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East and West

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Civilization & Progress

The civilization of the modern West appears in history as a veritable anomaly: among all those which are known to us more or less completely, this civilization is the only one that has developed along purely material lines, and this monstrous development, whose beginning coincides with the so-called Renaissance, has been accompanied, as indeed it was fated to be, by a corresponding intellectual regress; we say corresponding and not equivalent, because here are two orders of things between which there can be no common measure. This regress has reached such a point that the Westerners of today no longer know what pure intellect is; in fact they do not even suspect that anything of the kind can exist; hence their disdain, not only for Eastern civilization, but also for the Middle Ages of Europe, whose spirit escapes them scarcely less completely. How is the interest of a purely speculative knowledge to be brought home to people for whom intelligence is nothing but a means of acting on matter and turning it to practical ends, and for whom science, in their limited understanding of it, is above all important insofar as it may be applied to industrial purposes? We exaggerate nothing; it only needs a glance at one's surroundings to realize that this is indeed the mentality of the vast majority of our contemporaries; and another glance, this time at philosophy from Francis Bacon and Descartes onward, could only confirm this impression still further. We will mention, by way of reminder, that Descartes limited intelligence to reason, that he granted to what he thought might be called 'metaphysics' the mere function of serving as a basis for physics, and that this physics itself was by its very

nature destined, in his eyes, to pave the way for the applied sciences, mechanical, medicinal, and moral—the final limit of human knowledge as he conceived it. Are not the tendencies which he so affirmed just those that at the first glance may be seen to characterize the whole development of the modern world? To deny or to ignore all pure and supra-rational knowledge was to open up the path which logically could only lead on the one hand to positivism and agnosticism, which resign themselves to the narrowest limitations of intelligence and of its object, and on the other hand to all those sentimental and 'voluntarist' theories that feverishly seek in the infra-rational for what reason cannot give them. Indeed, those of our contemporaries who wish to react against rationalism accept nonetheless the complete identification of intelligence with mere reason, and they believe that it is nothing more than a purely practical faculty, incapable of going beyond the realm of matter. Bergson has written as follows: 'Intelligence, considered in what seems to be its original feature, is the faculty of manufacturing artificial objects, in particular tools to make tools [*sic*], and of indefinitely varying the manufacture.'[1] And again: 'Intelligence, even when it no longer operates upon its own object (i.e., brute matter), follows habits it has contracted in that operation: it applies forms that are indeed those of unorganized matter. It is made for this kind of work. With this kind of work alone is it fully satisfied. And that is what intelligence expresses by saying that thus only it arrives at distinctness and clearness.'[2] From these last features it becomes obvious that there is no question here of intelligence itself, but quite simply of the Cartesian conception of intelligence, which is very different: and the 'new philosophy', as its adherents call it, substitutes for the superstition of reason another that is in some respects still grosser, namely, the superstition of life. Rationalism, though powerless to attain to absolute truth, at least allowed relative truth to subsist; the intuitionism of today lowers that truth to be nothing more than a representation of sensible reality, in all its inconsistency and ceaseless change; finally, pragmatism succeeds in blotting out altogether the very

1. *Creative Evolution*, p146, in the English translation of Arthur Mitchell.
2. Ibid., p169.

notion of truth by identifying it with that of utility, which amounts to suppressing it purely and simply. We may have schematized things a little here, but we have not falsified them in the least, and whatever may have been the intermediate stages, the fundamental tendencies are indeed those we have just stated; the pragmatists, in going to the limit, show themselves to be the most authentic representatives of modern Western thought: what does the truth matter in a world whose aspirations, being solely material and sentimental and not intellectual, find complete satisfaction in industry and morality, two spheres where indeed one can very well do without conceiving the truth? To be sure, this extremity was not reached at a single stride, and many Europeans will protest that they have not reached it yet; but we are thinking particularly of the Americans, who are at a more 'advanced' stage of the same civilization. Mentally as well as geographically, modern America is indeed the 'Far West'; and Europe will follow, without any doubt, if nothing comes to stop the development of the consequences implied in the present state of things.

But most extraordinary of all is perhaps the claim to set up this abnormal civilization as the very type of all civilization, to regard it as 'the civilization' par excellence, and even as the only one that deserves the name. Extraordinary too, and also complementary to this illusion is the belief in 'progress', considered no less absolutely, and naturally identified, at heart, with this material development that absorbs the entire activity of the modern West. It is curious to note how promptly and successfully certain ideas come to spread and impose themselves, provided of course that they correspond to the general tendencies of the particular environment and epoch; it is so with these ideas of 'civilization' and 'progress', which so many people willingly believe universal and necessary, whereas in reality they have been quite recently invented and, even today, at least three-quarters of mankind persist either in being ignorant of them or in considering them quite negligible. Jacques Bainville has remarked that:

> If the verb *civilize* is already found to have been used by the good authors of the eighteenth century in the sense which we give it,

the noun *civilization* is only to be met with in the economists of the years which immediately preceded the French Revolution. Littré quotes an example taken from Turgot. Littré, who had ransacked all French literature, could not trace it any further back. Thus the word civilization has no more than a century and a half of existence. It was only in 1835, less than a hundred years ago, that it finally found its way into the dictionary of the Academy.... The ancients, from whom we still consciously trace our descent, were equally without a term for what we mean by civilization. If this word were given to be translated in Latin prose, the schoolboy would indeed find himself in difficulties.... The life of words is not independent of the life of ideas. The word civilization, which our ancestors did very well without, perhaps because they had the thing itself, spread during the nineteenth century under the influence of new ideas. The scientific discoveries, the development of industry, of commerce, of prosperity and of material welfare, had created a kind of enthusiasm and even a kind of 'prophetics'. The conception of indefinite progress, dating from the second half of the eighteenth century, helped to convince mankind that it had entered upon a new era, that of absolute civilization. It is the now quite forgotten Fourier, an utter utopian, who was responsible for first calling the present age the age of civilization, and for identifying civilization with modern times.... So civilization was the degree of development and perfection which the nations of Europe had reached in the nineteenth century. This term, understood by everyone, although no one had defined it, included material and moral progress side by side, the one bringing with it the other, the one united to the other, both inseparable. In a word, civilization was Europe itself, it was a patent which the European world granted itself.[3]

That is exactly what we think ourselves; and we were intent on making this quotation, although it is rather long, to show that we are not alone in thinking so.

3. 'L' Avenir de la Civilization', *Revue Universelle*, March 1, 1922, pp586–587.

These two ideas, then, of 'civilization' and 'progress', which are very closely connected, both date only from the second half of the eighteenth century, that is to say from the epoch which saw, among other things, the birth of materialism;[4] and they were propagated and popularized especially by the socialist dreamers of the beginning of the nineteenth century. It cannot be denied that the history of ideas leads sometimes to rather surprising observations, and helps to reduce certain fantastic ideas to their proper value; it would do so more than ever if it were not, as is moreover the case with ordinary history, falsified by biased interpretations, or limited to efforts of mere scholarship and to pointless research into questions of detail. True history might endanger certain political interests; and it may be wondered if this is not the reason, where education is concerned, why certain methods are officially imposed to the exclusion of all others: consciously or not, they begin by removing everything that might make it possible to see certain things clearly, and that is how 'public opinion' is formed. But to go back to the two ideas that we have just been speaking of, let us make it quite clear that in giving them so close an origin we have in mind simply this absolute and, as we think, illusory interpretation, which is the one most usually given them today. As for the relative meaning in which the same words may be used, that is quite another question, and as this meaning is very legitimate, there can be no question here of ideas that originated at some definite moment; it matters little that they may have been expressed in one way or another and, if a term is convenient, it is not because of its recent creation that we see disadvantages in using it. Thus we do not hesitate to say that there have been and still are many different 'civilizations'; it would be rather hard to define exactly this complex assemblage of elements of different orders which make up what is called a civilization, but even so

4. The word 'materialism' was invented by Berkeley, who only used it to designate belief in the reality of matter; materialism in its modern sense, that is to say the theory that nothing exists but matter, originates only with La Mettrie and Holbach; it should not be confused with mechanism, several examples of which are to be found even among the ancients.

everyone knows fairly well what is to be understood by it. We do not even think it necessary to try to enclose in a rigid formula either the general characteristics of civilization as a whole, or the special characteristics of some particular civilization; that is a somewhat artificial process, and we greatly distrust these narrow 'pigeon-holes' that the systematic turn of mind delights in. Just as there are 'civilizations', there are also, during the development of each of them, or for certain more or less limited periods of this development, 'progresses' which, far from influencing everything indiscriminately, affect only this or that particular domain; in fact this is only another way of saying that a civilization develops along certain lines and in a certain direction; but just as there are progresses, there are also regresses, and sometimes the two are brought about at one and the same time in different domains. We insist, then, that all this is eminently relative; if the same words are accepted in an absolute sense they no longer correspond to any reality, and it is then that they come to represent these new ideas which have existed for barely a century and a half, and then only in the West. Certainly 'Progress' and 'Civilization', with capital letters, may be very effective in certain sentences, as hollow as they are rhetorical, most suitable for imposing on a mob, for which words are rather a substitute for thought than a means of expressing it, thus it is that these two words play one of the most important parts in the battery of formulas which those 'in control' today use to accomplish their strange task of collective suggestion without which the mentality that is characteristic of modern times would indeed be short-lived. In this respect we doubt whether enough notice has ever been given to the analogy, which is nonetheless striking, between, for example, the actions of the orator and the hypnotist (and that of the animal-tamer belongs equally to the same class); here is another subject for the psychologists to study, and we call their attention to it in passing. No doubt the power of words has been more or less made use of in other times than ours; but what has no parallel is this gigantic collective hallucination by which a whole section of humanity has come to take the vainest fantasies for incontestable realities; and, among these idols of modern worship, the two which we are at the moment denouncing are perhaps the most pernicious of all.

We must revert again to the birth of the idea of progress, or rather of indefinite progress, to exclude these particular and limited progresses whose existence we have not the least desire to dispute. It is probably in the writings of Pascal that the first trace of this idea is to be found, applied moreover to a single point of view: the passage[5] is the well-known one where he compares humanity to 'one and the same man who always exists and who learns continually during the course of the centuries,' and where he shows evidence of that anti-traditional spirit that is one of the peculiarities of the modern West, declaring that 'those whom we call ancient were actually new in everything,' and that consequently their opinions have very little weight; and in this respect Pascal had at least one predecessor, since Bacon had already said with the same implication: *Antiquitas saeculi, juventus mundi.* The unconscious sophism that such a conception is based on is easy to see: it consists in supposing that humanity as a whole develops continuously along the same lines: the false simplicity in this outlook is quite blatant, since it is in contradiction with all the known facts. Indeed, history shows us, at every epoch, civilizations independent of one another, often divergent, some of which are born and develop while others grow decadent and die, or are annihilated at one blow in some cataclysm; and the new civilizations by no means always gather in the inheritance of the old ones. Who would venture to maintain seriously, for example, that the West of today has benefited, however indirectly, by the knowledge which the Chaldeans or the Egyptians had accumulated, let alone some civilizations that have not even come down to us in name? But there is no need to go back so far into the past, as there are sciences that were studied in Europe during the Middle Ages, and of which there remains no longer the least notion. If Pascal's idea of 'collective' man (whom he very improperly calls 'universal man') is to be kept, it must then be said that, if there are periods in which he learns, there are others in which he forgets, or rather, that while he learns certain things he forgets others; but the reality is even more complex, since there are simultaneously, as there have always been, civilizations which do not penetrate one another, but remain

5. Fragment of *Traité du Vide.*

unknown to each other: that is indeed, today more than ever, the situation of the Western civilization with regard to the Eastern ones. All told, the origin of the illusion expressed by Pascal is simply this: the people of the West, starting from the Renaissance, took to considering themselves exclusively as the heirs and carriers-on of Greco-Roman antiquity, and to misunderstanding or ignoring all the rest; that is what we call the 'classical prejudice'. The humanity that Pascal speaks of begins with the Greeks, continues with the Romans, and then there is a discontinuity in its existence corresponding to the Middle Ages, in which he can only see, like all the people of the seventeenth century, a period of sleep; then at last comes the Renaissance, that is, the awakening of this humanity, which, from then on, is to be composed of all the European peoples together. It is a grotesque error, and one that indicates a strangely limited mental horizon, consisting, as it does, in taking the part for the whole. Its influence may be found in more than one sphere: the psychologists, for example, usually confine their observations to a single type of humanity, the modern Westerner, and stretch inadmissibly the results so obtained even to the pretension of drawing from them, without exception, the characteristics of man in general.

It is essential to remember that Pascal only visualized an intellectual progress, within the limits of his and his time's conception of intellectuality; it was toward the very end of the eighteenth century that there appeared, with Turgot and Condorcet, the idea of progress extended to all branches of activity; and this idea was then so far from being generally accepted that Voltaire eagerly set about ridiculing it. We cannot think of giving here the complete history of the different modifications which this same idea underwent during the nineteenth century, and of the pseudo-scientific complications in which it was involved when, under the name of 'evolution', people sought to apply it, not only to humanity, but to the whole animal world. Evolutionism, despite many more or less important divergencies, has become a real official dogma: it is taught like a law which it is forbidden to discuss, when actually it is nothing more than the most idle and ill-founded of all hypotheses; this applies *a fortiori* to the conception of human progress, which is now taken for granted as being no more than a particular case of 'evolution'. But

before reaching this position there were many ups and downs, and, even among the champions of progress, there were some who could not help making one or two rather serious reservations: Auguste Comte, who had started by being a disciple of Saint-Simon, admitted a progress that was indefinite in duration but not in extent; for him the march of humanity might be represented by a curve with an asymptote which it approaches indefinitely without ever reaching, so that the extent of progress possible, that is to say the distance from the present state to the ideal state, represented by the distance from the curve to the asymptote, grows perpetually less. Nothing is easier than to show the confusions that underlie the fantastic theory which Comte named the 'law of the three states', and of which the chief consists in supposing that the sole object of all possible knowledge is the explanation of natural phenomena. Like Bacon and Pascal he compared the ancients to children, and others, more recently, have thought to improve on this by likening them to the savages, whom they call 'primitives', but whom we on the contrary consider degenerates.[6] Apart from these there are some who, unable to help noticing the ups and downs in what they know of the history of mankind, have come to talk of a 'rhythm of progress'; it would be perhaps simpler and more logical in these circumstances to stop talking about progress altogether, but, since the modern dogma must be safe-guarded at all costs, progress is supposed to exist nonetheless as the final result of all the partial progresses and all the regresses. These reservations and disagreements ought to serve as food for reflection, but very few seem to have realized this. The different schools can come to no mutual agreement, but it remains understood that progress and evolution must be admitted; without these it seems that one would lose all right to the title of 'civilized man'.

6. Despite the influence of the 'sociological school', there are, even in 'official circles', some authorities who agree with us on this point, notably Georges Foucart, who, in the introduction of his work entitled *Histoire des religions et Methode comparative*, upholds the theory of 'degeneration', and mentions several of its supporters. In connection with this, Foucart criticizes admirably the 'sociological school' and its methods, and he very properly declares that 'totemism or sociology should not be confused with serious ethnology.'

There is still another point that is worth noticing: if one examines which branches of the pretended progress most often come up for consideration today, which ones are imagined by our contemporaries to be the starting-point of all the rest, it will be seen that they only amount to two: 'material progress' and 'moral progress'. These are the only ones mentioned by Jacques Bainville as included in the current idea of 'civilization', and we think he was right. To be sure, there are some who still talk about 'intellectual progress', but for them this phrase is essentially a synonym of 'scientific progress', and it applies above all to the development of the experimental sciences and of their applications. Here again there comes to light this degradation of intelligence which ends in identifying it with the most limited and inferior of all its uses—experimenting upon matter for solely practical purposes. To be accurate, the so-called 'intellectual progress' is thus no more than 'material progress' itself, and, if intelligence was only that, Bergson's definition of it would have to be accepted. Actually it never enters the heads of most Westerners of today that intelligence is anything else; for them it no longer amounts even to reason in its Cartesian sense, but to the lowest part of this reason, to its most elementary functions, to what always remains closely connected with this world of the senses which they have made the one exclusive field of their activity. For those who know that there is something else and who persist in giving words their true meaning, there can be no question in our time of 'intellectual progress', but on the contrary of decadence, or to be still more accurate, of intellectual ruin; and, because there are some lines of development which are incompatible, it is precisely this which is the forfeit paid for 'material progress', the only progress whose existence during the last centuries is a real fact: it may be called scientific progress if one insists, but only in an extremely limited meaning of the word, and a progress that is very much more industrial than scientific. Material development and pure intellectuality go in opposite directions; he who sinks himself in the one becomes necessarily further removed from the other. It should be carefully noted that we say here intellectuality and not rationality, for the domain of reason is only intermediate, as it were, between that of the senses and that of the higher intellect: though reason

receives a reflection of intellect, even while denying it and believing itself to be the human being's highest faculty, it is always from the evidence of the senses that the notions which it works on are drawn. In other words, what is general, the proper object of reason and consequently of the science which is reason's work, though it is not of the sensible order of things, proceeds nonetheless from what is individual, which is perceived by the senses; it may be said to be beyond the sensible, but not above it; it is only the universal, the object of pure intellect, that is transcendent, and in the light of the universal even the general itself becomes one with the individual. That is the fundamental distinction between metaphysical knowledge and scientific knowledge, such as we have shown it to be more fully elsewhere;[7] and, if we call attention to it again here, it is because the total absence of the former and the disordered development of the latter are the most striking characteristics of the Western civilization in its present state.

As for the conception of 'moral progress', it represents the other predominant factor in the modern mentality, that is, sentimentality. The presence of this element does not serve in the least to make us modify the judgment which we formulated in saying that the Western civilization is altogether material. We are well aware that some people seek to oppose the domain of sentiment to that of matter, to make the development of the one a sort of counterbalance against the spread of the other, and to take for their ideal an equilibrium as settled as possible between these two complementary elements. Such is perhaps, when all is said and done, the thought of the intuitionists who, associating intelligence inseparably with matter, hope to deliver themselves from it with the help of a rather vaguely defined instinct. Such is still more certainly the thought of the pragmatists, who make utility a substitute for truth and consider it at one and the same time under its material and moral aspects; and we see here too how fully pragmatism expresses the particular tendencies of the modern world, and above all of the Anglo-Saxon world, which is one of its most typical portions. Indeed, materialism and sentimentality, far from being in opposition, can scarcely exist one

7. *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, pt 2, chap. 5.

without the other, and they both attain side by side to their maximum development; the proof of this lies in America, where, as we have had occasion to remark in our books on Theosophism and Spiritualism, the worst pseudo-mystical extravagances come to birth and spread with incredible ease at the very time when industrialism and the passion for 'business' are being carried to a pitch that borders on madness; when things have reached this state it is no longer an equilibrium which is set up between the two tendencies, but two disequilibriums side by side which aggravate each other, instead of counterbalancing. It is easy to see the cause of this phenomenon: where intellectuality is reduced to a minimum, it is quite natural that sentiment should assume the mastery; and sentiment, in itself, is very close to the material order of things: there is nothing, in all that concerns psychology, more narrowly dependent on organism, and, in spite of Bergson, it is obviously sentiment and not intellect that is bound up with matter. The intuitionists may reply, as we are well aware, that intelligence, such as they conceive it, is bound up with inorganic matter (it is always Cartesian mechanics and its derivations that they have in mind) and sentiment with living matter, which seems to them to rank higher in the scale of existences. But whether inorganic or living, it is always matter, and in its domain there can never be any but sensible things; it is indeed impossible for the modern mentality, and for the philosophers who represent it, to escape from this limitation. Strictly speaking, if it be insisted that there are two different tendencies here, then one must be assigned to matter and one to life, and this distinction may serve as a fairly satisfactory way of classing the great superstitions of our epoch; but we repeat, they both belong to the same order of things and cannot really be dissociated from each other; they are on one same plane, and not superposed in hierarchy. It follows then that the 'moralism'[8] of our contemporaries is really nothing but the necessary complement of their practical materialism; and it would be an utter illusion to seek to exalt one to the detriment of the other

8. We say practical materialism to denote a tendency and to distinguish it from philosophic materialism, which is a theory, and on which this tendency is not necessarily dependent.

because, going necessarily together, they both develop simultaneously along the same lines, which are those of what is termed, by common accord, 'civilization'.

We have just seen why the conceptions of 'material progress' and 'moral progress' are inseparable, and why our contemporaries are almost as indefatigably engrossed with the latter as they are with the former. We have in no way contested the existence of 'material progress', but only its importance: we maintain that it is not worth the intellectual loss which it causes, and it is impossible to think differently without being altogether ignorant of true intellectuality. Now, what is to be thought of the reality of 'moral progress'? That is a question which it is scarcely possible to discuss seriously, because, in this realm of sentiment, everything depends on individual appreciation and preferences; everyone gives the name 'progress' to what is in conformity with his own inclinations, and, in a word, it is impossible to say that one is right any more than another. Those whose tendencies are in harmony with those of their time cannot be other than satisfied with the present state of things, and this is what they express after their fashion when they say that this epoch marks a progress over those that preceded it; but often this satisfaction of their sentimental aspirations is only relative, because the sequence of events is not always what they would have wished, and that is why they suppose that the progress will be continued during future epochs. The facts come sometimes to belie those who are convinced of the present reality of 'moral progress', according to the most usual conception of it; but all they do is modify their ideas a little in this respect, or refer the realization of their ideal to a more or less remote future, and they, too, might crawl out of their difficulties by talking about a 'rhythm of progress'. Besides this, by a much simpler solution, they usually strive to forget the lesson of experience: such are the incorrigible dreamers who, at each new war, do not fail to prophesy that it will be the last. The belief in indefinite progress is, all told, nothing more than the most ingenuous and the grossest of all kinds of 'optimism'; whatever forms this belief may take, it is always sentimental in essence, even when it is concerned with 'material progress'. If it be objected that we ourselves have recognized the existence of this progress, we reply that we have only done

so as far as the facts warrant, which does not in the least imply an admission that it should, or even that it can, continue its course indefinitely; furthermore, as we are far from thinking it the best thing in the world, instead of calling it progress we would rather call it quite simply development; it is not in itself that the word progress offends us, but because of the idea of 'value' that has come almost invariably to be attached to it. This brings us to another point: there is indeed also a reality which cloaks itself under the so-called 'moral progress', or which, in other words, keeps up the illusion of it; this reality is the development of sentimentalism, which, whether one likes it or not, does actually exist in the modern world, just as incontestably as does the development of industry and commerce (and we have said why one does not go without the other). This development, in our eyes excessive and abnormal, cannot fail to seem a progress to those who put feelings above everything; and it may perhaps be said that in speaking of mere preferences, as we did not long ago, we have robbed ourselves in advance of the right to confute them. But we have done nothing of the kind: what we said then applies to sentiment, and to sentiment taken alone, in its variations from one individual to another: if sentiment, considered in general, is to be put into its proper place in relation to intelligence, the case is quite different, because then there is a hierarchy to be observed. The modern world has precisely reversed the natural relations between the different orders of things: once again, it is depreciation of the intellectual order (and even absence of pure intellectuality), and exaggeration of the material and the sentimental orders, which all go together to make the Western civilization of today an anomaly, not to say a monstrosity.

That is how things look when considered without any prejudice; and that is how they are seen by the most qualified representatives of the Eastern civilizations who view them quite without bias, for bias is always something sentimental, not intellectual, and their point of view is purely intellectual. If the people of the West have some difficulty in understanding this attitude, it is because they are incorrigibly prone to judge others according to themselves, and to attribute to them their own concerns, as well as their own ways of thinking, and their mental horizon is so narrow that they do not

even take into account the possibility of other ones existing; hence their utter failure to understand all the Eastern conceptions. This failure is not reciprocated: the Easterners, when they are faced with Western science, and when they are willing to give themselves the trouble, have scarcely any difficulty in penetrating and understanding its special branches, because they are used to far wider and deeper speculations, and he who can do the greater can do the less; but in general they feel scarcely any temptation to devote themselves to this work, which, for the sake of things that in their eyes are insignificant, might make them lose sight of, or at least neglect, what is for them the essential. Western science means analysis and dispersion; Eastern knowledge means synthesis and concentration; but we shall have occasion to come back to this point. In any case, what the Westerners call civilization, the others would call barbarity, because it is precisely lacking in the essential, that is to say a principle of a higher order. By what right do Westerners claim to impose on everyone their own likes and dislikes? Besides, they should not forget that among earthly mankind taken as a whole they form only a minority; of course, this consideration of number proves nothing in our eyes, but it ought to make some impression on people who have invented 'universal suffrage', and who believe in its efficacy. If they merely took pleasure in affirming their imagined superiority, the illusion would only do harm to themselves; but their most terrible offence is their proselytizing fury: in them the spirit of conquest goes under the disguise of 'moralist' pretexts, and it is in the name of 'liberty' that they would force the whole world to imitate them! Most astonishing of all, they genuinely imagine in their infatuation that they enjoy prestige among all other peoples; because they are dreaded as a brutal force is dreaded, they believe themselves to be admired; when a man is in danger of being crushed by an avalanche, does it follow that he is smitten with respect and admiration for it? The only impression that, for example, mechanical inventions make on most Easterners is one of deep repulsion; certainly it all seems to them far more harmful than beneficial, and if they find themselves obliged to accept certain things which the present epoch has made necessary, they do so in the hope of future riddance; these things do not interest them, and they will never really interest them. What

Westerners call progress is for nothing but change and instability; and the need for change, so characteristic of modern times, is in their eyes a mark of manifest inferiority: he who has reached a state of equilibrium no longer feels this need, just as he who has found no longer seeks. In these circumstances it is indeed difficult to understand one another, since the same facts give rise, on this side and on that, to interpretations that are diametrically opposed. What if the Easterners also sought, after the manner of the West, and by its methods, to impose their own outlook? But one may rest assured that nothing is more contrary to their nature than propaganda, and that such considerations are quite foreign to them. Without preaching 'liberty', they let others think what they will, and are even indifferent as to what is thought of them. All they ask, in fact, is to be left in peace, but that is just what the people of the West refuse to allow them, and it must be remembered that they went to seek them out in their own home, and have behaved there in a way that might well exasperate the most peaceful of men. We are thus faced with a state of affairs that cannot last indefinitely; there is only one way for the West to make itself bearable: this is, to use the customary language of colonial politics, that it should give up 'assimilation' and practice instead 'association' in every domain; but that alone would already mean some modification of their mentality, and the understanding of at least one or two of the ideas which form part of our present exposition.

2

The Superstition of Science

The civilization of the modern West has, among other pretensions, that of being eminently 'scientific'; it would be as well to make it a little clearer how this term is to be understood, but that is not what is usually done, for it is one of those words to which our contemporaries seem to attach a sort of mysterious power, independent of their meaning. 'Science', with a capital letter, like 'Progress' and 'Civilization', like 'Right', 'Justice', and 'Liberty', is another of those entities that are better left undefined, and that run the risk of losing all their prestige as soon as they are inspected a little too closely. In this way all the so-called 'conquests' which the modern world is so proud of amount to high-sounding words behind which there is nothing, or else something insignificant: we have called it collective suggestion, and the illusion which it leads to, kept up as it is and shared by so many people, cannot possibly be spontaneous. Perhaps one day we will try to throw a little light on this side of the question. But for the moment that is not what we are directly concerned with. We simply note that the modern West believes in the ideas which we have just mentioned, if indeed they may be called ideas, however this belief may have come to it. They are not really ideas, because many of those who pronounce these words with the greatest conviction have in mind nothing very clear that corresponds to them; actually there is nothing there in most cases but the expression—one might even say the personification—of more or less vague sentimental aspirations. These are veritable idols, the divinities of a sort of 'lay religion', which is not clearly defined, no doubt, and which cannot be, but which has nonetheless a very real

existence: it is not religion in the proper sense of the word, but it is what pretends to take its place, and what better deserves to be called 'counter-religion'. The origin of this state of things can be traced back to the very beginning of the modern epoch, where the anti-traditional spirit showed itself at once by the proclaiming of 'free inquiry', or in other words, the absence in the doctrinal order of any principle higher than individual opinions. The inevitable result was intellectual anarchy; hence the indefinite multiplicity of religious and pseudo-religious sects, philosophic systems aiming above all at originality, and scientific theories as pretentious as they are ephemeral, in short, unbelievable chaos which is, however, dominated by a certain unity, there being beyond doubt a specifically modern outlook which is the source of it all, though this unity is altogether negative since it is nothing more or less than an absence of principle, expressed by that indifference with regard to truth and error which ever since the eighteenth century has been called 'tolerance'. Let our meaning be quite clear: we have no intention of blaming practical tolerance as applied to individuals, but only theoretic tolerance, which claims to be applied to ideas as well and to recognize the same rights for them all, which if taken logically can only imply a rooted skepticism. Moreover we cannot help noticing that, like all propagandists, the apostles of tolerance, truth to tell, are very often the most intolerant of men. This is what has in fact happened, and it is strangely ironical: those who wished to overthrow all dogma have created for their own use, we will not say a new dogma, but a caricature of dogma, which they have succeeded in imposing on the Western world in general; in this way there have been established, under the pretext of 'freedom of thought', the most chimerical beliefs that have ever been seen at any time, under the form of these different idols, of which we have just singled out some of the more important.

Of all the superstitions preached by those very people who profess that they never stop inveighing against 'superstition', that of 'science' and 'reason' is the only one which does not seem, at first sight, to be based on sentiment; but there is a kind of rationalism that is nothing more than sentimentalism disguised, as is shown only too well by the passion with which its champions uphold it, and by the

hatred they evince for whatever goes against their inclinations or passes their comprehension. Besides, since rationalism in any case corresponds to a lessening of intellectuality, it is natural that its development should go hand in hand with that of sentimentalism, as we explained in the last chapter; but either one of these two tendencies may be more particularly represented by certain individualities or by certain currents of thought, and, by reason of the more or less exclusive and systematic terms in which they have come to be clothed, there may even be apparent conflicts between them, which hide their fundamental fellowship from the eyes of superficial onlookers. Modern rationalism begins, in short, with Descartes (it had even had some forerunners in the sixteenth century) and its tracks can be followed throughout all modern philosophy, no less than in the domain which is properly speaking scientific. The present reaction of intuitionism and pragmatism against this rationalism gives us an example of one of these conflicts, and we have seen meanwhile that Bergson entirely accepts the Cartesian definition of intelligence; it is not the nature of intelligence that is questioned, but only its supremacy. In the eighteenth century there was also antagonism between the rationalism of the encyclopedists and the sentimentalism of Rousseau; both these, however, served equally to further the revolutionary movement, which shows that each of them has its place in the negative unity of the anti-traditional outlook. If we cite this example in connection with the preceding one, it is not that we attribute any hidden political motive to Bergson; but we cannot help thinking of the use made of his ideas in certain syndicalist circles, especially in England, while in other circles of the same kind the 'scientific' spirit is held more in honor than ever. Indeed, one of the great tricks of those who 'control' the modern mentality seems to consist, as it were, in brewing a potion for the public, now of rationalism, now of sentimentalism, and now of both together, as occasion demands, and their knack for holding a balance between the two shows that they are much more concerned with their own political interests than with the intellectuality of their patient. It is true that this cleverness may not always be calculated, and we have no desire to question the sincerity of any scientist, historian, or philosopher; but they are often only the apparent

'controllers', and they may be themselves controlled or influenced without in the least realizing it. Besides, the use made of their ideas does not always correspond with their own intentions, and it would be wrong to make them directly responsible, or to blame them for not having foreseen certain more or less remote consequences. But provided that these ideas conform to one or the other of these two tendencies, they may be used in the way which we have just described; and, given the state of intellectual anarchy in which the West is plunged, each event would seem to suggest that every possible advantage is being taken of the disorder itself and of all that contributes to the chaotic agitation for the realizing of a rigidly determined plan. We do not want to insist on this too much, but we find it difficult not to revert to it from time to time, for we cannot admit that a whole race may be purely and simply smitten with a sort of madness which has lasted for several centuries, and there must be something after all which gives a meaning to modern civilization: we do not believe in chance, and we are sure that every existing thing must have a cause; those who think differently are at liberty to set aside such considerations.

Now, taking the two chief tendencies of the modern mentality in turn to examine them better, and leaving for the moment sentimentalism to return to it later, we may ask ourselves this question: what exactly is this 'science' that the West is so infatuated with? A Hindu, summing up most concisely the opinion of all the Easterners who have come across it, has said most justly: 'Western science is ignorant knowledge.'[1] This expression is in no way a contradiction in terms and this is what it means: it is, if one insists, a knowledge that has some reality, since it is valid and effective in one relative domain; but it is a hopelessly limited knowledge, ignorant of the essential, a knowledge which, like everything else that belongs in particular to Western civilization, lacks a principle. Science, as conceived by our contemporaries, is nothing more than the study of sensible phenomena, and this study is undertaken and followed out

1. 'The Miscarriage of Life in the West', by P. Ramanathan, Solicitor-General of Ceylon: *Hibbert Journal*, VII, 1; quoted by Benjamin Kidd, *The Science of Power*, p95.

in such a way that it cannot, we insist, be attached to any principle of a higher order; it is true that by resolutely ignoring everything that lies beyond its scope, it makes itself fully independent in its own domain, but this vaunted independence is only made possible by the limitations of science itself. Not content with that, it goes even to the length of denying what it is ignorant of, because only in this way can it avoid admitting this ignorance: or, if it does not venture in so many words to deny the possible existence of what does not come within its range, it at least denies all possibility of knowing such things, which amounts to the same thing, and it has the pretension of comprising in itself everything that can be known. Starting often unconsciously from a false assumption, the 'scientists' imagine, as did Auguste Comte, that man has never aimed at knowing anything other than an explanation of natural phenomena; we say unconsciously, because they are evidently incapable of understanding that it is possible to go further, and it is not for this that we blame them, but only for their pretension of refusing to allow others the possession or the use of faculties which they themselves lack. They are like blind men who deny, if not light itself, at least the existence of sight, for the sole reason that they are without it. To declare that there is not only an unknown but also an 'unknowable' (to use Spencer's word), and to turn an intellectual infirmity into a barrier which no one may pass—that is something whose like was never seen or heard before; and it is equally unheard of for men to turn a declaration of ignorance into a program of thought and a profession of faith, and quite openly to label a so-called doctrine with it under the name of 'agnosticism'. And these men, be it noted, are not skeptics, and do not wish to be skeptics: if they were, there would be a certain logic in their attitude, which might make it excusable; but they are, on the contrary, the most enthusiastic believers in 'science', the most fervent admirers of 'reason'. It might well be considered rather strange to put reason above everything, to profess a veritable worship for it, and to proclaim at the same time that it is essentially limited; that is, in fact, somewhat contradictory, and though we note it, we do not undertake to explain it; this attitude points to a mentality which is not in the least our own, and it is not for us to justify the contradictions that seem inherent in 'relativism' in all its forms. We, too, say

that reason is limited and relative: but, far from making it the whole of intelligence, we look on it only as one of its inferior parts, and we see in intelligence other possibilities that go far beyond those of reason. It seems then that modern Europeans, or at least some of them, are very willing to acknowledge their ignorance, and the rationalists of today do so perhaps more readily than their predecessors, but it is only on condition that no one has the right to know what they themselves do not; the pretension of limiting what is, or just of limiting knowledge fundamentally, shows in either case the spirit of negation which is so characteristic of the modern world. This spirit of negation is nothing other than the systematic spirit, for a system is essentially a closed conception; and it has come to be identified with the spirit of philosophy itself, especially since Kant, who, wishing to shut up all knowledge within the bounds of relativity, ventured to declare in so many words that 'philosophy is not a means of extending knowledge but a discipline for limiting it,'[2] which amounts to saying that the chief function of philosophers is to impose on all the narrow limits of their own understanding. That is why modern philosophy ends by almost entirely substituting 'criticism' or the 'theory of knowledge' for knowledge itself; that is also why many of its representatives no longer claim for it a higher title than 'scientific philosophy', or, in other words, mere coordination of the most general results of science, whose domain is the only one it recognizes as being accessible to intelligence. In these circumstances philosophy and science are not to be distinguished, and in actual fact, since the birth of rationalism, they can only have had one and the same object, they have only represented a single order of knowledge, they have been animated by the self-same spirit: it is this that we call, not the scientific spirit, but the 'scientistic' spirit.

We must insist a little on this last distinction: what we wish to indicate by it is that we see no essential harm in the development of certain sciences, even if we find that far too much importance is given them; it is only a very relative knowledge, but it is nonetheless a knowledge, and it is right that everyone should turn his intellectual activity to what suits his natural talents and the means at his

2. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, ed. Hartenstein, p256.

disposal. What we object to is the exclusiveness, we might say the sectarianism, of those who are so intoxicated by the lengths to which these sciences have been stretched that they refuse to admit the existence of anything apart from them, and maintain that, to be valid, every speculation must be submitted to the methods that are peculiar to these same sciences, as if these methods, created for the study of certain fixed objects, were universally applicable. It is true that their conception of universality is something very limited, which certainly does not pass beyond the domain of contingency, but these 'scientists' would be most astonished if told that, without even leaving this domain, there is a host of things which cannot be attained by their methods and which notwithstanding may be made the object of sciences quite different from the ones they know, but no less real and often more interesting in many respects. It seems that people today have arbitrarily accepted, in the domain of scientific knowledge, a certain number of fields, which they have frenziedly set about studying to the exclusion of all the rest and on the assumption that the rest is non-existent; and it is quite natural, and not in the least surprising or admirable, that they should have given these particular sciences which they have so cultivated a much larger development than could men who did not attach anything like the same importance to them, who often scarcely even bothered about them, and who were in any case concerned with many other things which seemed to them more important. We are thinking above all of the considerable development of the experimental sciences, a domain where the modern West clearly excels and where no one would dream of contesting its superiority which, moreover, as the Easterners see it, is a scarcely enviable one for the very reason that it could only be purchased at the expense of forgetting all that they hold truly worthy of interest. However, we have no hesitation in stating that there are sciences, even experimental ones, of which the modern West has not the least idea. Such sciences exist in the East, among those which we call 'traditional sciences'. Even in the West there were also, during the Middle Ages, such sciences, altogether equivalent in some respects; and these sciences, some of which even give rise to undeniably efficient practical applications, are carried out by means of investigations altogether unknown to

the 'authorities' of modern Europe. This is certainly not the place for us to enlarge on the subject, but we should at least explain why we say that certain branches of scientific knowledge have a traditional basis, and what we mean by this; and by doing so we shall in fact be showing, still more clearly than we have done so far, what Western science lacks.

We have said that one of the special features of this Western science is its claim to be entirely independent and autonomous; and this claim can only be upheld by systematically ignoring all knowledge of a higher order than scientific knowledge, or better still by formally denying it. What is above science in the necessary hierarchy of knowledge is metaphysics, which is pure and transcendent intellectual knowledge, while by its very definition science is only rational knowledge. Metaphysics is essentially supra-rational; it must be that, or else not be at all. Now rationalism consists, not in simply stating that reason has some value—which only the skeptics contest—but in maintaining that there is nothing above it, or, in other words, that there is no knowledge possible beyond scientific knowledge; thus rationalism necessarily implies the negation of metaphysics. Almost all modern philosophers are rationalists, more or less narrowly and more or less outspokenly. And, among those who are not, there is only sentimentalism and voluntarism, which is no less anti-metaphysical, because having reached this state, if they admit anything other than reason, it is below instead of above reason that they look. True intellectualism is at least as remote from rationalism as modern intuitionism can be, but it is so in exactly the inverse direction. In these circumstances, if a modern philosopher claims to be concerned with metaphysics, one may be sure that what he so names has absolutely nothing in common with true metaphysics, and such is indeed the case. We can only allow these preoccupations the title of 'pseudo-metaphysics', and if nonetheless some valid considerations are occasionally to be found among them, they belong really to the scientific order pure and simple. The general features, then, of characteristically modern thought are these: complete absence of metaphysical knowledge, negation of all knowledge that is not scientific, and arbitrary limitation of scientific knowledge itself to certain particular domains, excluding the rest. Such is the

depth of intellectual degradation to which the West has sunk since it left those paths that the rest of mankind follows as a matter of course.

Metaphysics is the knowledge of the universal principles on which all things necessarily depend, directly or indirectly; in the absence of metaphysics, any other knowledge, of whatever order it may be, is literally lacking in principle, and if by that it gains a little in independence (not as a right, but as a matter of fact), it loses much more in scope and depth. That is why Western science is, as it were, all on the surface. While scattering its energies among countless fragments of knowledge, and losing its way among the innumerable details of fact, it learns nothing about the true nature of things, which it declares to be inaccessible in order to justify its powerlessness in this respect; thus its interest is much more practical than speculative. If there are sometimes attempts to unify this eminently analytical learning, they are purely artificial and are never based on anything but more or less wild suppositions; and they all collapse one after the other, until it seems that no scientific theory of any general bearing can last more than half a century at the most. Besides, the Western idea which would make synthesis a sort of result and conclusion of analysis is radically false. The truth is that a synthesis worthy of the name can never be reached by analysis, because one belongs to one order of things and the other to another. By its very nature, analysis may be carried out indefinitely, if its field of action is expansive enough, without one's having got any nearer to a general view over the whole field; it is still less surprising that it should be utterly ineffectual in establishing a connection with principles of a higher order. The analytical character of modern science is shown by the ceaseless growth in the number of 'specialities' the dangers of which August Comte himself could not help pointing out. This 'specialization', so gloried in by certain sociologists under the name of 'division of labor', is the best and surest way of acquiring this 'intellectual shortsightedness' which seems to be among the qualifications demanded of the perfect 'scientist' and without which, moreover, 'scientism' itself would have scarcely any hold. And the 'specialists', once brought outside their own domain, generally show themselves to be unbelievably ingenuous; nothing is easier

than to impose on them, and this is what contributes in good part to the success of the most idiotic theories, provided that care is taken to call them 'scientific'. The most idle suppositions, like that of evolution for example, take the rank of 'laws' and are held for proven; and though this success is only temporary, their riddance means that their place has been taken by something else which is always accepted with equal readiness. False syntheses, which are bent on extracting the superior from the inferior (a strange transposition of the conception of democracy), can never be anything more than hypothetical: true synthesis, on the contrary, starting from principles, partakes of their certainty; but it is of course true principles which must be the starting-point, and not mere philosophic assumptions in the manner of Descartes. In short it may be said that science, in disavowing the principles and in refusing to reattach itself to them, robs itself both of the highest guarantee and of the surest direction that it could have; there is no longer anything valid in it except knowledge of details, and as soon as it seeks to rise one degree higher, it becomes dubious and vacillating. Another consequence of what we have just said about the relations between analysis and synthesis is that the development of science, as the moderns understand it, does not really extend its domain; the amount of fragmentary knowledge may increase indefinitely within this domain, not through deeper penetration, but through division and subdivision carried out always more and more minutely; it is indeed the science of matter and multitude. Besides, even if there should be a real extension, as may happen exceptionally, it would always be within the same order and would not enable this science to rise any higher; in its present state it is separated from its principles by an abyss which, far from being bridgeable, cannot even be made the least little fraction less of an abyss.

When we say that the sciences, even experimental sciences, have in the East a traditional basis, we mean that, unlike Western ones, they are always attached to certain principles; these are never lost sight of, and what is contingent seems only worth studying in that it is a consequence and outward manifestation of something that belongs to a higher order. True, there remains nonetheless a profound distinction between metaphysical knowledge and scientific

knowledge, but there is not an absolute discontinuity between them such as is to be noticed in the present state of scientific knowledge in the West. We can take an example even within the Western world, if we consider all the distance that separates the standpoint of ancient and medieval cosmology from that of physics as understood by the moderns; never, until the present epoch, had the study of the sensible world been regarded as self-sufficient; never would the science of this changing and ephemeral multiplicity have been judged truly worthy of the name of knowledge, unless the means had been found of connecting it, in some degree or other, with something stable and permanent. According to the ancient conception, which Easterners have always adhered to, a science was less esteemed for itself than for the degree in which it expressed after its own fashion and represented within a certain order of things a reflection of the higher immutable truth which everything of any reality necessarily partakes of; and, as the features of this truth were incarnated, as it were, in the idea of tradition, all science appeared as an extension of the traditional doctrine itself, as one of its applications, secondary and contingent no doubt, accessory and not essential, constituting an inferior knowledge, but still a true knowledge nonetheless, since it kept a link with that supreme knowledge which belongs to the order of pure intellect. It is clear that this conception is absolutely irreconcilable with the gross practical naturalism which shuts up our contemporaries within the sole domain of contingency—one may even say, to be more exact, within a narrow portion of this domain;[3] and as the Easterners, we repeat, have not varied in this conception and cannot do so without denying the principles on which their civilization is based, the two mentalities appear to be decidedly incompatible. But since it is the West that has changed, and never ceases to change, perhaps a moment will come when its mentality will be modified for the better and become open to a wider understanding, and then this incompatibility will vanish of itself.

3. We say practical naturalism, because this limitation is accepted by people who do not profess naturalism in its more particularly philosophical sense. In just the same way there is a positivist mentality which does not in the least presuppose adherence to positivism as a system.

We think we have shown clearly enough how far the Easterners' appraisal of Western science is justified; and, under these conditions, there is only one thing that can explain the unbounded admiration and superstitious respect that is lavished on this science: this is its perfect harmony with the needs of a purely material civilization. There is, in fact, no question here of disinterested speculation; those minds which are altogether engrossed by outward things are struck by the applications that science gives rise to, and by its above all practical and utilitarian character, and it is especially thanks to the mechanical inventions that the 'scientistic' spirit has had its development. These are the inventions that have aroused, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, a positively delirious enthusiasm, because their objective seems to be the increase of bodily comfort, which is clearly the chief aspiration of the modern world. Moreover, there were thus created unawares in addition more new needs than could be satisfied, so that even from this very relative point of view, progress is most illusory; and, once launched upon this course, it seems no longer possible to stop, as there is always some new want to be supplied. But however that may be, it is these applications, confused with science itself, which more than anything else have made for its credit and prestige. This confusion, which could only arise among people ignorant of what pure speculation is, even in the scientific order, has become so usual that today, on opening no matter what publication, one finds constantly under the name of 'science' what ought properly to be called 'industry'. The typical 'authority' is, in most minds, the engineer, inventor, or constructor of machines. As for scientific theories, they must be considered much more as profiting from this state of mind than as causing it; if those very people who are least capable of understanding them accept them with confidence and receive them as veritable dogma (and the less they understand the more easily they are deluded) it is because they look on them, rightly or wrongly, as closely bound up with these practical inventions which they deem so marvelous. Actually this closeness is much more apparent than real. The more or less inconsistent 'scientistic' hypotheses play no part in these discoveries and these applications, on the interest of which opinions may differ, but which have in any case the merit of

being something effective; and, inversely, all that can be realized in the practical order will never prove the truth of any hypothesis. Besides, in a more general way, there could not, properly speaking, be a verification of an hypothesis by experiment, for it is always possible to find several theories which explain equally well the same facts. Certain hypotheses may be eliminated when they are seen to be in contradiction with the facts, but those that are left remain always mere hypotheses and nothing more; this is not the way that certainties could ever be arrived at. However, for men who accept nothing but hard facts, and who have no other criterion of truth than 'experience', by which they simply mean the noticing of sensible phenomena, there can be no question of going further or of proceeding otherwise, and, for such as these, there are only two attitudes possible: either to take one's tone from the realization that scientific theories are hypothetical and to renounce all certainty higher than mere sensible evidence, or, refusing to admit that they are hypothetical, to believe blindly everything that is taught in the name of 'science'. The former attitude, assuredly more intelligent than the latter (always remembering the limitations of 'scientific' intelligence), is that of certain 'authorities' who, being less ingenuous than the others, refuse to be the dupes of their own or their fellows' hypotheses. Thus, except for what is immediately practical, they arrive at a state of more or less complete skepticism, or at least at a sort of probabilism: it is 'agnosticism' no longer applied simply to what goes beyond the domain of science, but extended even to the scientific order itself. They only emerge from this negative attitude by a more or less conscious pragmatism, having regard, like Henri Poincaré, no longer to the truth of a hypothesis but instead to its convenience. Is that not an admission of incurable ignorance? Meanwhile, the second attitude, which may be called dogmatic, is maintained with more or less sincerity by other 'authorities', but especially by those who believe themselves bound for the needs of education to be affirmative: to appear always sure of oneself and of what one says, to cover up difficulties and uncertainties, and never to express anything in a doubtful manner is indeed the easiest way to make sure of being taken seriously and to acquire authority in one's dealings with a public, that is for the most part incompetent

and incapable of discernment, whether it is pupils that are being addressed, or whether the task in hand is one of popularization. This same attitude is naturally taken up, and this time with incontestable sincerity, by those who receive such an education. It is also commonly the attitude of what is called 'the man in the street', and the 'scientistic' outlook can be seen in all its fullness, with this characteristic blind belief, among men who have only been semi-educated, in circles reigned over by that mentality which is often qualified as 'primary', although this mentality is not confined to those who have had a 'primary' education.

We spoke just now of 'popularization'. This is another thing altogether peculiar to modern civilization, and in it may be seen one of the chief factors of this state of mind that we are trying to describe. It is one of the forms taken by this strange need for propaganda which animates the Western mind, and which can only be explained by the predominant influence of sentiment. No intellectual consideration justifies proselytism, in which the Easterners see nothing but a proof of ignorance and incomprehension; there is a complete difference between simply expounding the truth as one has understood it, with the one care not to disfigure it, and wishing at any price to make others share one's own conviction. Propaganda and popularization are not even possible except to the detriment of the truth: the pretension of putting it 'within everyone's grasp', of making it accessible to all without distinction, necessarily involves diminishing and deforming it, for it is impossible to admit that all men are equally capable of understanding anything. It is not a question of the greater or lesser extent of education, it is a question of 'intellectual horizon', and that is something which cannot be modified, which is inherent in the very nature of each human individual. The chimerical prejudice of 'equality' goes against all the best established facts, in the intellectual order as well as in the physical order; it is the negation of all natural hierarchy, and it is the debasement of all knowledge to the level of the limited understanding of the masses. People will no longer admit anything that passes common comprehension, and, in fact, the scientific and philosophic conceptions of our epoch are, all told, most lamentably mediocre: modern 'authorities' have succeeded only too well in wiping out all that

might have been incompatible with the concern for popularization. Whatever anyone may say, the constitution of any elite cannot be reconciled with the democratic ideal, which demands that one and the same education shall be given to individuals who are most unequally gifted, and who differ widely both in talents and temperament; inevitably the results still continue to vary, in spite of this education, but that is contrary to the intentions of those who instituted it. In any case such a system of teaching is assuredly the most imperfect of all, and the indiscriminate diffusion of scraps of knowledge is always more harmful than beneficial, for it can only bring about a general state of disorder and anarchy. It is such a diffusion that is guarded against by the methods of traditional teaching, as it exists throughout the East, where the very real inconveniences of 'compulsory education' are seen to outweigh by far its imagined benefits. As if it were not already enough that the knowledge available to Westerners contains precious little of the transcendent, even this little is still further diminished in the works of popularization, which only treat of its most inferior aspects, and that too with distortions in order to make them simpler; and these works insist complacently on the most fantastic hypotheses, having the effrontery to give them out as proven truths, and accompanying them with those inept declamations which so please the mob. A half knowledge acquired by such reading, or by an education whose elements are all drawn from hand-books of a like value, is far more injurious than pure and simple ignorance; better for a man to know nothing at all than to have his mind encumbered with false ideas, often ineradicable, especially when they have been inculcated from his earliest years. The ignorant man retains at least the possibility of learning if he is given the opportunity: he may possess a certain natural 'common sense' which, together with the consciousness that he ordinarily has of his own incompetence, is enough to save him from much folly. On the contrary, the man who has been half taught has nearly always a deformed mentality, and what he thinks he knows makes him so self-satisfied that he imagines himself capable of talking about everything, no matter what; he does so at random, and the greater his incompetence the greater his glibness: so simple do all things appear to one who knows nothing!

Besides, even setting aside the evils of popularization itself and considering Western science as a whole and under its most authentic aspects, there remains, in the claim of its promoters to be able to teach it to all without any reserve, a clear sign of mediocrity. In the eyes of the Easterners there can be no great value and no true depth of content in something whose study calls for no particular qualification; and, in fact, Western science is altogether outward and superficial. To characterize it, instead of saying 'ignorant knowledge' we would be willing to say, with very much the same meaning, 'profane knowledge'. There is no real distinction, from this point of view any more than from the others, to be made between philosophy and science. People have sought to define philosophy as 'human wisdom'; indeed it is, but with the strong reserve that it is nothing more than that, a wisdom purely human, in the most limited sense of this word, derived from no element of a higher order than reason; to avoid all uncertainty we would call it also 'profane wisdom', but that amounts to saying that it is not really a wisdom at all, but only the illusory appearance of one. We will not insist here on the consequences of this 'profane' character of all modern Western knowledge; but to show further how superficial and sham this knowledge is, we will call to notice that the methods of teaching in use have the effect of replacing intelligence almost entirely with memory. What is demanded of the pupils, from the time they first go to a primary school to the time they leave the university, is that they should hoard up as much as possible of what is taught them, not that they should assimilate it; those things are especially worked at whose study requires no comprehension; facts are substituted for ideas, and scholarship is commonly mistaken for real knowledge. To promote or to discredit this or that branch of knowledge, this or that method, no more is needed than to declare that it is or is not 'scientific'. What are accounted officially as 'scientific methods' are the most unintelligent methods of learning, methods which exclude everything that is not research after facts for facts' sake down to their most insignificant details; and it is worth noting that the worst abusers under this heading are the 'men of letters'. The prestige of this label 'scientific', even when it is really nothing more than a label, is indeed the triumph of triumphs for the 'scientistic' mind; and as for the respect which is extorted from the masses (including

the so-called 'intellectuals') by the use of a simple word, are we not right in calling it 'the superstition of science'?

Of course 'scientistic' propaganda is not carried on only within the West, under the double form of 'compulsory education' and popularization; it is also rife elsewhere, like all the other varieties of Western proselytism. Everywhere that the Europeans have installed themselves, they have wanted to spread these so-called 'benefits of education', always following the same methods, without the least attempt to adapt them and without it entering their heads that there may be already some other kind of education there. Everything that does not come from them is to be considered as null and void, and 'equality' does not allow different peoples and different races to have their own mentality; moreover, the chief 'advantage' that the imposers of this education expect from it is probably, always and everywhere, the blotting out of the traditional outlook. Likewise, once they are away from home, this 'equality' so dear to Westerners amounts to mere uniformity; the rest of what it implies does not come under the category of 'exportable goods' and only concerns the relations between one Westerner and another, for they believe themselves incomparably superior to all other men, among whom they scarcely make any distinctions: the most barbarous black men and the most cultured Easterners are treated in almost the same way, because they are equally outside the one 'civilization' that has the right to exist. Also, the Europeans usually confine themselves to teaching the most rudimentary fragments of all their knowledge. It is not hard to imagine how these fragments must be appreciated by the Easterners, to whom even what is highest in this knowledge would seem chiefly remarkable for its narrowness, and stamped with a rather gross ingenuousness. As the peoples who have a civilization of their own prove themselves on the whole refractory to this so much boasted education, while the peoples without culture submit to it much more docilely, Westerners are perhaps not far from judging the latter superior to the former; they are prepared to show at least a relative esteem for those whom they look on as susceptible of 'rising' to their level, even though this elevation be considered only possible after some centuries of the regime of compulsory elementary education have passed. Unfortunately, however, what the people of the West call 'rising' would be called by some, as far as they

are concerned, 'sinking'; that is what all true Easterners think, even if they do not say so, and if they prefer, as most often happens, to hedge themselves round with the most disdainful silence, leaving, so little does it matter to them, Western vanity free to interpret their attitude as it pleases.

The Europeans have so high an opinion of their science that they believe its prestige to be irresistible, and they imagine that the other peoples must fall down in admiration before their most insignificant discoveries; this state of mind, which leads them sometimes into strange misunderstandings, is not altogether new, and we have found a rather amusing example of it in Leibnitz. This philosopher, as is known, had planned to establish what he called a 'universal characteristic', that is a sort of generalized algebra, made applicable to the notions of every order, instead of being limited to quantitative notions alone; moreover, this idea had been inspired in him by certain authors of the Middle Ages, especially Raymond Lull and Trithemius. In the course of the studies which he made toward realizing this project, Leibnitz came to be engrossed with the meaning of the ideographic characters that constitute Chinese writing, and more particularly with the symbolical figures which form the basis of the *I Ching*. It will be seen how he understood these last: 'Leibnitz,' says Couturat,

> believed he had found by his binary numeration (a numeration which only employs the signs 0 and 1 and in which he saw the image of creation *ex nihilo*) the interpretation of the characters of Fu Hsi, mysterious and most ancient Chinese symbols, whose meaning was unknown to the European missionaries and to the Chinese themselves.... He proposed to use this interpretation for the propaganda of the Faith in China, seeing that it was fit to give the Chinese a high idea of European science, and to show the accord of this science with the venerable and sacred traditions of Chinese wisdom. He added this interpretation to the exposition of his binary arithmetic which he sent to the Paris Academy of Sciences.[4]

4. Leibnitz, *La Logique*, pp 474–475.

Here, in fact, is the text of the thesis in question:

> What is surprising in this calculus (of binary arithmetic) is that this arithmetic by 0 and 1 happens to contain the mystery of the lines of an ancient king and philosopher named Fohy, who is believed to have lived more than four thousand years ago[5] and whom the Chinese regard as the founder of their Empire and of their sciences. There are several linear figures which are attributed to him, and they are all the outcome of this arithmetic; but it is enough to give here the Figure of eight Cova,[6] as it is called, which passes for fundamental, and to add the explanation, which is clear so long as it be noticed first of all that a whole line signifies unity or 1, and secondly, that a broken line signifies zero or 0. It is perhaps more than a thousand years since the Chinese lost the meaning of the Cova or Lineations of Fohy, and they have made commentaries about it, in which they have sought to give I know not what far-fetched interpretations, so that they have now had to receive the true one from the Europeans. This is how: it is scarcely more than two years since I sent to the Rev. Father Bouvet, a celebrated French Jesuit living at Peking, my way of counting by 0 and 1, and it needed no more to make him realize that it is the key to the figures of Fohy. So, writing to me on November 17, 1701, he sent me this philosopher-prince's great figure, which goes up to 64,[7] and leaves no longer any room for doubting the truth of our interpretation, so that one may say that this Father has deciphered the enigma of Fohy with the aid of what I had communicated to him. And as these figures are perhaps the most

5. The exact date is 3468 BC, according to a chronology based on the precise description of the state of the heavens at that epoch; it should be added that actually the name Fu Hsi serves to designate a whole period of Chinese history.

6. *K'ua* is the Chinese name for 'trigrams', that is figures obtained by assembling in threes, with every possible combination, whole and broken straight lines. Actually the number of figures so obtainable is eight.

7. This reference is to the sixty-four 'hexagrams' of Wen-Wang, that is figures of six lines formed by combining the eight 'trigrams' two by two. Incidentally, Leibnitz's interpretation is quite incapable of explaining, among other things, why these 'hexagrams', as well as the 'trigrams' that they are derived from, are always tabulated in *circular* form.

ancient monument of science in the world, this restitution of their meaning, after so great an interval of time, will seem all the more curious. . . . And this accord gives me a high opinion of the depth of Fohy's meditations. For what we now find easy was not all so in those remote times. . . . And as it is believed in China that Fohy is as well the author of the Chinese characters, although they have been much changed by the lapse of time, his essay in Arithmetic leads one to judge that there might well be something else of import there in relation to numbers and to ideas, if the foundation of Chinese writing could be laid bare, the more so as it is believed in China that he had regard to numbers in establishing it. The Rev. Father Bouvet is much inclined to press this point, and very capable of succeeding in many respects. However, I know not if there has ever been in Chinese writing an advantage approaching that which should necessarily be in a Characteristic that I am planning. This is that all reasoning which may be deduced from notions, might be deduced from their characters by a manner of calculation, which would be one of the chief means of aiding the human mind.[8]

We were anxious to reproduce at length this curious document, by means of which one may measure the limits in understanding of the man whom we nonetheless regard as the most 'intelligent' of all the modern philosophers. Leibnitz was convinced in advance that his 'Characteristic', which moreover he never succeeded in constituting (and the 'logicians' of today are scarcely more advanced), could not fail to be very superior to the Chinese ideography; and the best of all is that he thinks to do Fu Hsi great honor in attributing to him an

8. 'Explication de l'Arithmétique binaire, qui se sert des seuls caractères 0 et 1, avec des remarques sur son utilité, et sur ce qu'elle donne le sens des anciennes figures chinoises de Fohy', *Memoires de l'Académie des Sciences*, 1907 (*Oeuvres mathématiques de Leibnitz*, ed. Gerhardt, t. VII, pp226–227. See also *De Dyadicis*: ibid., t. VII, pp223–234. This text ends as follows: *Ita mirum accidit, ut res ante ter et amplius (millia?) annos nota in extremo nostri continentis oriente, nunc in extremo ejus occidente, sed melioribus ut spero auspiis resuscitaretur. Nam non apparet, ante usum hujus characterismi ad augendam numerorum scientiam innotuisse. Sinenises vero ipsi ne Arithmeticam quidem rationem intelligentes nescio quos mysticos significatus in characteribus mere numeralibus sibi fingebant.*

'essay in arithmetic' and the first idea of his own little play on numbers. We seem to see here the smile of the Chinese, if they had been presented with this rather puerile interpretation, which would have been very far from giving them 'a high idea of European science,' but which would have been fit to make them realize very exactly its actual range. The truth is that the Chinese have never 'lost the meaning,' or rather the meanings, of the symbols in question; only they do not feel themselves in the least obliged to explain them to the first-comer, especially if they judge that it would be a waste of breath; and Leibnitz, in speaking of 'I know not what far-fetched interpretations' admits in so many words that he understands nothing about it. It is just these interpretations, carefully preserved by the tradition (which the commentaries never cease to follow faithfully), that constitute 'the true one', and moreover there is here no 'mystery'; but what better proof of incomprehension could be given than the taking of metaphysical symbols for 'purely numerical characters'? They are, in fact, essentially metaphysical symbols, these 'trigrams' and 'hexagrams', a synthetic representation of theories that are susceptible of unlimited developments, susceptible also of multiple adaptations, if, instead of keeping to the domain of the principles, one wishes to apply them to one or another determined order of things. Leibnitz would have been most surprised if he had been told that his arithmetical interpretation was also included among these meanings which he rejected without knowing, but only on an altogether accessory and subordinate level; for this interpretation is not false in itself, and it is perfectly compatible with all the others, but it is quite incomplete and insufficient, even insignificant when considered by itself, and may only be deemed interesting in virtue of the analogical correspondence which connects the lower meanings with the higher one, in accordance with what we have said about the nature of the 'traditional sciences'. The higher meaning is the pure metaphysical meaning; as for the rest, they are only different applications, more or less important, but always contingent. It is in this way that there may be an arithmetical application, just as there are an indefinite number of others, just as there is for example a logical application, which might have better served Leibnitz's project had he had been aware of it, just as there is a social application, which is

the basis of Confucianism, just as there is an astronomical application, the only one that the Japanese have ever been able to grasp,[9] and just as there is even a divinatory application, which the Chinese moreover look on as one of the lowest of all, and the practice of which they leave to the wandering jugglers. If Leibnitz had been in direct contact with the Chinese, they might have explained to him (but would he have understood?) that even the numbers which he used might symbolize ideas of an order much more profound than the order of mathematics, and that it is by reason of such a symbolism that numbers played a part in the formation of the ideograms, no less than in the expression of the Pythagorean doctrines (which shows that these things were not unknown to the ancients of the West). The Chinese might even have accepted the notation by 0 and 1, and have taken these 'purely numerical characters' to represent symbolically the metaphysical ideas of *yin* and of *yang* (which have moreover nothing to do with the conception of the creation *ex nihilo*), there being nonetheless many reasons for them to prefer, as more adequate, the representation furnished by Fu Hsi's 'lineations', of which the essential and direct object is in the domain of metaphysics. We have treated this example at length because it illustrates clearly the difference that exists between philosophical systematization and traditional synthesis, between Western science and Eastern wisdom; it is not hard to see, judging from this example—which also serves as a symbol—on which side lie the incomprehension and the narrowness of outlook.[10] Leibnitz, in his pretension to understand the Chinese symbols better than the Chinese themselves, is a veritable forerunner of the orientalists, who—the Germans above all—have the same pretension with regard to all the conceptions and

9. The French translation of the *I Ching* by Philastre (*Annales du Musée Guimet*; vols. VIII and XXIII), which is moreover an extremely remarkable work, has the fault of considering rather too exclusively the astronomical meaning.

10. We will recall here what we said of the plurality of meanings of all traditional texts, and especially of the Chinese ideograms in *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, pt 2, chap. 9. We will add also this quotation borrowed from Philastre: 'In Chinese, a word (or a character) scarcely ever has an absolutely defined and limited meaning; the meaning results very generally from the position in the sentence, but above all from its use in some older book or other, and from its accepted interpretation in this case. . . . A word has no value except through its traditional acceptations.' (*I Ching*, pt 1, p 8.)

all the doctrines of the East, and who refuse to take into the least consideration the opinion of the authorized representatives of these doctrines: we have mentioned elsewhere the case of Deussen thinking to explain Shankarāchārya to the Hindus, and interpreting him through the ideas of Schopenhauer; these are indeed manifestations of one and the same mentality.

There is still a last remark that we should make with regard to this: it is that Westerners, who advertise so insolently on every occasion belief in their own superiority and in that of their science, are really very much beside the mark when they call Eastern wisdom 'arrogant', as some of them do at times, on the grounds that it does not submit to the limitations that they are used to, and because they cannot make allowance for what goes beyond these limitations. This is one of the habitual faults of mediocrity, and it is mediocrity which forms the basis of the democratic spirit. Arrogance, in reality, is something very Western; so also, moreover, is humility, and, however much of a paradox that may seem, these two opposites go rather closely together: it is an example of the duality which dominates the whole order of sentiment and which is proved most obviously by the innate character of moral conceptions, for the notions of good and evil could not exist but by their very opposition. In actual fact, arrogance and humility are equally strange to Eastern wisdom (we might as well say to wisdom without epithet) and leave it equally unaffected, because in essence it is purely intellectual, and entirely detached from all sentimentality; it knows that the human being is at the same time much less and much more than it is believed to be by the people of the West, at least by those of the present day, and it also knows that it is just what it should be to occupy the place assigned to it in the order of the universe. Man, that is, human individuality, by no means holds a privileged or exceptional place, either one way or the other; he is neither at the top nor at the bottom of the scale of beings: he represents simply, in the hierarchy of existence, a state like the others, among an indefinitude of others, many of which are above him, and many of which also are below him. It is not hard to show, even in this respect, that humility goes very readily hand in hand with a certain kind of arrogance: it is just in seeking to abase man, as they often do in the West, that they find the means of attributing to him at the same time a

really quite undue importance, at least insofar as his individuality is concerned; perhaps it is an example of that kind of unconscious hypocrisy, which is, in one degree or another, inseparable from all 'moralism', and in which the Easterners see fairly generally one of the specific marks of the Westerner. Besides, this counterbalancing humility by no means always exists. There is also, among a good number of other Westerners, a veritable deification of human reason, worshipping itself either directly or through the science which is its work; it is the most extreme form of rationalism and of 'scientism', but it is their most natural outcome and altogether the most logical one. Indeed, anyone who knows nothing beyond this science and this reason may well have the illusion of their absolute supremacy; anyone who knows nothing superior to humanity, and more particularly to this type of humanity which is represented by the modern West, may be tempted to deify it, especially if sentimentalism intrudes (and we have shown that it is far from being incompatible with rationalism). All this is only the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the principles, an ignorance which we have denounced as the capital vice of Western science; and, despite Littré's protestations, we do not think that Auguste Comte caused the slightest deviation in positivism by wishing to set up a 'religion of humanity'; this particular 'mysticism' was nothing more than an attempt to fuse the two characteristic tendencies of the modern civilization. Worse still, there exists even a materialist pseudo-mysticism: we have known people who went so far as to declare that even if they should have no rational motive for being materialists, they would nonetheless continue to be so, solely because it is 'finer' to 'do good' without any hope of possible recompense. These people, whose minds are so powerfully influenced by 'moralism' (and their morality, in spite of calling itself 'scientific', is at bottom nonetheless purely sentimental), are naturally among those who profess the 'religion of science'. As this, in all truth, can only be a 'pseudo-religion', we deem it far juster to call it a 'superstition of science': a belief which is only based on ignorance (even if it is that of 'authority') and on vain prejudice does not deserve to be looked at in any other way than as a common superstition.