



Chair:

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Introductory Lecture: "What did we want to know?"



JEAN-MICHEL BESNIER

Since we have heard it said so often and know it to be true that wealth will henceforth lie in the hands of those who know how to control the instruments of knowledge, it seems normal and logical to turn to philosophers and, more generally, to those who are familiar with the knowledge on which our world is built, of whom Heinz Wismann is one of the most eminent. M.U.R.S. has immediately entrusted him with the task of elevating our discussions, whose theme moreover is the alleged flatness of our world.

Heinz Wismann represents the two sources of humanism which have fed our traditions - the Greco-Latin source on the one hand, and that which we associate with the European Renaissance on the other hand. I do not think that we could have found a better thinker to open a conference exploring the homogenization of the world which we may currently be in the process of creating. Some sort of continuity may exist between the homogeneity of nature, which Galileo stated was backed by the language of maths, and the homogeneity which is possible thanks to digitalization, symbolized by Google.

Has the world really lost its depth and nuances over the centuries? Has it perhaps become something that we can fully decipher and manipulate? Is our world disillusioned therefore? Is this what we actually intended when we developed our knowledge? I think that Heinz Wismann has always had a passion for what makes the world legible in depth, for what prevents a review of explanations from being mistaken for superficiality. He has always wanted to explain things. His attachment to the languages of tradition, and his wariness of what he terms "service languages" sums up his passion.

I am, therefore, delighted that he will be opening our discussions on aspects of the dialogue which we wish to initiate in the European knowledge community and I would therefore ask him to join us.



HEINZ WISMANN

In 1781, at the end of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant listed the three fundamental questions exercising human thought: "What can I know?" "What ought I do?", and "What can I hope for?". He had just answered the first question, "What can I know?", by assigning limits to philosophical ambition. By turning his back completely on traditional ontology, by setting aside "the thing in itself" (*Ding an sich*), by drafting the formal conditions for all objectifiable experience, Kant freed science from the straitjacket of metaphysics. Exactly 200 years later, in 1981, another German philosopher, Hans Blumenberg, who died in 1996 and who is now becoming known in France, revisited in some respects the *Critique of Pure Reason* in a book called *The Legibility of the World*. The first sentence of the work picks up on Kant's question, but reframes it. "What did we want to know?", asks Blumenberg, not "What can I know?". "What did we want to know?" means that science and the ambitions of science can in turn be called into question. Has science lived up to its promises? What did we in fact want to know? This invites us to reflect on the issue of the promises of science and also on that of the achievements of science which, though spectacular, were perhaps disappointing.

This critical inquiry, which exactly mirrors Kant's own, constitutes a new epistemological turning point. Philosophical thought will now reflect on what Blumenberg locates in the past as common interest: what did we want to know? The past of the human community is thus brought into play. It is no longer a question of knowing what we can know in absolute terms. The object is to place the aims of science in a historical context. The model for this new inquiry was developed in parallel with the *Dictionary of Philosophical Concepts*, whose project manager, Reinhart Koselleck, a historian and philosopher also now deceased, diagnosed the expansion of the horizon of expectations beyond what he termed the area or field of experience as one of the fundamental traits of modern European society. Whilst traditional societies are characterized by the fact that their expectations are based on the past and do not necessarily, or almost never, extend beyond what the past offers them in terms of meaning, modern European society as embodied by Renaissance utopias, projects itself into the future and creates a horizon of expectations which is no longer restricted to the legacy of the past. However, this has a particular logical impact, primarily on historical sciences. Every present, including our own, can be seen as the future of a past that we can now know. Thanks to the relationship that our present and all presents have with the past as the future, we are in a position to evaluate expectations, i.e. the horizons of expectation of the past. Blumenberg's question draws its inspiration directly from Koselleck's epistemological construct.

28

"What did
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Blumenberg wonders what triggered the whole scientific venture. What epistemic interest, to use the term introduced by Max Weber, lies at the origin of this mental adventure? From what interest originated by us, which can be located historically and is shared throughout society, does scientific endeavour stem? This interest must be identified so that we can know whether the promises related to it have been kept. Therefore, in order to identify this common interest, Blumenberg takes as his starting point a radical theory. He asserts that the interest guiding scientific endeavour cannot be expressed directly in the scientific idiom. The interest which underlies the spread of scientific research is initially expressed in a language which does not belong to the science which is developing. The power of scientific discourse resides specifically in the fact that it eliminates everything which does not enable it formally to target its aims, in order to ensure the relevance of its approach.

For Blumenberg, the interest which presides over all scientific endeavours belongs in its initial form to the common language. It is a compelling argument to maintain that when science is used rigorously it is based initially on a rhetorical achievement, an agreement sealed by a metaphor. In *The Legibility of the World*, Blumenberg attempts to trace one of these seminal metaphors, the metaphor of the book. Actually, the idea that a single book replacing all other books could contain all that there is to know and understand, only emerged at a certain point

in history. It is not an idea which has always existed, like an anthropological constant. Alphabets, writing, an abundance of texts and all sorts of means of circulation of texts were required before idea of a single book, the Book of books suddenly appeared in the history of humankind. From that moment onwards, the meaning of all things was sought through deciphering this Book, rather than observing the world of phenomena. During the Renaissance, in a strategic reversal, scientists, in the modern sense of the term, then declared that they would now decipher "the Book of nature". The metaphor remains the same. This is an intentional shift because the aim at the time was to lend legitimacy to science by comparing it with what the Book of books had hitherto promised to deliver in the way of revelation of knowledge.

There is a confrontation scene in Brecht's *Galileo Galilei* which sums up this reversal perfectly. On one side of the prince are the doctors of the church, the guardians of traditional knowledge. They are holding the works of Aristotle which are used to support their reading of the Bible. On the other side, slightly lower down, is Galileo with his telescope, which offers the promise of new facts based on direct observation. While the teachers keep repeating, "Aristotle said that...", Galileo simply requests: "Come and see. Come down from your scholastic pedestal and see". This scene is the prototype for the issue in which we are interested, because tension was to increase over the following centuries between a book which

is written using a normal alphabet and the Book of nature which people decipher using new alphabets, for which mathematics are the main vector. It is amusing to note that in Galileo's day, a Jesuit named Emmanuele Tesauro wrote a rhetorical treatise entitled *The Aristotelian Telescope* to challenge Galileo's initiative, as if there needed to be the equivalent of this telescope in the field of books, which would help people observe nature itself. Therefore, Blumenberg goes so far as to claim that the key concept of natural history, evolution, is based on the metaphor of the Book of nature, since the scroll was a roll, whose unrolling could also be applied to natural phenomena. Pursuing this metaphor throughout his demonstration, he points out, citing Schrödinger, that hopes of deciphering human genetic codes still draw inspiration from the idea that reality should be able to be read.

In relation to this initial metaphor, which has nothing to do with science as such, we can ask ourselves if the promise which it re-presents has been kept. Has the world, the whole world, been made legible by deciphering the Book of nature? This is where doubt can creep in, where unprecedented tension can occur. In fact, this tension, this opposition exists between reading which encompasses all the possible meanings of human and divine endeavour, and deciphering the Book of nature, whose method restricts this ambition to establishing certainties which can be verified by every person subjecting themselves to the same methodological re-

quirements, has never ceased to exercise the most informed minds.

There might be an inevitable discrepancy between these two sides of our universe of knowledge, requiring an in-depth analysis of how much of what we had initially hoped for or even announced has been lost or diminished during the process.

This discrepancy emerges already in the Bible, between the stories of Babel and Pentecost. In the story of Babel, the multiplicity of languages is depicted as a punishment inflicted on human pride and the dream of rediscovering the original language with which everybody could communicate with everybody else is depicted as reparation or even redemption. However, this universal language would be a language which designates the realities to which it refers using a one-to-one mapping. It is a denotative language which assumes that reality is identical for everybody. When the apostles started speaking "in tongues" during the miracle of Pentecost, the notion prevailed that each individual had some form of experience of the world to be communicated, which led to an explosion of idioms. Here, the miracle or dream of redemption lies in the fact that all those who speak in tongues, who diversify the way in which they express their experience, understand each other.

Science is caught between precisely the same two extremes. Science cannot be compared to the miracle of Pentecost. Science

tends more towards Babel. This is significant. But because science is on the side of this denotative one-to-one, clear and universal language, it may lose access to the initial sources of its own anxiety. Maybe what science wanted could only be expressed in another language which involves considerable diversity, an essentially connotative rather than denotative language, namely metaphorical language.

What I wanted to suggest by using Blumenberg's hypothesis as a starting point is that the influence of science in our modern society is dependent on an aspiration which scientific language cannot reproduce in its entirety. Therefore, there is probably little point in trying to boast of the successes of science using scientific language. However, it is very difficult to talk about science in anything other than scientific language, because this contradicts its legitimate methodological requirements. Hence the point of Blumenberg's question: "What did we want to know?". How can we express our shared interest at the outset and which language should we use, since it must by definition be a non-scientific language? I think that only an educational programme which places connotative language - i.e. the historic richness of natural languages which have become national languages in our world - at the centre of a revamped curriculum for learning can provide us with the basis for profound thought on the interests which have been lending legitimacy to scientific endeavour since the outset.

We should not dream of a purely scientific transformation in our education system, as if it were possible to motivate people by simply bringing them face to face with science as it is developing and being practised. This is an idea that has been widely supported and I think that this is a serious mistake. The interest which underscores scientific endeavour can only be expressed in non-scientific language. This presupposes that we immerse ourselves in the historic authenticity of our linguistic and cultural heritage so that schools become places where we can manage to speak in tongues. This is undoubtedly where the future of science will be decided.

JEAN-MICHEL BESNIER

I would like to thank Heinz Wismann on your behalf for setting these two days in the context of the story of Babel and the single language which would unite us and the Pentecost miracle of the redeeming spirit. Thank you for putting the very science which we want to draw into dialogue into perspective. As has already been mentioned, all types of present were futures in the past which we were able to know. I would now like to invite you to suspend time for a coffee break just outside.