

A Tentative Answer to Unanswerable Questions

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Unesco's first Philosophical Encounters were held last year at Paris on the theme of "*What Do We Not Know?*" and they were a great success. *Diogenes* published some of the papers by participants in its No. 169. A second meeting was held from March 27–30, 1996, devoted to a question as simple and difficult as that of the first: "*Who Are We?*" Once again this journal will not be able to publish all contributions, but is fortunate enough to present at least some of them to its readers.

"*What Do We Not Know?*" did not focus on the evidently meaningless problem of not knowing and ignorance, but on the no man's land on the fringes of knowledge. The question: "Who are we?" is not to be confused with "what are we?" After all, we are human beings in the Universe. We are made of flesh and bones, of blood and combinations of molecules and neurons, of memories, belief, and hopes. But what meaning does time and history have for this little pile of matter and mystery? What image does it give of others and of self? What, in this latter phrase, do the words "other" and "self" mean? What is the universal in all of us?

"*Qui sommes nous?*" "Who are we?" "Wer sind wir?" "*Quienes somos?*" – these three brief words (or two in the Spanish language, raising three questions, since *Quienes* represents the plural, since the pronoun "we" is included in the verb *somos*, and since the notion of time separates the form *somos* from that of *estamos*) suffice to trigger a whole pile of questions. To begin with, do we dare say who is who? Who is to be judge of "whom"? Who can say what the who is about if not the who himself? Furthermore, obvious and troubling as it may be, the appearance of being is set in the present tense "are." It is a present which is laden with past and future and for

which the imperfect or future tense is equally fitting. Finally, there is the word "we" of which no-one can say whether it is the individual royal "we" or that of a more or less circumscribed family, of a linguistic or religious community, of a tribe, a nation, an empire, a tradition – or of humans in general.

And if it is humans in general about whom we are talking here, who can speak about them in their diversity, except themselves and themselves alone? A Japanese person can speak of the Swiss, a Swiss of the Japanese, a West German of an East German, a man of the twentieth century of people in the Middle Ages or in prehistory. There are always only humans to talk about humans.

Gazes in the fullest sense, through space, by these humans at other humans. Gazes in a special sense, through time, from the present toward the past and perhaps also – but to what extent? – from the present toward the future. Gazes that crisscross in space. Retrospective or prospective gazes through time. Time is the very medium which gives rise to our problem that originates in biology and finds its expression in history.

Being of having been – here are our fate and chains; our happiness and our drama. Perhaps the matter revolves entirely around how we depart – without ever doing so completely – and how we transform into freedom as much of fatality as possible. And the origins in our destiny. The debate over difference and identity is being added to that over what is universal.

Politics inevitably seizes hold of a machinery that was created by biology and paleontology. Hope for the future responds to the myths about our origin. At the heart of the question: "Who are we?" an existential insecurity is underlying adolescence, minorities, economic and sexual difference, utopia and sects. In this sense, this issue of *Diogenes* represents an exception in the history of the journal: it is the invasion of the political into the rule of the universal.

What then has *Diogenes* stood for during close to half a century? It represented a tiny fragment in the puzzle of knowledge; it certainly made an effort in the direction of being interdisciplinary and to globalize the dialogue among cultures. There was also, within the privileged space of Unesco, a striving for liberty, for tolerance and a plurality of viewpoints. Finally, there was the attempt to raise, with audacity, questions that tackled not merely

obliquely but also unexpectedly traditional fields of knowledge. Following the theme of "*What do we not know?*" the question "*Who are we?*" reacts to these exigencies. Here is the semblance of an answer to innumerable questions without end.