⟨1⟩
The Question of Common Sense

The citizens of Athens never imagined that Socrates was going to transform them into his patsies, allowing him to justify the adventure of this strange undertaking that has been called philosophy ever since. Nor did I imagine that Alfred North Whitehead, such a radically atypical philosopher, would resort to such an utterly typical remark about the origins of philosophy as this: "Socrates spent his life in analysing the current presuppositions of the Athenian world. He explicitly recognized that his philosophy was an attitude in the face of ignorance."[1] This sort of commonplace remark is not in itself noteworthy. It is common enough in Whitehead's texts, and each reader must decide on their own whether to find a reason to ignore it and to move on to the next phrase with a smile, or to stop and puzzle over it. I have opted to grant it the power to put me to work.

Does Philosophy Confront Ignorance?

When I imagine how Socrates's peculiar questions caught the citizens of Athens off guard, what first come to mind are the posters that caught my attention in one of the corridors of the European Commission building, which houses the offices of civil servants tasked with questions about "science and society." The posters reproduced the results of public opinion polls dealing with what European citizens think about science. In light of the absurdity of the opinions expressed, the results seemed to have been posted as a reminder to civil servants about what sort of attitude would be suitable when

dealing with a band of unabashedly ignorant people, whom one must pretend to respect, but above all, must manage—all for their own good, of course.

As everyone knows, pollsters count on the agreement of those whom they kindly call "average citizens" to provide responses to questions without wondering what sort of trick is being played on them, even though they have never before had the opportunity to engage with such issues. Pollsters show no scruples about relying on the weakness of those whom they trap, which simply makes them crooks. But of course, Socrates was not a crook. He went to great lengths to make the citizens whom he questioned see the ignorance evidenced in their answers. This is what Whitehead calls an attitude, and the term "attitude" takes on a good deal of weight. The attitude of Socrates is itself a philosophical theme. There are as many possible Socrateses as there are readings of his attitude toward ignorance, and as many ways of facing the beginnings of philosophy.

One Socrates is a master of aporia, claiming not to have any answer himself but seeking only to make his interlocutors confront the difficulty, possibly insurmountable, of formulating the answer. He is the one who knows himself ignorant. There is another Socrates, master of Plato, for whom aporia is a form of propaedeutics, preparing citizens to welcome a knowledge that transcends the divergent answers they have proposed. He is one who invents philosophy to pacify disagreements, giving to the city his orientation toward what is truly good, just, and beautiful, above and beyond illusions. Yet the historical Socrates was condemned for poisoning the public peace, for instilling the poison of doubt, and Wittgenstein may well have ratified this condemnation, Wittgenstein the anti-Socrates who passed his life posing questions not so much of ordinary citizens as of his fellow philosophers, who stood accused of spreading the disease of false problems.

There can be many possible Socrateses, yet those whom he addresses are always construed as ignorant citizens. Asked to define truth, justice, or courage, they offer cases and examples that, as Socrates shows easily enough, lead to divergent definitions. A veritable stingray, Socrates sparks them awake in an attempt (it is said) to share with them his only privilege, of knowing he does not know. It could also be said that he stuns them. He leaves them stupefied, con-

vinced of their incapacity to know what they are saying, and ready to leave it to the philosopher to guide them. Or else he confronts them with a challenge that is also a trap. If the meaning of words indeed depends on making reference to circumstances or a particular language game, the citizens of Athens were not ignorant. They knew everything there was to know.

What would Whitehead's attitude in the streets of Athens be? In *Modes of Thought*, he praises the practice of assemblage, to be taken up time and time again from era to era. He associates assemblage with what for him is the task of philosophy: "Philosophy can exclude nothing."[2] Assemblage changes everything. The different answers the philosopher gathers, however divergent and partial they may be, are not to be disqualified or reduced to attesting to a speaker's ignorance on the part of a Whiteheadian Socrates. They are part of an assemblage that puts the philosopher to work. What characterizes the assemblage is the *problematic*. The problematic is not a problem to be resolved, for even if an answer proves correct, it will continue to vie against others. The problematic implies a terrain to be shared under the aegis of perplexity activated by the philosopher. If Socrates had not positioned himself as an arbitrator, judging and excluding, he might have been able to make the divergence revealed by his requests for definition into a source of collective concern. He might have welcomed the perplexity he aroused, not as a symptom, but as a question, which he might have shared with what Whitehead calls common sense: "Common sense brooding over the aspects of existence hands [them] over to philosophy for elucidation into some coherence of understanding."[3]

Ignorance here shows an entirely different face. The citizens "awakened" by Socrates will not have to abandon their initial propositions as worthless. Socrates's questioning caught them off guard. They know that they have let themselves be surprised by an unusual question, and in this respect, their ignorance has been demonstrated. Even if they expressed them only partially, their propositions attest to a knowledge that need not for all that be cancelled out. Another Socrates must be imagined, one who needs the brooding of the citizens of Athens. This Socrates needs citizens who accept that there is no need to lend authority to the commonplace propositions bedecking their thought, but neither is it necessary to disavow those aspects of

existence that matter to them. On the contrary, their brooding should activate the sense of importance that they attached to their answer, which related it to an aspect of existence. Belonging to existence itself, this aspect would be irreducible to what is habitually attributed to the "subjective" and relativized. So it is that Whitehead eschews using the divergence of answers to deny their value: "The philosophic attitude is a resolute attempt to enlarge the understanding of the scope of application of every notion which enters into our current thought. The philosophic attempt takes every word, and every phrase, in the verbal expression of thought, and asks, 'What does it mean?'"[4]

In *Modes of Thought,* Whitehead relentlessly activated words. His mode entailed reimmersing words in situations that were part of common experience without letting common experience define them. Instead, common experience takes on the power to engage words in a *speculative* adventure. Neither metaphoric nor literal in meaning, "speculative" here means dramatizing what goes without saying when we say something. It deploys what is presupposed and assumed by the most limpid and banal of statements, even to the point where we lose our bearings, so long as the statement is not reduced to *a* statement, but envisaged as *this* statement, always engaged in *this* situation, answering to *this* mode of engagement in the situation: "Philosophy begins in wonder. And, at the end, when philosophic thought has done its best, the wonder remains. There have been added, however, some grasp of the immensity of things, some purification of emotion by understanding."[5]

When philosophy has done its best, the sense of the word "wonder" has somehow changed. At first, as the philosopher encountered a discordant multiplicity of meanings demanding elucidation, "wonder" signaled perplexity. After she has endeavored to *comprehend,* what remains is closer to wonderment, for she has grasped something of the immensity presupposed and claimed by each aspect of existence. Philosophy does not respond to the brooding of common sense with procedures of selection and hierarchy to eradicate discrepancy. Nor will philosophy pacify common sense by assigning a meticulously bounded territory to each aspect of existence. Such solutions do not inspire wonder. They sadly accept limits that commit them to thinking under surveillance—the triumph of critique: "The strength of the critical school lies in the fact that the doctrine of evo-

lution never entered, in any radical sense, into ancient scholarship. Thus there arises the presupposition of a fixed specification of the human mind; and the blueprint of this specification is the dictionary."[6]

If the citizens of Athens had been armed with a dictionary to provide a fixed answer, or to define the rules of good usage, or to trace the more or less arbitrary philological evolution of a meaning, then they might have answered Socrates's questions. But they would have done so as if at school. Such a mode would have shielded them from any perplexity and from any grasp of the immensity of things. The ability to respond to the Socratic question "what is . . . ?" with a definition of what we mean by "courage," or "the good," or "justice" produces a statement stripped to its bones, stripped of its sensuous flesh, soft and corruptible. The dream of the ideal dictionary is to extract only what proves resistant to critique, intent on what belongs to the human mind as such, independently of shifting and diverging sensibilities. Stripped of all reference to passions, appearances, and circumstances, such a mind would for Whitehead be nothing but an automaton, incapable of error perhaps, yet incapable of understanding as a result. What proves resistant to critique would be nothing more than dead abstractions, to be passively accepted because they do not arouse any stirring of thought or of imagination.

In contrast, to accept the doctrine of evolution in a radical manner is to accept a form of empiricism that embraces change as primordial. Evolution does not produce species that remain fixed. The designation of a species, including the species called human, is based on the relative stability of a handful of traits permitting characterization and classification. It does not set limits on what the individual realities thus identified are capable of. Accepting evolution means agreeing to abandon the idea that thought needs fixed references to avoid confusion and arbitrariness. Evolution strips critique of its power when it strives to hold us accountable by demanding guarantees and discounting what it calls beliefs. For Whitehead, there is no stable definition of common sense any more than there is a fixed identity to the human species. There is no way to define a common sense that would allow us to ground consensus, nor one that we would have to resist.

The aim here is not to define common sense, much less to envisage some sort of philosophy of common sense, and still less to make

common sense an attribute of the human. Whitehead made common sense a constraint for philosophy. Common sense is a constraint for philosophy because it is the task of philosophy, as Whitehead understands it, to refuse the kind of freedom specialists claim when they rule out or exclude what is incompatible with their presuppositions, even taking pride in scandalizing common sense. To respect a constraint, however, is not to respect a limit. It is to refuse what comes easy. What comes easy would be to accept variability with nothing at stake, to assume that the question "what does that mean?" is entirely arbitrary, depending on the moment.

Evolution for Whitehead is not a matter of progress toward the human. Neither is it an arbitrary history, something merely observed. His key word is adventure. The calling of philosophy is to consent to adventure, which means participating in it. The task of philosophy thus requires, as Whitehead puts it, "a welding of imagination and common sense."[7]

The originality of Whitehead as a philosopher, then, comes of his speculative relation to common sense. Common sense is not only a constraint but also a wager. If it is to be welded to imagination, common sense must be capable of brooding. "Brooding" implies not being taken in, not docilely agreeing to disqualify what matters to it. Common sense cannot be reduced to what philosophers discuss or what they define. It cannot be reduced to playing a role in their thought, whether authority or patsy. The possibility of welding, which implies a genuinely metallurgical operation, is speculative. Its wager is adventure instead of progress. The possibility of welding implies that philosophy does not ultimately have to bring a satisfactory answer to the brooding of common sense. It has to nourish what makes for brooding. Such is Whitehead's attitude toward the ignorance that Socrates forced the inhabitants of Athens into admitting. Ignorance is our common lot as we face the immensity of things. The question, however, is not to know that one does not know. That is just another way of discrediting common sense. It is a matter of daring to imagine, contrary to the assurances of specialized forms of knowledge, that what mutely insists and makes us brood expresses a certain grasp of the immensity of things—even if we don't quite know how to put it into words.