Preface

Where do we come from? Where are we going? In all ages, people have wondered about their destiny and their origins, and it seemed to them that knowing more about their past would allow them, at the same time, to know more about their future. The poetry of origins was intertwined with blind gropings, then with decisive steps forward in science. With the starry sky above them, the learned and the unlearned allowed themselves to be carried away by the same metaphysical anguish in which space and time took the principal roles. We had to wait a very long time until science finally taught us a little more on the birth of the universe and of thought. Sometimes, on more than one point, science resembled primitive mythologies passed on through the darkness of time.

Throughout the whole of the first half of this century, the lightning progress of mathematical physics turned our image of the universe completely upside down. Albert Einstein not only transformed the world in which we live but also our thought processes. What had appeared as attractive but abstract views were supported by experimentation, and, for better or worse, concrete realities confirmed the theoretical visions. In travelling through space, one also travelled through time, and one came to travel back from millenium to millenium and to witness events that had taken place millions and millions of years ago. A kind of dizziness sprang from science that was showing us a universe in continual expansion, born from a big bang some fifteen billion years ago and made up of innumerable galaxies and mysterious black holes.

The image of man could not but be changed by such extraordinary upheavals. *Diogenes*, a review of the human sciences, had a duty to enter these areas that appeared to be beyond the scope of the human sciences but, clearly, had a close influence on them. An everlasting chain runs from the stars to thought. Thinking developed in a humanity that had risen from the primates that were a form of life that had descended from matter created by the big bang. An immense genealogy, extending through billions of years

in which the beginning of life is perhaps as inexplicable as the creation of matter or the origin of time, established itself before our eyes. Humanity is a minor episode in this prodigious adventure. Humanism appears more as a need, a hope, or a wish rather than as a reality that can be assumed in advance. Humanity is being constructed. It is an infinite task. It is situated at the end of a universal evolution whose past we are beginning to distinguish vaguely and whose future remains closed to us. Perhaps humanity has only appeared to destroy itself? Perhaps, on the contrary, the progress that it is still capable of making will lead it as far from its contemporary image as its contemporary image is from its origins?

Geologists, physicists, astronomers, chemists, biologists, and palaeontologists must work together in a study that attempts to draw up a balance-sheet of our knowledge of the past of humanity and of the environment from which it sprang, that is to say, the universe. We have asked M. Yves Coppens, an eminent specialist in prehistory and professor at the Collège de France, to bring together a number of texts that would give an up-to-date account of current knowledge in this area. M. Coppens is the chief editor of this issue of *Diogenes*, what the Anglo-Saxons call a "guest editor." We would like to express the gratitude of the review to him and to all the distinguished names he has brought together.

JEAN D'ORMESSON
Académie française

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