely the fact that they simultaneously exclude the top and the bottom.

We live at a time that manifests the demand for wisdom in a myriad different ways; wisdom thrives in modern societies in the form of a demand for meaning, spirituality, the unlocking of inner resources, and it is translated through the success accorded modern or classical authors. In short, a demand for wisdom which is well established and which is naturally associated, like its antidote, with the threat of dehumanization from below, a threat which can be uttered in every key: the rise of barbarism, the ruination of a sense of community, the loss of reference-points, the growing scepticism concerning scientific progress. Faced with this intentionally dramatized context, demand for wisdom seems natural, but it, too, is expressed from the top down and often resorts to the description of a context, the reverse of the preceding instance, which I would describe as 'angelicized'.

How is this angelicized context most often presented? As a corollary of the theme of the end of history, as a consequence of the homogenization of history, as the result of the loss of the event, of the dissipation of the improbable. Francis Fukuyama has recently written a description of this angelicized context, developing the theme of a world unified after the triumph of liberal ideology, by proposing the idea that the World Wide Web was in fact the prefiguration of global society, of this dynamic and integrally pacified totality to which it remains for us to ally ourselves. I could additionally qualify this irenic context by means of a play on words suggested to me by Schopenhauer's important work; I would thus say that for us today, the world is no longer – or would no longer be – either 'will' or 'representation'. Not the will, because we would no longer experience desire, and

we would be deprived of the motive capable of triggering history. Not representation, in the sense that the world would henceforth open to us boundlessness, the infinite. In expressing this, I have in mind Pierre Lévy who, in his book, *World Philosophy* has precisely argued the idea that the Web is incapable of representation; it is 'un-representability itself', he says (p. 161). In short, as you will have guessed, the demand for wisdom seems to me suspect in the highest degree of preserving the representation of an indubitably sterilized universe, the ideal of a world devoid of substance. I would willingly hold it responsible for announcing the end of the 'over-human human-being', since we have just quoted Nietzsche, and I shall not be delighted, from this perspective that people will go and seek classical or oriental models which have themselves also sought to reply to the objection, to the confrontation with a reputedly unbearable world, while asking to tear one's mind away from it mentally.

The classical and oriental models of wisdom to which recourse is frequently made share, in my eyes, the common characteristic of being mollifying and, I would say, even of bearing death, in other words, of wanting to go beyond the human and dispel its limited character. It is this which I should like briefly to explain. Fundamentally, in the virtual age, in the era of globalization, the models of wisdom invoked by the followers of 'world philosophy', since I have just mentioned Pierre Lévy's evocative title, these models of wisdom have, indiscriminately, stoic, Christian, or Buddhist emphases. I say 'indiscriminately', because we believe today we should assert, like a victory, that the truth lies in syncretism; it is another way of describing postmodernism, and I should like briefly to list the features of this supposedly universal wisdom, while saying first that it inevitably puts us outside history. When we mention Seneca, it is often to recall his *Letters to Lucilius* and their injunctions: 'you must go away'; 'take flight'; 'tear yourself away from this world'. This wisdom which puts us outside history inevitably sites us within nature and it beckons us to re-ally ourselves with it. Here, there is a colossal opposition between nature and history. This wisdom thus propels us into abstraction. We have to tear ourselves away from the multiple in order to sojourn in the unique. This wisdom also beckons us to neutrality, neutrality in the strongest sense of the word, in other words, to indifference, placing extremes at equal distance, 'ataraxy' as it is called in the Greek epicurean tradition; in short, this wisdom of the global age, which is offered to us as a viaticum, calls us to asceticism. The body, and its denial by contemporaries, is much talked of, and I believe that it is clear that this should be refined, because asceticism is definitely also an invitation to cultivate it, to endeavour in fact to sculpt it, so effectively that you finally forget that it is made of flesh and blood; it is perhaps this which lies at the root of the craze for zen techniques, martial arts, and this asceticism which sustains the contemporary invitation to wisdom is also a way of satisfying the 'self-concern' encouraged by the Stoics and which Michel Foucault aimed to update, in other words: an abstract individualism, freed from subjectivity and its mirages. Fundamentally, we find here once again the ideal of the timeless sage. The sage is an individual who is not a Self who has broken with the illusions of subjectivity and who accepts being interchangeable, being neutral in this sense of belonging to a 'greater Whole'. These are roughly the characteristics common to the stoic and to the Buddhist sage, and they are simultaneously – and we have to get used to this – the description of the surfer on the Internet who consents to be no more than a neuron at the heart of the planet Gaia or of being no more than an insignificant element of the Cybionte.¹

Read, or re-read, through these glasses, Michel Houellebecq's *Les particules élémentaires*: you will find the ideal of wisdom at its most basic imposed in cyber-culture and in the perspective opened to us by bionic man. If you find this book tedious, read François Jullien's, *Un sage et sans idée*, and there, too, you will find the formulation of an ideal of human 'zombification', by way of response to the question, 'How should one live well today?' It is this type of wisdom that I claim to be bearing death, that is, profoundly untrue, so long as closure remains man's ultimate truth, and, over and against that wisdom, I would not hesitate for my part to demand Aristotelian prudence, because it remains engaged, because it is pragmatic, because it is anti-dogmatic, because it even puts itself forward as the means of steering a subtle course and cobbling things together at the heart of the contingencies which make up our concrete existence. Jean-Pierre Dupuy recalls that what makes discussion in committees on ethics possible is abandoning the attempt to reply to questions about the basis of ethics and is, in fact, prudence: Aristotelian *phronesis* does not actually ask the question about the basis of values which will lead you to the best, and this is why it is sagely pragmatic.

For my part, I demand a wisdom which does not disempower, which eschews both heroism and sanctity, those two modes of evading the everyday. I demand a wisdom which shirks neither weaknesses nor setbacks nor cowardliness; in short, a poor man's wisdom, a wisdom whose model I find more in literature than in philosophy, more in reading Chekhov than the great philosophers, including Kant. In my *Réflexions sur la sagesse*, this is what I had to try and stress, recalling how, in *Si c'est un homme*, Primo Levi well and truly described an embodied wisdom, that of a man who categorically refuses to remain a subject endowed with will, even at dead of night. You may perhaps remember that Primo Levi distinguished two types of humanity in the concentration camps: there was the one who had let go of his will, who had abdicated the desire to express the ego and who was ready to become immersed in the nebulosity of death, which he called the 'Muslim', and the rest. Now, human dignity, as Tzvetan Todorov forcefully puts it in *Face à l'extrême*, is exactly this concentration of energy in order to remain a subject that says 'I will'. It is this kind of wisdom that I would assert, for my part: a wisdom which is able to dissociate setback from error – a setback is what happens to you, error is what you have committed, when you confuse the two you are placing yourself in the impasses which so many of the rejected experience today.

I call upon a wisdom which does not have great aspirations to happiness: exactly what is displayed by the heroes of Chekhov whom I just mentioned or Primo Levi's companions in misfortune is that one can be wise without being happy, which Plato ruled out. I would like a wisdom which does not inevitably aim at the realization of a universal good, for one can be wise without being moralistic, even without being moral. I rather like the fact that, in Jacques Schlanger's book entitled *Sur la bonne vie*, I have recently found this statement which seems to reunite the ethical and the aesthetic: in a world where, wolf-like, brother turns on brother, Schlanger more or less says, the wise man behaves like a wolf whose attitude commands admiration because it is fine and coherent. I quite like this idea, this theme, because I am diligent reader of Machiavelli's *The Prince* and I have often asked myself why one should admire Cesare Borgia so much and maintain that this was an eminently wise and virtuous man, while the facts demonstrate that he was an unprincipled crook. And, since I mentioned Primo Levi, re-read *Si c'est un homme* and his description of Alberto, one of his deported friends whom he explicitly presents as a

model of wisdom adapted to the camp; you will see that he has absolutely none of the character traits which Kant described and that, none the less, he fits this ideal of implied wisdom well, this contextualized wisdom which, to my mind, sums up all the ideals of a 'good life'. Wisdom in fact needs a context to embody itself, this context which the representations of a global society wish to deprive us of precisely what we are told, that is, that the virtual age offers no more context.

We should resolutely demand the upholding of the context. I believe there is nothing more pressing than this wisdom imbricated in concrete existence, at the point in time when the flag-bearers of the virtual proclaim to us the take-over of the human.

Jean-Michel Besnier

University of Compiègne

Translated from the French by Juliet Vale

References

- Besnier, J.-M. (1999) *Réflexions sur la sagesse* (Paris, Fayard-Le Pommier).
— (1998) *Éloge de l'irrespect et autres écrits sur Georges Bataille* (Paris, Descartes et Cie).
Ferry, L., and A. Comte-Sponville (1998) *La sagesse des modernes. Dix questions pour notre temps* (Paris, Laffont).
Jullien, F. (1998) *Un sage est sans idée, ou l'autre de la philosophie* (Paris, Seuil).
Houellebecq, M. (1998) *Les particules élémentaires* (Paris, Flammarion).
Levi, P. (1987) *Si c'est un homme* (Paris, Julliard).
Lévy, P. (2000) *World philosophy. Le marché, le cyberspace, la conscience* (Paris, Odile Jacob).
Schlanger, J. (2000) *Sur la bonne vie. Conversations avec Épicure, Épictète et d'autres amis* (Paris, PUF).
Todorov, T. (1991) *Face à l'extrême* (Paris, Seuil).

Note

1. The term Cybionte has been created by Joel de Rosnay from the two words 'cybernetics' and 'biology' in *L'homme symbiotique* (Ed. Le Seuil, 1995, p. 17).