DIOGENES AND NEO-HUMANISM

My dear Professor,

Diogenes, as you know, is an international review. Appearing simultaneously in several languages, it is for that very reason addressed to several publics. It is, moreover, an inter-disciplinary review. This means that its readers, who, as in the case of any publication on a fairly high level, are themselves also either real or potential contributors, did not receive an identical instruction, were not intellectually brought up by the same methods, and are far from having the same habits of thought. Neither the questions they ask, in beginning a piece of research, nor their rhetorics, when they wish to interest or convince others, can be said to coincide. The diversity of cultures at the very start, of aims and principal points of reference, of expository processes, poses difficult and novel problems for the editor. They entail considerable constraints which he is at first tempted to underestimate, because he naturally believes in the universality of the human mind, and because such obstacles exist only to an infinitely less degree for the editor of a review which is addressed to a more homogeneous public. May I explain myself this way: in order to

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engage the prompt attention of crystallographers, it is enough to offer them a good study in crystallography; but this approach is not enough to interest economists in a work of linguistics, however remarkable, or to fascinate archeologists with an article, no matter how excellent, on the history of the cinema. The article which they are asked to consider must bring them something, enrich them in some way, be of some use to them, awake a sympathetic echo in their minds.

This situation is a healthy one, for *Diogenes* would not have much interest if this publication should appear as a sort of quarterly anthology of scholarly work, of the type to be found in the specialised reviews. You will readily agree that a publication which assembled summaries, every three months, of very specialised articles from the disparate sciences, strictly speaking, would have no meaning at all.

In the sciences which have man's works for their subject, however, no matter how specialised they may be, it is scarcely conceivable that there will not be studies which, in some fashion or other, even though this be only through the method employed, will arouse the curiosity of persons who are either not specialists, or specialists in another discipline. It is this type of studies that *Diogenes* sets itself the task of gathering together and encouraging. There exist, for every branch of science, publications of very high quality in which new discoveries of the slightest immediate importance can be stated, placed in context, and discussed with all necessary care. It is not our task to select some confusing samples from their respective tables of contents. Nor is it our task to choose hasty, brilliant, and most often fragile generalisations as against precise studies. We must limit ourselves to the 'significant' epitome, and to avoid all findings, certainly often very valuable in themselves, which at present are not susceptible to, or are not accompanied by, some commentary which would define their general meaning.

The stone-quarryman and the architect both contribute to the construction of a building. Science also knows its quarriers and its architects. In science, however, it is most often the same men who fill the two functions, although in varying proportions according to their personal bent or the focus of their interest; following also a certain aptitude for the co-ordination of findings, which is not the most widespread attribute in this world.

Now I should like at this point to state my thoughts somewhat more boldly: since scientific research, or at any rate the teaching of science, has become, not only a vocation, but a trade and a career, there has developed

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a slightly mechanical method of committing oneself to it: with professional crowding and competition doing their part, and sometimes perhaps a certain exhaustion of the materials of investigation themselves, it happens that the tasks undertaken, however minuscule or incomplete they may seem, appear to be objects of sufficient interest in themselves to merit a lifetime of application, a great expense of persistence, and the mobilisation of a vast learning. Soon the result is judged, not on its intrinsic importance, but according to the effort spent in obtaining it and the competence demonstrated, which it was without doubt possible to put to a better use. This reversal is not without consequences.

It lies at the root of an unconscious overgrowth of studies which are brought to bear upon pinpoints, on the most minor subjects in the world, which it must have taken more ingenuity to discover than to carry through, and of which the authors acquit themselves less because of a consecrated ardour than to fulfil the conditions which will permit their access to such and such a university post. It is not rare for a student to choose his specialty less by irresistible vocation than in order to follow the enlightened advice of his teachers or after investigation and on the basis of having calculated the number of chairs which will become available in a short time. No doubt it is normal for such considerations to impinge upon science, and they are probably inevitable. But it is imprudent to evaluate the scientific character of a research according to criteria the usage of which is encouraged by conjectures of this kind.

How, indeed, under such conditions, can we avoid the danger that the final ends of our investigation, which are to inform us concerning man, should be lost sight of? Prudence, reinforced by a fundamental indifference, sometimes substitutes ends that are almost diametrically opposed to these. It leads, especially, to making a choice of subjects of study which do not demand great abilities, which provoke no passions at all, which are uncontroversial and, therefore, as close as one can get to nonentity. Under pressure to avoid a subject held to be dangerous, the risk grows of judging the seriousness of a work according to its insignificance. A work appears so much the more spotless, incontestable—scientific, in a word—as it answers fewer besetting questions of the mind. We end by being persuaded that it is so much the more valuable as it claims the honour of declaring itself most limited. For many among us are inclined to take limitation as a proof of honesty, exactness, objectivity. Now it is not without perils for scientific research to want to be limited, that is, to isolate itself, because the truth of things depends in large part on the perspective

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in which one places them, as I believe you will agree with me. The whole quarrel is there: is it not a fundamental self-deception, advantageous no doubt, but narrow and sterile, to establish a fact while taking a thousand precautions to prevent anyone from interpreting it, or taking the trouble in advance to discredit any interpretation which might be made as questionable and intrepid, that is, as nonscientific? This is the way for detailed erudition to assure itself cheaply of the security and prestige of which science has, quite rightly, been the beneficiary. You know, besides, that it is not in the laboratories that the epithet 'ingenious' is currently spoken out of the wrong side of the mouth, or that the term 'intelligent', pronounced after a certain fashion, serves to stamp a doubt on the solidity of the work which it qualifies. Neither are you unaware that in corresponding English-speaking circles, the use of 'clever' is flatly derogatory. This convergence is alarming. I can well see the dangers of excessive subtilty, but in the last analysis, there is no good substitute for intelligence.

Some evil spirit driving my thoughts further, it occurred to me to fancy, on the contrary, that detailed erudition constitutes, as it were, the root of the uncertainty of those sciences which are deprived of the rigour of demonstration, of the verdict of experiment, or of the resources of observation. Actually, an erudite mathematician is not a mathematician; he is a historian of mathematics; the notion of an erudite physicist is not much more satisfactory, while an erudite botanist is more easily conceived of, but he is not necessarily a great botanist because of this attribute. In the human sciences, erudition is no doubt indispensable, but who does not see that it is the weakness, not the strength, of this category of the sciences? And this detailed knowledge necessarily supposes as a complementary pole the capacity for co-ordinating, for supposing, for constructing, and a concern to relate every new document to some centre of reference which will permit its relationships and its meaning to be appreciated.

I think I have said enough to convince you that the particular vocation of *Diogenes*, if it is not one of erudition, is not one of popularisation either, as you seem to have supposed at several points in our recent talk. It is to prefer to the separate examination of facts and events, which I think deceptive and illusory, the relations which these same data can have among themselves, in their historic, lived, inextricable coherence. No doubt it is imprudent to reconstruct relationships of this sort. All the same, the results of that research which, rather adventurously, I recognise, labours to bring

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them to light, seem to me to be much more secure in the end than an isolated item of knowledge, although it may be more certain. From the very fact that it remains isolated, this knowledge lacks the context which alone can give it meaning. The value of *Diogenes*, for the great number of scholars who have been good enough to assure it their support and who recognise the possible fruitfulness of its ambitions, is in reacting against the tendency to study such or such a datum in itself, losing sight of the contiguous terrain.

In a word, and to bring to an end, this over-long profession of faith I do not at all consider, as you seem to do, that an article in *Diogenes* is bound to be an erudite man's or specialist's article, stripped of those precisions which constitute its worth in the eyes of other learned men or specialists. I remember telling you, on the contrary, very plainly that it was indispensable that the essay should retain the critical apparatus which backed it up and justified it. But it should also uncover the principal connexions of each problem, not isolate it artificially, which as you know often happens in the scholarly reviews. It must make an effort to evaluate the problem's lasting and instructive significance. Such a study is not something less, it is something more than a scholarly article. It must manifest all those qualities which are rightly expected from a scientific monograph. It must give proof, besides, of qualities which sometimes are missing in that type of work, namely, demonstrate enough imagination and critical mentality so that a meticulous research into details does not paradoxically end up with extraordinarily slight and reckless results, as a result of the fact that its author did not take the trouble to place his investigation in a sufficiently wide perspective.

A little while ago I defined two tendencies which, in the sciences of man, are opposed and complementary, both indispensable to their best development, one of which draws the student into a series of analytic studies, the other of which drives him to concern himself further with the meaning and the value of his results. *Diogenes*, by its very nature, is committed to serve only the second of these two fashions of understanding scientific work. The erudite journals, as I was just saying, are more naturally destined to gather works of the first sort. I do not tire of affirming that it would be harmful and fallacious to imagine that these are the only works that are scientific, or that they are more scientific than the others. For here is a mystery which I cannot clear up and which I take the liberty of submitting to your keen judgment: the most lasting works are almost always works of synthesis. There is nothing more transient,

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nothing more ephemeral than a purely erudite work, which more erudition or a different erudition is not long in superseding. But the idea lasts; or, after a time of eclipse, it is born again. Contrary to all expectations, to all appearances, the *ktema eis aei* is not the customary lot of erudite research, it is rather that of the blessed conjecture.

It does not follow that we must separate two sorts of activity which join in a reciprocal relation more than they exclude each other. Experience has often seen ingenious and fruitful methods emerge after being conceived for securing a minuscule and quickly invalidated result, methods less transitory and more generalisable than the uncertain and infinitely singular data which they were invented to underwrite in vain.

You surely hold as I do that it is fitting to take care, especially in our time, that research should be first of all an intelligent, planned and not an almost maniacal activity comparable to the toil of those ants which carefully transport almost anything at all in every direction.

This review believes more in the methods than in the results of erudition, for it cannot fail to recognise the results as precarious by definition. On the other hand, a gratuitous theory could have an interest only for philosophers. I will always prefer a good monographic study on the anticipation of the relative in Demosthenes or on the use of the epithetical adjective in the first collections of Hugo's verse. I purposefully take the most unrewarding examples because, if these items of knowledge are valuable solely for what one may draw out of them, I want expressly to underline that it is from them and not from the empty or the arbitrary that it is proper to draw something. So much having been said, is not a failure to draw anything from such items of knowledge, whether motivated by prudence or impotence, equivalent to transforming them into sterile treasures, into that gold beside which a starveling miser dies, that *census iners* which Tacitus defines not without some scorn? Yes, I should like to have scholars who are like the Germans he paints (or whom he invents) 'eager for the welfare of others, disdainful of their own'. It is for the diffusion of this new race that *Diogenes*, it seems to me, ought to be employed. So far as I am concerned, I can see no other valid vocation for these pages.

I thank you again for the goodwill and the urbanity with which you have received the apprehensions of an editor who cannot neglect to concern himself about the natural exigencies of the scattered public which he has undertaken to satisfy. Nevertheless, I do not wish to leave you with the conviction that this public, with respect to which you seemed to me

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to entertain a certain scorn, is less exacting, in matters of method, than that which professionally reads the learned journals. I think the reverse is true. In my experience, I have found these readers less ingenuous, more prompt to recognise the weak points of an argument, more ready to discover an unconscious fallacy under the impressive, but sometimes somewhat uncritical, mass of heterogeneous data. I am sure that they are not bringing any pressure upon the contributors of this review to sell scientific rigour off cheaply. I believe, rather, that their legitimate exactions safeguard its reason for being.

There is one last point which I should like to discuss with you. The horizon of our knowledge has been considerably widened today. It is that of the planet itself. This expansion involves a reordering of the fundamental notions of our culture.

The basic principle can no longer remain, within cultural frontiers now fortunately broken down, the continuity of an antique tradition. Greek and Latin classical antiquity have for long supplied the West with the essentials of an intellectual and moral patrimony of which it might claim to be the heir. From this circumstance has come that deep, systematic and long-justified study of a sum of principles to which it seemed that nothing important or substantial could ever be added. But now we are in a position where this invariable inheritance has been rifled indefatigably and, out of an activity sometimes more mechanical than reflective, there has grown a prodigious accumulation of ever more learned and complex commentaries. This mass of learning has in turn become less and less productive of any evident interest, sometimes almost visionary and, paradoxically, foreign; and, more importantly, unfaithful to the principal lesson of a culture which, since the Renaissance, has never ceased to assimilate the most varied conquests of the mind.

Today the Humanities are far from coinciding with that Humanism from which they can reclaim only an ever-narrowing sector, continuously squeezed, in time as in space, by the civilisations of an age-old Orient and of a rising America.

The West, from Bossuet to Hegel, believed in a linear development of history of which it seemed to be the axis, the support, and the destiny. The excavations of its own archeologists, however, as well as the travels of its explorers, the translations made by its philologists, revealed in the four corners of the globe, empires which were no copy of its own, and independent gospels, neither its allies nor its rivals, born and grown

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great in a mutual isolation which ended only yesterday, when the better-informed history which had revived them, undertook for the first time to count them, to confront them, and to inventory them.

If there do exist a particularly Western opulence and fruitfulness, it is not fitting to seek them in the ancestral treasure of a local tradition which, besides, had more than one string to its bow; but in the universal wealth which it has more at its disposal than do the other more self-inclosed cultures which have sent into the world fewer swarms of explorers, archeologists, and philologists, fewer goldseekers and missionaries, fewer of the inquisitive ones of every species and the voracious of every stripe.

The permanent temptation of the learned classes, when they form a constituted body, is doubtless to refine their knowledge and their researches, and thus to turn them, unconsciously, toward scholasticism, patristics, and the exercises of schools. This vigilance, this zeal, this infinite and meticulous rendering of the small change of an immutable and closed patrimony, surely cannot have exclusively bad effects. But it would not be judicious to imagine that they produced only excellent ones. In any case, here again, *Diogenes* has no choice. This review could not be a fortress, a monastery or some acropolis, still less a 'reserve'; it is forced to be a crossroads or, in the worst of cases, a bazaar: in any event, a gathering-place, a place of meeting and of big or little exchange trade, an orientation chart showing where man stands today among many disciplines and all the fraternal cultures of which he can be equally proud to have been the author.

Several of the major works of our time, such as the great compositions of a Malraux or a Toynbee, whatever reservations they may have deserved at the hands of the specialists who have criticised them, bear witness to this ecumenical awareness. They put the results of parcelled erudition into just such perspectives as these researches themselves have permitted far-reaching minds to organise.

This extension of the domain of the Humanities to the fifteen or twenty centres of civilisation from which today's man has received unequal but equally irreplaceable gifts, obliges him not to accord exorbitant privileges to any one of them, still less exclusive privileges. To be sure, the obligation to take over practically from scratch the administration of this immense new fortune, invites each of us to reduce a little the engrossing, almost monopolistic attention which he gladly has for its oldest jewels. If there is no research so particularistic that it does not bring us and teach us some-

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thing, it is not fitting that a study should deliberately isolate itself in such a way as to furnish an easy refuge to mediocrity or to a vain spirit of secession.

Thus it is also one of the major preoccupations of *Diogenes* to insist for each culture, not on the thousand and one anecdotal accidents which clutter the memory and which, besides, defy explanation, but on the permanent human preoccupations which can be discerned among so many changing circumstances and which establish the closest relationships among histories which sometimes have not even crossed: such as one discovers in the same need for excellence and perfection, readable under the most varied finery; or such as are evidenced by errors, failures, and analogous crimes, which are extremely far apart from each other in their contexts, their ambitions and their approaches.

It is also of such lessons as these that a reborn general culture will have need. This universality counts for far more with *Diogenes* than the material fact that this review—the first on its level—at present has several editions at its disposal, much more also than its concern to draw upon sources issuing from the most diverse geographical origins. For it is only at this price, it seems to me, that *Diogenes* will validly attempt to become the authentic and militant utterance of the scholars federated in the International Council of Philosophy and the Humanistic Sciences.

Believe me, my dear Professor, ever the respectful admirer of your work.

ROGER CAILLOIS

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