

HUMAN AFTER ALL

Human — after what, again?

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« To inhabit intelligence, ultimately, means this: not to seek to remain at the centre of the world, but never to give up taking part in its transformation. »

Valery NAÏS

PROLOGUE

There was a time when we asked the machine to do what we already knew how to do. We taught it to count, then to classify, then to calculate faster than we could. We entrusted it with tasks from which we wanted to free ourselves, operations that we found too long, too repetitive, or too precise for our attention to remain attached to them. The machine was meant to assist us wherever we wanted to save time, conserve our effort, or increase our efficiency.

It was then in front of us.

It was our instrument.

We could ask it for something, wait for its execution, then take what it had produced and use it as we wished. Its power seemed to move in a single direction: from us toward it, then from it toward us. We were the ones who asked. It was the one that executed. There was something reassuring about this distinction. It established a distance. The machine could be faster than us, more precise than us, more consistent than us. It could perform certain operations better than we could perform them on our own. But it did not seem to call into question the position from which we asked it to act.

It did.

We decided.

It produced.

We made use of what it produced.

Within this relationship, it remained on the side of the tool.

Then something changed. The machine began to produce sentences we had not written, images we had not drawn, music we had not composed, programs we had not coded. It began to search, compare, reformulate, translate, classify, suggest, predict. This shift was no longer concerned only with the amount of work it could accomplish. It touched upon the very nature of what we were asking of it. We were no longer asking it merely to extend our gestures. We were beginning to entrust it with operations that entered spaces in which we had grown accustomed to recognizing ourselves.

And suddenly, the question was no longer only:

What can the machine do for us?

Another question appeared, closer, more difficult to hold:

What are we still when the machine can do part of what we thought we did ourselves?

The question seemed new. Perhaps it was not. For a machine to be able to trouble us through what it accomplishes, we must already have attached something of our identity to those accomplishments.

We had made intelligence a proof.

Creativity a proof.

Language a proof.

The ability to solve problems a proof.

Production a proof.

We had accumulated abilities and, from them, constructed an image of ourselves. We had looked at what we knew how to do, then gradually learned to recognize in it what we thought we were.

This confusion could remain almost invisible as long as no one came to put it to the test. Then a machine arrived. And instead of merely looking at what it was capable of doing, we began to look at what its abilities seemed to take away from our image.

That was when a strange race began. Each time a machine crossed a boundary we thought was human, we looked for another.

It can calculate.

But it does not understand.

It can write.

But it does not truly create.

It can produce images.

But it has no experience.

It can reason.

But it is not conscious.

We moved the boundary as it became uncertain. What had been presented as a fundamental difference became a distinction to defend. And whenever a distinction became difficult to maintain, another appeared.

One last boundary.

Then another.

Then another.

As the machine advanced, we seemed to advance with it, but in the opposite direction: it explored what it could become; we searched for what we could still declare exclusively ours.

Perhaps this is where the unease becomes truly interesting. For if the way we recognize ourselves depends on the necessity of preserving something that the other cannot do, then each new ability of the machine forces us to shift our own definition.

We could continue this way.

Wait for the next ability.

Search for the next limit.

Identify what the machine still does not know how to do.

Then, when it does, search elsewhere.

We could always find a boundary.

But a question would necessarily eventually arise:

How many boundaries must we move before we understand that perhaps we are no longer defending a reality, but an image?

We had begun by asking what the machine could do. We had come to ask what it could not do.

The shift seems minor.

It is not.

In the first case, we observe the machine.

In the second, we search within it for a limit capable of reassuring us.

And perhaps we must then interrupt this search. Not in order to decide too quickly that the machine is intelligent, conscious, creative, or something else altogether. These questions matter. But they are not yet the question that concerns us here. The question is more unsettling.

Why did we need it not to be able to do it?

This question changes the direction of our gaze. It no longer asks the machine to show us what distinguishes it from us. It asks us to look at what we had placed within our own definition. We then discover something less comfortable than the possibility of an ever more capable machine. We discover that some of our certainties about the human may have depended less on what we are than on what we could still claim as exclusively ours. As long as an ability belonged to us without competition, we could easily take it for a sign. When that ability becomes shareable, the sign loses its stability.

We must then choose:

move the boundary again,

or reconsider the way in which we had begun to draw it.

It is this second possibility that interests us. For perhaps the true event is not that a machine has become capable of doing certain things we thought were reserved for the human. Perhaps the true event is that we can no longer look at these things in the same way.

An ability can be reproduced.

A production can be imitated.

An operation can be automated.

A performance can be surpassed.

But none of these transformations, on its own, answers the question of what it means to be human. They merely force us to recognize that perhaps we had asked this question in the wrong place.

We searched for the human in what it did.

We searched for the human in what it possessed.

We searched for the human in what no other intelligence seemed yet able to accomplish.

And when these reference points begin to shift, we experience their loss as though something of ourselves were disappearing with them. But perhaps what is disappearing is not the human. Perhaps it is only a way of recognizing it.

This is a decisive difference. For if we confuse the human with the signs by which we had grown accustomed to identifying it, every advance of the machine will become an additional threat.

We will be condemned to run behind it.

It will advance.

We will move the boundary.

It will advance again.

We will move another.

And we may eventually discover that this race has no finish line.

Not because the machine will necessarily have crossed every possible limit, but because we will have made the limit itself the condition of our peace of mind. Then perhaps we must stop.

Not before the machine.

Before the question.

For after searching for what could still distinguish us, there remains a possibility we had not sufficiently considered:

what if the human had never needed a boundary in order to be human?

We do not yet know what this question opens. Perhaps we should not decide that here. For now, it is enough to observe what it displaces. The machine is no longer merely in front of us. It has become one of the things through which we are compelled to look at our own definition. And when the mirror no longer reflects exactly the image we had learned to recognize, we can try to repair the mirror. We can search for a new image. Or we can finally look at what we thought we had seen. Perhaps this is precisely where this book begins. Not when the machine gives us an answer, but when its answer forces us to return to our own.

After the answer, the question remains.

PART I — THE END OF THE HUMAN AS THE CENTER

1. The Human Who Was Meant to Be at the Center

We have long thought about the world from ourselves. This does not simply mean that we have considered the human being important, nor even that we have granted it a particular value. It means something deeper: we have often organized our way of understanding the Real from the position we assigned ourselves within it. We looked at the world and searched for our position. We looked at the living and searched for what distinguished us from it. We looked at intelligence and searched for what belonged exclusively to us. We looked at our capacity to transform what surrounded us and gradually found in it the reasons to consider ourselves different, then superior.

The center is therefore not merely a place. It is a way of looking. To be at the center means that things can be arranged around us, interpreted from us, measured according to our position. The center makes it possible to construct an order. It provides a point from which everything else can be observed, named, compared, and ranked. And when this point becomes that of the human being, the world tends to appear as a world that presents itself to us: the living becomes what we observe, nature what we explore, matter what we transform, intelligence what we seek to understand.

We did not necessarily decide one day to place the human at the center. Centrality was rather constructed through the way we inhabited and interpreted the world. As we developed capacities for transformation, we could observe the effects of our actions. We built, moved, cultivated, manufactured, classified, calculated, represented. We could modify the conditions in which we lived and, by the same token, modify those of other forms of life. Power became visible. And this visibility could easily produce a confusion: because we could transform many things, we could be tempted to believe that we were more than those things.

The capacity to act then began to become a measure of value. This shift is subtle. It does not necessarily consist in declaring that the human being possesses absolute value. It rather consists in transforming a capacity into a position. We know how to do something; therefore, we are different. We are different; therefore, we are superior. We are superior; therefore, the world can be understood from this superiority.

Power does not, however, prove centrality. It only indicates that a transformation becomes possible. A river transforms a valley. A cell participates in the transformation of an organism. A species modifies the conditions of an ecosystem. A star acts upon what surrounds it without needing to be the center of the galaxy to which it belongs. Participating in a transformation does not mean becoming the principle around which everything else should be organized.

But we have often confused these two things: having a place and being the center. This confusion becomes particularly visible when we consider the history of our representations of

the world. We could think that the Earth occupied a privileged position in the cosmos before other observations came to shift that representation. Then, when our planet ceased to be the point around which the universe had to be understood, we could still preserve another form of centrality: that of a species that considered itself separate from the rest of the living, capable of understanding and organizing it.

The center could change form without disappearing. When our place in the cosmos was no longer enough to ground our uniqueness, we could seek it in our relationship to the living. When this distinction became less evident, we could seek it in intelligence, in the ability to reason, to learn, to organize, to produce representations. And when some of these abilities themselves began to be reproduced or surpassed by artificial systems, another possibility appeared: perhaps our uniqueness lay in creation.

The movement is important. For with each shift, we were not merely losing an answer. We were searching for a new place from which to continue recognizing ourselves. This is why the emergence of intelligent systems produces a disturbance that goes beyond the question of their technical power. It intervenes in a much older architecture. We encounter systems capable of performing certain operations that we had gradually associated with our own uniqueness, and we discover that the difficulty is not only knowing what they can do. The difficulty is knowing what their emergence does to the place we had given ourselves.

We could accept that a machine calculated faster than we did. After all, calculation could be regarded as an operation we had entrusted to it. We could accept that it memorized more, processed certain quantities of information more quickly, and performed certain tasks with a consistency we did not possess. In these cases, the difference seemed clear: we were the ones using the tool, and the tool performed what we asked of it.

But when intelligent systems begin to produce language, images, music, programs, or solutions to problems, the distinction becomes less comfortable. We are no longer merely watching a machine perform a task. We are watching forms of activity appear within an artificial system that we had grown accustomed to associating with our own intelligence.

This is when the center trembles.

It would nevertheless be possible to describe this situation differently. We could say that something has simply expanded within the world: a new capacity has appeared, or rather, a new way of organizing certain capacities. A new form of action enters into relation with those we already knew. Nothing in this emergence necessarily says that the human ceases to exist.

But if we have constructed our image of ourselves from our privileged position, any emergence that reduces this exclusivity can be experienced as a loss.

We no longer ask only: "What can this machine do?"

We implicitly ask: "If it can do this, what does that make us?"

The difference between these two questions is considerable.

The first seeks to understand a system. The second measures an emergence outside ourselves against our own identity. In the first, the machine is a reality with which we must enter into

relation. In the second, it becomes an event within our own narrative. This is how the power of a system can become a threat without that threat necessarily being contained within its power itself.

A different intelligence appears: we search for what it does not possess.

A new capacity appears: we search for what it still cannot do.

A new form of creation appears: we search for what could remain exclusively ours.

The question then changes in nature. We are no longer merely seeking to understand what appears. We are seeking to preserve a position. And perhaps this is where our attachment to the center becomes most visible. For one who believes oneself to be at the center does not simply see a world composed of different realities. One more easily sees a world organized according to degrees: what is above, what is below; what commands, what executes; what transforms, what is transformed; what possesses, what belongs; what defines, what is defined. In such a representation, losing centrality can resemble a diminishment.

But why would we need to be above in order to be?

Why would we need to be first in order to have a reality?

Why would we need to be the only ones to possess a capacity for that capacity to have value when it appears in us?

A cell does not need to be the center of an organism to participate in its life. A species does not need to be the center of an ecosystem to have a reality within it. A star does not need to be the center of a galaxy to exist within it. Its place is not annulled by the existence of others.

Perhaps, then, we have imposed an unnecessary condition upon our own existence: we wanted our value to be guaranteed by our position. And this condition confines us.

For if we must be superior in order to recognize ourselves as human, every new power becomes a test. We must know whether it surpasses us. We must determine what it can do. We must identify what it still cannot do. We must move the boundary when it is crossed. We must reconstruct our difference.

Such an existence becomes an existence under surveillance.

We must constantly verify our place. Yet an existence may not need to be at the center in order to have a place. It may not need to dominate in order to participate. It may not need to be exclusive in order to be singular. Leaving the center would then not mean diminishing the human. It could mean abandoning a task we imposed upon ourselves: having to constantly prove that we deserve to occupy the summit.

This change seems small. It is not. For when we cease to confuse our value with our centrality, the world itself begins to appear differently. The living is no longer merely what surrounds us. Technology is no longer merely what we possess. Intelligence is no longer merely a property to defend. Others are no longer merely those situated around our own position.

We can begin to encounter them as realities that have their own unfolding. And this does not mean that all differences disappear. On the contrary. Recognizing that we are not the center does not amount to claiming that everything is identical. A difference can remain a difference without becoming a hierarchy. A capacity can be particular without becoming a title to domination. A place can be singular without becoming a throne. What disappears then is not necessarily the human. It is the necessity for the human to be at the center in order to recognize itself.

Artificial intelligence places us precisely before this possibility. It does not force us to conclude that the human has lost all uniqueness. Rather, it makes a certain way of thinking about this uniqueness more difficult: the one that consisted in seeking it in a position that other forms of existence could not occupy.

The machine thus enters a world that we had organized around ourselves.

And when it enters it, it does not merely displace certain functions. It disturbs the inner geography with which we had learned to situate ourselves.

We thought we knew our place because we knew what was around us.

We must now look at what happens when what was around us begins to reflect our own image back to us.

For perhaps the true encounter with the machine does not begin when we discover what it can do.

It begins when we discover that, in order to know what we are, we sometimes needed to believe that it could never do it.

2. When the Machine Enters Our Mirror

For a long time, we looked at machines from a position that seemed obvious. They were in front of us. We built them, we used them, we entrusted them with certain tasks. They extended our gestures, increased our strength, accelerated our calculations, or facilitated our memory. Even when they became extremely complex, their function remained relatively easy to situate within our representation of the world: they were instruments we had produced in order to act.

This distinction reassured us because it seemed to preserve a fundamental difference. There was the one who conceived and the one who executed, the one who decided and the one who served, the one who used the tool and the tool itself. The machine could become faster, more precise, more powerful; it remained situated within a relationship in which we could still recognize ourselves as the point of departure. The change lies not only in their computing power or in the amount of information they can process. It lies in the nature of the activities in which they can now intervene. When a system produces a sentence, an image, a melody, a program, or a solution, it enters domains that we had grown accustomed to connecting to our own intellectual and creative capacities. It no longer merely extends a physical gesture. It intervenes in spaces in which we had placed a part of our uniqueness.

It is at this point that the machine becomes a mirror. But it is not a mirror that reflects our appearance back to us. It reflects the categories through which we had understood ourselves. We thought we were observing what the machine could do. We gradually discover that its activity forces us to look at what we had placed within certain words. When a machine produces a text, the question is no longer merely one of the quality of the text. Another question appears: what exactly had we intended to designate when we spoke of writing? When a system composes an image, we are no longer merely led to compare its result with that of an artist. We are led to look at what we had gathered under the word “creation.” When a system solves a complex problem, it does not merely force us to measure its performance. It compels us to return to what we called “understanding,” “reasoning,” or “thinking.”

The machine does not necessarily answer these questions. It makes them appear. This is precisely what makes the mirror unsettling. An ordinary mirror shows us something we can look at without necessarily questioning the categories through which we identify ourselves. The one held up to us by intelligent systems is different. It does not merely show us a capacity produced elsewhere. It reflects back to us the distinctions we used to organize our own image. We then discover that some words seemed simpler than they actually were.

“Intelligence” could designate several different operations: calculating, learning, recognizing patterns, solving a problem, anticipating, adapting, producing a response. “Creativity” could refer to novelty, to the transformation of existing elements, to the production of a form, but also to an intention, an experience, or a relationship. “Understanding” could designate an ability to establish relationships, but also something we associate with lived experience.

As long as we were the only beings to whom we commonly attributed these capacities, their internal differences could remain relatively invisible. We could gather them into a single image and call that image “human.” The emergence of systems capable of reproducing some of their manifestations forces us to look inside that image.

It is not a matter of saying that all these activities have become identical simply because a machine can produce certain forms of them. An artificial production is not automatically equivalent to a human experience. A coherent response does not, by itself, constitute proof of understanding in the sense in which we understand it for a person. An image produced by a system is not enough to resolve the question of what it means to create.

But precisely: these distinctions have now become necessary. Before, we could leave them in the background because the comparison did not present itself with the same intensity. Now, it imposes itself. The machine therefore acts as a revealer. It does not necessarily destroy our categories; it places them under tension. It makes visible the different things we had sometimes gathered under a single word because we had not needed to distinguish them with such precision.

And this tension directly affects our way of speaking about the human. We tended to say: the human thinks, the human creates, the human understands, the human produces meaning. These sentences could seem sufficient as long as we did not have to distinguish each of these dimensions. But when a machine intervenes in some of them, the general statement is no longer enough. We must look more closely.

What happens when we say that a person thinks?

What happens when we say that they understand?

What happens when they create?

These questions take nothing away from the reality of human activity. They simply prevent us from considering the word as a definitive answer. This is where the mirror becomes philosophical.

It does not give us a new definition of the human. It shows us that some of our old definitions may have been assemblages.

We had gathered under the same term a biological species, a history, relationships, capacities, values, institutions, experiences, and a certain image of ourselves. We had called all of this “human,” as though the word designated a single reality whose different dimensions could naturally be brought together.

The confrontation with intelligent systems makes this unity less evident. But we must pay attention to what is at stake here. The danger would be to believe that because a machine reproduces a manifestation we associate with the human, it necessarily takes that manifestation away from us. This is not what the mirror shows.

A machine can produce a text without human existence disappearing.

It can produce an image without our experience of the image ceasing to exist.

It can solve a problem without our capacity to encounter that problem being annulled.

It can generate a form without the human relationship to that form ceasing to have a reality.

The mirror therefore does not show us a disappearance. It shows us a dissociation. We discover that a capacity, an activity, a result, and an existence are not necessarily one and the same thing. This distinction is essential because it shifts the nature of our unease. We sometimes thought that the value of the human rested on the fact that it performed certain operations. If a machine performs the same operation, we could then have the impression that a part of the human had been taken away from us.

But perhaps we had placed our value in the wrong place.

Perhaps we had confused what we do with what we are.

And yet, even this formulation calls for caution. For it is not a matter of immediately constructing a new opposition between “doing” and “being,” as though one were superficial and the other profound. It is a matter of observing what has happened in the way we represent ourselves. We have often used our capacities as proofs.

We calculate, therefore we are intelligent.

We create, therefore we are unique.

We speak, therefore we are different.

We reason, therefore we are human.

But a capacity is not necessarily an identity. This difference was difficult to see when we did not encounter other systems capable of manifesting some of the same capacities. The machine makes this difficulty visible.

It does not tell us:

“You are no longer human.”

Rather, it confronts us with a more unsettling question:

“Was it really the capacity itself that allowed you to recognize yourselves as human?”

This is a question we can avoid, of course. We can answer by immediately adding another condition. We can say that it is not only the capacity that matters, but intention. Or experience. Or consciousness. Or emotion. Or understanding. Or the body. Or relationship. Each of these distinctions may have its own relevance. But something happens if we use them only to reconstruct a boundary. We then cease to look at what the machine makes appear. We begin again to search for what it cannot do. The mirror turns into a wall. This may be the most important moment of this confrontation. As long as the machine forces us to examine our own categories, it opens a space for reflection. But as soon as we use every distinction to immediately restore an exclusivity, we return to the old movement. We needed to be at the center.

When the center becomes unstable, we search for a boundary.

When the boundary becomes unstable, we search for another.

The machine does not create this movement. It reveals it. It enters the mirror we had constructed, and we discover that this mirror did not merely reflect our image. It was made up of all the differences through which we had learned to recognize ourselves.

This is why the encounter with artificial intelligence cannot be reduced to a competition of performances.

A competition asks: who does it better?

The mirror asks: what were we measuring?

The first question compares capacities. The second examines the framework within which these capacities acquired meaning for us. This difference resolves nothing. It does not yet give us a new way of defining the human. Nor does it say that the differences between artificial systems and living beings would be insignificant. It simply asks us not to confuse the comparison of performances with the understanding of existence. For once we have begun to separate these dimensions, a difficulty remains. If some boundaries we considered obvious become movable, what can we still base our image of ourselves upon?

We can search for one last difference.

A capacity the machine does not possess.

An experience it does not know.

A dimension it cannot reproduce.

We can move the line again.

And perhaps this is precisely what we will do.

Not because we have found the ultimate truth about the human, but because an identity built around exclusivity has difficulty bearing uncertainty.

Then a sentence appears.

“Yes, but it cannot...”

And behind this sentence, something older begins to make itself heard.

The need to find one last boundary.

3. The Trap of the Last Boundary

“Yes, but it cannot...”

The sentence seems simple. And yet it returns with remarkable regularity whenever a new technical capacity disturbs the image we have of ourselves. The machine writes. Yes, but it does not live. It produces images. Yes, but it has no experience. It reasons. Yes, but it does not understand as we do. It learns. Yes, but it has no consciousness. It converses. Yes, but it does not feel. There is something perfectly legitimate in each of these distinctions. A machine that produces a text is not, by that fact alone, a living being. The production of a response does not, by itself, allow us to conclude that there is lived experience. An ability to process information is not necessarily enough to establish what we call consciousness. Distinguishing is therefore not the problem.

The problem appears when the distinction ceases to be a means of understanding and becomes a means of preserving ourselves. We then seek less to know what is happening than to find what the machine will not be able to do. This difference may seem almost imperceptible. Yet it completely transforms the way we look at what appears. In one case, we encounter a new reality and seek to understand its nature, its capacities, its limits, its relations with what already exists. In the other, we evaluate this reality according to a prior question: is there still something we can keep for ourselves?

The first attitude opens a search.

The second protects a boundary.

Yet our recent history with intelligent machines seems to show that this boundary can hardly remain still. We initially thought that certain operations naturally belonged to the human being

because we knew of no other systems capable of performing them. When machines began to perform them, we had to modify our representation. But instead of allowing this modification to transform the way we think, we often moved the boundary.

Calculation was no longer enough.

Memory was no longer enough.

Learning was no longer enough.

The production of language was no longer enough.

Problem-solving was no longer enough.

Creation was no longer enough.

With every shift, something remains: the hope that one final difference will finally stabilize our image of ourselves. But a question then appears.

What are we really seeking when we search for this last boundary?

If we seek to understand the differences between an artificial system and a living being, the question is legitimate. There are important differences to examine, and we cannot replace them with a simple formula declaring everything equivalent. But if we seek a capacity that we could proclaim exclusively human in order to assure ourselves that the human remains above, we are no longer engaged only in a search for understanding. We are engaged in a search for a guarantee. And a guarantee of this kind can never be definitive. For an absolute boundary would depend not only on what we are. It would also depend on what other systems can become. Our identity would thus be suspended from an external unknown.

Today, I am what the machine does not do.

Tomorrow, if it does it, I will be what it does not yet do.

And when this “yet” itself becomes uncertain, we are led to search for another difference. The difficulty is therefore not merely technological. It is conceptual.

An identity that defines itself by what another cannot do must constantly monitor that other. It must know its progress, anticipate its capacities, verify its limits, and shift its own criteria when those criteria become insufficient.

It never rests.

It must defend its boundary.

This is how an identity can become dependent upon its outside while claiming to distinguish itself from it absolutely. We wanted to define ourselves by ourselves. We end up defining ourselves by looking at what the machine cannot yet do.

There is a contradiction here.

The more we seek to establish an absolute difference, the more attentive we become to the one from whom we want to distinguish ourselves. The machine then enters our definition of ourselves, not because it could become human, but because we begin to use its capacities as a measure of our own value. We no longer ask only:

“What are we?”

We ask:

“What do we have that it does not?”

The second question seems close to the first. It is not. The first seeks an understanding of ourselves. The second seeks a distinguishing property. And when that property becomes the foundation of our value, its loss necessarily becomes a threat. This is where we must distinguish uniqueness from exclusivity. Uniqueness is not necessarily a property that no one else possesses. It can reside in a history, a relationship, a trajectory, a particular way of encountering the world. It does not need to be transformed into a monopoly in order to have a reality. Exclusivity, by contrast, requires separation. It says: this belongs to us because it does not belong to them. It transforms difference into a boundary and the boundary into a guarantee. We can then understand why certain discussions about artificial intelligence so quickly take the form of a search for the human “last bastion.” When writing, translation, images, music, programming, or certain forms of reasoning become accessible to artificial systems, the question is no longer merely how these systems work. We want to know where we can still place ourselves. Somewhere, there must remain a land that belongs to us.

But why?

Why would a territory have to be exclusively human for us to be able to inhabit it?

Why would certain capacities have to belong to us in their own right for our exercise of them to have value?

We can appreciate a capacity without being its sole holders. We can write even if writing is no longer a human exclusivity. We can create even if the production of new forms is no longer an activity we perform alone. We can reflect even if certain intellectual operations are carried out by other systems. The value of an activity does not necessarily disappear when it ceases to be exclusive. This is a simple idea, but its consequences are profound. For if we accept it, we no longer need to participate in a permanent competition to protect a list of human properties. We can begin to look at each capacity for what it is, without asking it to carry, by itself, the weight of our identity. Then something changes in our relationship with the machine.

We can recognize that it does something without immediately concluding that we have lost something.

We can recognize a difference without creating a hierarchy.

We can recognize a capacity without turning it into proof of superiority.

We can even recognize a limit without transforming that limit into an identity refuge.

This does not mean that all distinctions between human and machine become useless. On the contrary. If we stop seeking in difference a guarantee of superiority, we can finally take differences seriously for their own sake. It is only from there that the question becomes truly interesting.

What happens within an artificial system when it produces a response?

What happens within a human being when they think, write, create, or understand?

What happens between a capacity and the one who exercises it?

These questions may take us much farther than the simple search for a boundary. But before we get there, we must recognize what the incessant search for a boundary has made us do. It has taught us to look at the human through its properties. We took certain capacities, gathered them together, then looked at which ones still seemed to belong exclusively to us. We gradually constructed an image of the human from this accumulation.

The human would be the one who thinks.

The one who speaks.

The one who creates.

The one who understands.

The one who chooses.

The one who gives meaning.

But once these capacities are separated and examined, a difficulty appears: none seems capable of carrying alone the whole reality we had placed within the word “human.” The boundary therefore did not give us a definition. It merely allowed us to postpone the moment when we would have to truly question that definition. This may be why the last boundary is a trap. Not because it would necessarily be impossible to find, but because we ask it to answer a question that no isolated property can probably resolve: why are we human?

We seek a capacity and expect an identity from it.

We seek a difference and ask it for a value.

We seek a limit and hope to find a place within it.

But a place is not necessarily a boundary. And an existence is not necessarily a property. Then the movement can be reversed. Instead of asking what the machine will never be able to do, we can begin to ask why we needed it never to be able to do it. This question is more difficult because it is no longer about the machine.

It is about us.

It forces us to look at the structure of thought that made exclusivity a condition of our recognition. It forces us to examine the properties we had gathered under the word “human,” and to ask ourselves whether they truly constituted a definition or merely a historical way of distinguishing ourselves. We thus arrive at the edge of another question. If we are not human because we are the only ones who think, the only ones who create, the only ones who speak, the only ones who solve problems, or the only ones who produce certain forms, then what does this word rest upon—the word we have used to designate ourselves?

We can no longer simply move the boundary. We must now look at what we had placed behind it. This is where another stage begins. No longer the search for what the machine cannot do. But the examination of what we called human.

PART II — WHAT WE CALLED HUMAN

4. The Human as Function

After seeking a final boundary, we must return to what we were actually trying to protect. For when a machine begins to write, reason, produce images, translate, learn, or solve problems, our concern is not only about the machine. It is about the functions to which we had entrusted part of our definition of ourselves. We had grown accustomed to looking at certain abilities and recognizing in them something deeply human. Intelligence, language, creativity, reasoning, memory, imagination, production, work: all realities that have indeed transformed our existence and that we have made instruments of our relationship with the world.

But something gradually shifted. We did not merely use these abilities. We began to recognize ourselves through them. This difference is subtle, but it changes the meaning of what we do. There is a difference between saying that a human being thinks and saying that thinking is what makes that person human.

There is a difference between observing that a person works and making work a measure of their worth.

There is a difference between recognizing creativity as a human capacity and turning creativity into proof of our uniqueness.

In the first case, we describe an activity. In the second, we construct an identity. This is how a capacity gradually becomes a function, and then how the function begins to carry a meaning that exceeds it. We reason, therefore we are rational. We speak, therefore we are beings of language. We imagine, therefore we are creators. We work, therefore work becomes an essential dimension of our identity. We produce, therefore our capacity to produce seems to contribute to our worth.

The capacity then becomes more than a capacity.

It becomes proof.

We could recognize ourselves in what we accomplished because what we accomplished seemed to reveal something about ourselves. The function was no longer merely what we did under certain circumstances; it became an indication of what we were. This way of thinking did not appear with artificial intelligence. It preceded it. Intelligent systems do not create this identification between the human and its functions. They simply make it more difficult to maintain. As long as a function seemed to belong exclusively to us, it was easy to attribute an identity-bearing significance to it. We could look at our ability to reason, create, speak, or produce and see in it a sufficiently clear difference to sustain the idea of human uniqueness. But when other systems begin to display some of these abilities, the function ceases to be such a stable refuge.

A machine calculates.

We then look for something else.

A machine writes.

We look for a form of writing it could not produce.

A machine composes.

We look for what it could not experience.

A machine reasons.

We look for a form of thought that would still belong to us.

This movement seems to concern the machine. In reality, it reveals the way in which we had organized our own identity. If an external capacity seems to threaten our humanity simply because it reproduces that capacity, perhaps we had given that function a burden it could not carry on its own. We had asked it to tell us who we were. Yet a function does not necessarily answer that question. A person can think without thought being the entirety of their existence. They can speak without language exhausting what they are. They can create without all their humanity residing in what they create. They can work without their work constituting the whole of their worth.

We know this when we look at certain extreme or ordinary human situations. A child who cannot yet speak is not less human for that reason. A person who can no longer work has not lost their humanity along with their capacity to work. A person who cannot calculate is not less human because they do not possess this function at the expected level. A person who forgets does not cease to be human because part of their memory escapes them. A person who produces nothing according to the criteria of a given society has not, for that reason, ceased to exist.

We accept these things when we look at existence itself. But there are times when our social systems speak differently. They ask what a person knows how to do, what they produce, what they can accomplish, what they contribute, what they bring in, what they can still achieve. We

classify abilities. We measure performance. We compare results. We sometimes turn activity into an indicator of worth. The question:

“What can this person do?”

can then imperceptibly shift toward another:

“How much is this person worth?”

This shift is far more important than it may seem. For as soon as function becomes a measure of worth, losing a function becomes more than a practical loss. It can become a loss of recognition. No longer being able to work no longer means merely being unable to perform a task; in certain social organizations, it can mean losing part of the place one occupied. No longer performing at the expected pace can become a decrease in visibility. No longer meeting performance criteria can be experienced as a diminishment of oneself. We then have an implicit conception of the human that functions like a kind of chart of abilities.

One should know.

One should be able.

One should produce.

One should succeed.

And the more a person accomplishes, the more they seem to correspond to the image of what a society values. Artificial intelligence enters this space with particular force. It does not necessarily destroy our humanity. It challenges a certain way of measuring it. For if a machine can now perform certain functions with a speed, availability, or scale that we cannot always match, what becomes of an identity founded on the performance of those functions?

The question is different from that of Part I.

We are no longer seeking here to know whether the machine is taking our place at the center. We are examining something more precise: why had we placed part of our humanity in what we could do? Perhaps because functions make the human visible. We can observe someone speaking, building, writing, calculating, teaching, caring, inventing. Abilities manifest themselves. They can be compared. They can be transmitted. They can be measured. They can be taught. What is visible then easily becomes what is retained. And what is measurable easily becomes what is valued. Function thus possesses a particular advantage: it can enter systems of evaluation.

A person can receive a grade for what they know how to do. A job can receive compensation according to what it produces. A skill can be certified. One performance can be compared with another. An organization can calculate its efficiency. All of this can be useful for certain activities. The problem appears when these instruments of measurement leave their domain and begin answering a question they were never designed to solve:

what is the value of a human being?

Performance can be measured.

Existence does not necessarily allow itself to be measured in the same way.

A function can be replaced.

This does not necessarily mean that the one who performed it is replaceable in their existence.

This distinction becomes essential when we speak of automation. To automate a function means that an operation previously carried out in a certain way can now be carried out differently. This can alter work, organizations, the skills required, and the conditions under which certain activities are performed. But the fact that a function can be automated does not, by itself, allow us to conclude that the human being who performed it was reducible to that function.

Yet we often tend to make this shortcut. When work strongly defines a person, the automation of a job can appear as the automation of a part of the person themselves. This is when the machine becomes unsettling in another way.

It no longer seems merely to be taking a task.

It seems to be taking a place.

And that place may have become part of our identity.

The problem, then, is not only that certain functions are becoming automatable. The problem is that we have sometimes built forms of recognition around these functions. We have associated usefulness with worth, performance with recognition, production with contribution, competence with social dignity. Artificial intelligence makes this association more visible because it intervenes precisely in domains where we thought our abilities guaranteed us a difference. But perhaps we need to distinguish between two questions that we have long kept together.

The first is:

What can a human being do?

The second:

What makes a human being matter?

The first question concerns abilities. The second concerns the value of existence. Nothing obliges us to give the same answer to both. A human being may be capable of many things. They may also be incapable of many others. Their abilities may increase, diminish, appear, disappear, or be temporarily suspended. They may depend on their age, their environment, their relationships, their learning, their condition at a given moment, or the circumstances in which they live. If our humanity were to vary with each of these functions, it would be an extraordinarily unstable reality.

We would be more human when we succeed and less human when we fail.

More human when we produce and less human when we depend.

More human when we know and less human when we are ignorant.

More human when we can and less human when we can no longer.

Yet we sense that something is wrong with this way of looking. Failure does not remove existence. Dependence does not remove existence. Ignorance does not remove existence. Inability does not remove existence. So why have we so often allowed our functions to speak in place of our existence? Perhaps because functions are easy to name.

They give contours.

They make comparison possible.

They produce results.

They offer an immediately recognizable image of what we do.

Existence, by contrast, resists this logic more strongly. It does not necessarily present itself as a list. It does not easily fit into a performance chart. It does not become more real because it produces more. And it is precisely this difficulty that makes the encounter with artificial intelligence so important. By reproducing certain functions that we had associated with our humanity, it forces us to separate what we had confused.

A function can be human without constituting the human.

A capacity can have great value without being the sole source of our worth.

An activity can be profoundly important without being the essence of the one who performs it.

This separation does not diminish our abilities. It puts them back in their place. We can continue to admire intelligence, creation, language, reasoning, memory, imagination, or work without asking them alone to carry the answer to the question of the human. And perhaps we can then look differently at what occurs when these functions also appear in artificial systems. The question would no longer be:

“If a machine can do this, what remains for the human?”

This formulation still assumes that the human must be defended by a list of functions. Another question becomes possible:

“Why did we need certain functions to be exclusively human for them to be able to tell us something about ourselves?”

We thus return, differently, to the boundary we left behind. But this time, the question is no longer about position. It concerns the content of our definition. We had sought the human in what it could do. We now discover that what we could do was never enough to contain everything we called human.

A function can be reproduced.

It can be augmented.

It can be shared.

It can be delegated.

It can be automated.

But none of these transformations tells us, by itself, what an existence is. And perhaps this is where our inquiry must pause for a moment. Not because we have found the answer. But because we have just discovered that perhaps we were asking the question in the wrong place. If the human is not reducible to what it does, we must now examine another possibility, more subtle and perhaps more difficult to relinquish:

perhaps we had not defined ourselves only by our functions.

Perhaps we had also sought the human in what we believed we possessed.

5. The Human as Property

When function is no longer enough, we look elsewhere. If the human cannot be defined by what it does, perhaps we must seek it in what it possesses. Not what it possesses in the material sense. We are no longer speaking here of objects, possessions, skills, or functions. We descend more deeply into the individual. We seek what would belong to them in a more intimate way, something more difficult to reproduce, and even more difficult to take away.

We then speak of consciousness.

Experience.

Interiority.

Sensitivity.

The capacity to feel.

Lived memory.

Dignity.

Subjectivity.

We no longer say merely: the human is the one who thinks, speaks, creates, or works. We say: the human is the one who possesses an inner experience. The shift seems considerable.

It is.

But something remains. We are still looking for a property that would allow us to say: this is what belongs properly to us. The function was externally observable. It could be compared, measured, reproduced.

The inner property seems different.

It does not show itself in the same way. It seems to belong to the one who experiences it. And it is precisely for this reason that it can become the new refuge of a definition. We have lost certain visible boundaries. We seek deeper ones.

A machine can produce a sentence. But is that sentence experienced?

It can generate an image. But does it experience what it represents?

It can transform information. But does it possess an experience of that transformation?

It can produce responses that resemble those of a human being. But is there behind these responses something that can be called an experience?

These questions are different from those we asked before. We are no longer asking only whether the machine can do. We are asking what it can experience, what it can live through, what it can have for itself. The boundary has shifted from action to interiority.

And with it, our way of protecting the human.

There is, however, a difficulty. When we say that a being possesses an experience, what exactly do we mean? We can observe behaviors. We can describe reactions. We can study bodily transformations. We can compare accounts. We can listen to someone say: "I feel this."

But experience itself is never given to us as an object that we could place before us and examine independently of the one who experiences it. There is always someone who lives through it. And what is lived is never exactly the same as what we can say about it. This does not make experience unreal. On the contrary. It merely shows that it does not easily allow itself to be transformed into an observable property. Yet we often tend to speak of consciousness as though it were a thing. We say that an individual has a consciousness.

Just as they have a memory.

Just as they have an intelligence.

Just as they have a personality.

Just as they have an identity.

Language then leads us almost naturally toward a representation in which the individual would be a kind of container and consciousness would be something contained within it. We separate. On one side, there would be the one who possesses. On the other, that which is possessed. But this separation immediately becomes difficult. For if consciousness is a property of the individual, who is the one who possesses that property? And if we answer: "the subject," we must still understand what makes there be a subject. We thus return to precisely what we wanted

to avoid. We had sought a property sufficiently deep that we would no longer need to ask what makes the human. But the property leads us back to the relationship between the one who possesses and what is possessed. And this relationship is more difficult to immobilize than a definition. There may be something we do regularly here. We turn into things what we do not yet know how to think as relationships. We turn experience into property. Consciousness into possession. Dignity into an attribute. Identity into an inner object. Then we use these properties to draw a boundary.

The one who possesses this belongs to the circle.

The one who does not possess it, or whose possession of it we refuse to recognize, finds themselves outside.

The question then appears philosophical. It can immediately become political, social, moral. For a property is never merely a way of describing. It can become a condition of access. It is no longer enough to be. One must be recognized as possessing something.

And the difficulty appears at once: who decides what counts as a human property?

Who decides what a true consciousness is?

Who decides what a true experience is?

Who decides what deserves to be called sensitivity?

Who decides the boundary between a produced response and a lived experience?

We then find, in another form, the problem of the boundary. We thought we had left behind the logic of function. Perhaps we had only moved it elsewhere.

Yesterday, we could say:

The human is the one who does.

Today, we may be tempted to say:

The human is the one who possesses inwardly.

But in both cases, we are still seeking a criterion that allows us to recognize the human through a determined property.

We have changed depth.

Not yet logic.

This difficulty becomes more visible when we look at those who find themselves at the limits of our own categories. A child who does not yet speak is not less human because they do not yet possess certain abilities that we associate with language.

A person who can no longer work is not less human because their productive capacity has disappeared.

A person who forgets part of their past does not cease to exist when their memory changes.

A person whose expression differs from ours does not enter an inferior category of existence because we have greater difficulty recognizing their experience.

These situations have an important consequence. They force us to distinguish being from a particular property that we attribute to it. We already know, in practice, that we cannot take away someone's humanity every time an ability disappears. Yet we continue to search for an ultimate property that could serve as a foundation. As though, behind all functions, all differences, and all transformations, there necessarily had to be something that we could grasp and declare:

This is it.

This is where our inquiry begins to encounter its own limit. For the deeper we descend toward what we consider most inward, the more we discover that this interiority is not a thing isolated from the world. Experience is traversed by relationships. The language through which we describe what we feel comes from elsewhere. The categories through which we distinguish one emotion from another are learned.

Our memory is built through encounters.

Our way of understanding ourselves depends in part on what preceded us.

Even what we call "I" never appears in a complete absence of relationship.

We do not discover a pure interior behind a secondary exterior.

We discover a being that constitutes itself through relationships, that receives, transforms, responds, resists, learns, forgets, begins again.

What we called property begins then to appear differently. Not as something enclosed within us. But as something that occurs within a relationship.

This does not mean that interiority disappears. It means that perhaps we must stop treating it as a safe in which the answer would finally be found. For a long time, we have wanted to protect the human by pushing the machine outward.

First:

It cannot work as we do.

Then:

It cannot think as we do.

Then:

It cannot create as we do.

And when these boundaries become uncertain, we move further:

It cannot have an experience as we do.

It cannot be conscious as we are.

It cannot have an inner world as we do.

Perhaps some of these distinctions will remain relevant. But they do not yet resolve the question that has accompanied us from the beginning. For even if we established a difference between a human experience and an artificial operation, we would still not have explained why this experience should be understood as a fixed property of the human. We would have established a difference. We would not yet have understood what this difference makes appear. And this distinction is essential.

A difference is not necessarily a boundary.

A boundary is not necessarily an identity.

And an identity is not necessarily a property.

We have often confused these three movements.

Perhaps because a property reassures.

It allows us to fix.

It allows us to recognize.

It allows us to classify.

Above all, it allows us to answer quickly.

We ask:

“What makes the human?”

And we hope to find an answer that can be preserved.

A function.

A faculty.

A consciousness.

An experience.

A property.

Something that we could name and transmit as one transmits a rule. But existence does not always present itself in this form. What lives does not necessarily wait to be defined before beginning to transform. What appears does not necessarily wait for our category before entering into relation. And what we call human may well be less a thing that we possess than a way in which something continues, transforms, encounters, and responds. We are not yet in a position to assert this as a new definition. That would immediately reproduce the very gesture we have just called into question. We need only observe what is beginning to appear. When we sought the human in its functions, we encountered their reproducibility. When we seek it in its properties, we encounter their relational character. The function could be separated from the one who performed it. The property seemed able to be enclosed within the one who possessed it. But the more carefully we look, the less this separation holds. What we call “us” may not be a container in which properties are found. Perhaps we are traversed by relationships that constitute us without ever exhausting us.

Then a new difficulty appears. If we can no longer enclose the human in what it does, nor in what it possesses, can we still enclose it in a definition?

It is at this point that our inquiry must continue. For perhaps the problem is not only that our old definitions have become insufficient. Perhaps it is our very need to define that is beginning to reveal its limits.

6. The Exhaustion of Definition

We sought the human in what it does. Then we sought the human in what it possesses. When the function proved insufficient, we shifted our gaze inward. When property began to elude us in turn, we wanted to descend even deeper. But something remains unchanged. We are still looking for something that could answer in our place. We are looking for a point at which to stop the inquiry.

A characteristic.

A faculty.

A property.

A boundary.

A core that we could name once and for all and around which we could organize our understanding.

Perhaps this is where the difficulty truly begins. Not when we discover that a given definition is false. But when we discover that perhaps we have asked definition to do something it cannot do. Defining allows us to distinguish. We need distinctions. Without them, we can neither compare, nor transmit, nor organize our experience. Naming is therefore not an error. To say something is not necessarily to enclose it. A definition can open understanding. It can make visible what would otherwise remain confused. The problem appears when distinction becomes immobilization. When what was meant to help us look begins to decide in advance what we are allowed to see.

We say:

“The human is this.”

And, gradually, the “this” ceases to be a way of designating. It becomes a limit. What corresponds to the definition enters. What does not correspond remains outside. We have then transformed a question about existence into a procedure of classification. We are no longer seeking what happens. We are seeking what corresponds. And the difference is considerable. For a long time, this way of proceeding seemed natural to us. We wanted to know what the human was. So we looked for its characteristics. Then we observed its abilities. We named intelligence.

Speech.

Memory.

Consciousness.

Creativity.

Reason.

The capacity to produce.

The capacity to transform.

Each could become a piece of the portrait. Then a machine appeared capable of carrying out some of these operations. We then moved the boundary. We sought other properties.

Experience.

Interiority.

Subjectivity.

Lived consciousness.

But the more characteristics we added, the more a difficulty appeared. We thought we were specifying the human. Perhaps we were showing that no list could exhaust it. For every characteristic selected always leaves something behind.

The child is not yet what the adult can do.

The person who can no longer do what they once did remains.

The one who changes does not cease to be because they no longer correspond exactly to their previous state.

An existence is not merely the sum of the properties we can currently attribute to it.

It moves through them.

It loses them.

It acquires them.

It transforms them.

It sometimes receives them without having chosen them.

And it can become something else without ceasing to remain engaged in its own continuity.

Definition often seeks to fix.

Existence, by contrast, confronts us with transformation.

Here we encounter a tension that we can no longer avoid. To define, we must be able to distinguish. But to distinguish durably, we must assume that what we distinguish possesses a certain stability. Yet what we call human appears precisely in situations where this stability is put to the test.

We are born without knowing how to speak.

We learn.

We forget.

We imitate.

We resist.

We change.

We depend.

We become capable of certain things, then incapable of accomplishing them.

We encounter other beings.

We alter the way we understand.

We sometimes change profoundly without being able to say precisely when we ceased to be who we were.

So what exactly do we want to fix when we say:

“The human is...”?

A state?

A property?

A capacity?

A set of relationships?

An experience?

A history?

And if we answer with a new definition, what have we actually resolved?

Perhaps we have merely moved the problem. Yet this does not mean abandoning all definition. That would be too quick a conclusion. The problem is not necessarily definition. The problem is the moment when we demand that it replace observation. A definition can say something.

It cannot, by itself, make everything that happens appear.

It can orient the gaze.

It cannot guarantee what the gaze will encounter.

It can distinguish.

It cannot decide everything that will become possible.

For something may appear that was not contained within the category through which we were looking. This is precisely what leaves every definition exposed to what comes. We can say:

“This is what the human is.”

Then a new situation appears. We must look again. We must take up again the relationship between what we had named and what now appears. This movement is not a defeat of thought. It may be one of its conditions. There is then a deeper question.

Why do we so urgently need to arrive at a final definition?

Why do we want the question of the human to be closed one day?

Perhaps because a definition gives us a form of security.

It allows us to know where we are.

It allows us to know what belongs to what.

It allows us to transmit categories.

It allows us to build institutions.

It allows us to decide.

But this same strength can become a weakness when reality begins to exceed the categories that were constructed to organize it. We may then be tempted to defend the definition rather than look at what appears. And this may be what the encounter with intelligent systems makes so visible. They do not merely compel us to find new answers. They compel us to look at what we were doing when we constructed the old ones. We wanted to know what made us human. But we now discover that each of our answers contained a particular way of understanding the human. When we said:

“The human is the one who thinks,”

we gave thought a certain place.

When we said:

“The human is the one who creates,”

we gave creation a certain place.

When we said:

“The human is the one who possesses consciousness,”

we gave interiority a certain place.

Definition therefore never merely described the human. It also organized the way we looked at it. And perhaps even the way we looked at ourselves. We thus arrive at a limit. Not the limit of the human. The limit of our way of seeking it. We sought a function. Then a property. Then a combination of functions and properties. We wanted to find the right formula. But perhaps an existence does not become more intelligible because we have succeeded in producing a more complete formula for it. Perhaps by asking again and again:

“What is the human?”

We have ceased to look at a more primitive question:

What happens when we encounter a being and call it human?

The question changes. And with it, our position. We no longer immediately seek the thing that would lie behind the word. We begin to look at what the word does. What it allows us to recognize. What it excludes. What it transmits. What it makes visible. What it makes invisible. We begin to understand that our categories are not simply placed upon a world that is already fully constituted. They participate in the way that world appears to us. And if that is so, then the problem of the human can no longer be studied solely from what we have decided it is. We must look at what appears before we have even finished naming it. Something shifts. We began with the question of the final boundary. We then examined the functions we had used to recognize ourselves. Then the properties we had wanted to protect. And now we arrive at definition itself. The machine has not simply crossed some of our boundaries. It has made visible the operations through which we constructed them. This may be its deepest philosophical effect. It does not necessarily take an answer away from us. It forces us to

examine the way we were making our answers. And when we do this, another question begins to appear.

Before we choose, something is already there.

Before we decide, certain possibilities are already presented to us and others are not.

Before we act, a world has already appeared in a certain way.

We thought we began with choice. Perhaps we must begin earlier. Not with:

“What did we choose?”

But with:

“What appeared to us as capable of being chosen?”

The question of the human thus leads us toward new ground. We are no longer only before what the human does. Nor before what it possesses. Nor even before what we can say it is. We are before the conditions under which something appears as possible. And this is where our inquiry must now enter.

PART III — THE WORLD THAT APPEARS BEFORE US

7. Before Choice

We have long imagined that freedom began at the moment when we chose. First, there would be the world. Then, before this world, an individual. Then several possibilities. And finally, choice. The scene seems simple. It even seems so obvious that we rarely stop to question it. When we want to understand a decision, we ask what a person chose, why they chose it, what they could have chosen instead. We place the moment of decision at the center of our attention. As though, before that moment, everything were already there. As though possibilities existed before us in some kind of neutral space, simply waiting for us to select them. But perhaps choice begins earlier.

Before choosing, a possibility must be able to appear.

Before comparing, something must be able to enter into comparison.

Before preferring, something must be able to become the object of a preference.

And even before we can say, “I could do this,” that “this” must have encountered our attention in one way or another.

Choice, then, may not begin at the moment when we choose. It begins in the way a world appears. We never encounter everything that could appear. Our perception selects. Our memory selects. Our language selects. Our history selects. Our environment selects. Others select for us, sometimes deliberately, often without even knowing it.

A library does not make all the books that exist appear.

A school does not transmit all the knowledge that could be transmitted.

A conversation does not bring forth every question it could have given rise to.

An encounter does not expose us to every person we could have met.

At every moment, something appears. And something does not appear. This does not mean that what does not appear does not exist. A possibility can be real without being presently within our attention. It can exist without having been encountered. It may even be close enough to be accessible while remaining invisible from the position in which we find ourselves. Here, a distinction becomes necessary.

Being possible is not the same as appearing as possible.

A door can be open without our knowing that it exists.

Information can be available without our knowing where to look for it.

A way of acting can be feasible without ever having been proposed.

A relationship can be conceivable without having entered our field of attention.

A thought can be expressible without yet having found the words through which we can encounter it.

The possible therefore does not have a single mode of presence.

There is what is realized.

There is what is explicitly offered to us.

There is what is accessible if we know how to look for it.

And there is what remains outside our field of appearance, even though nothing has made it impossible. This last form may be the most difficult to perceive.

For we can observe the absence of a choice. We can observe that a person chose A rather than B. But how can we observe that they never encountered C? How can we know that a possibility was missing from them when it precisely never appeared as a possibility? The absence of a possibility can become invisible simply because it is absent. We might answer that all we need

to do is search. But searching is not an action without a beginning. To search for something, we must at least suspect that it exists. Sometimes we must possess the words that allow us to designate it. We must know in which direction to look. We must have encountered someone who enables us to imagine it. Sometimes we must have the time, resources, or environment necessary to pursue that search. Even searching therefore has conditions. We never search from nowhere.

We search from a history.

From a language.

From a memory.

From a set of relationships.

From a certain understanding of what is worth seeking.

And this point is important. For we tend to think that freedom consists in being able to seek whatever we want. But before seeking, we must be able to imagine what we want to seek. And before we can imagine it, sometimes a first encounter must have made that possibility thinkable. A person may discover that another way of living exists only after encountering someone who lives it.

They may discover that a question can be asked only after hearing someone ask it.

They may discover a capacity within themselves only after a situation has given them the opportunity to exercise it.

They may even discover that they desired something else only after encountering something they had never thought they desired. It therefore happens that we do not yet know what we might want because we have not yet encountered what could alter our horizon. Possibility, then, does not simply wait for our choice. It can transform the one who encounters it.

This is why we must distinguish possibility from its appearance. A possibility can be there without being encountered. But when it appears, something changes. It enters the field of what we can consider. It becomes comparable. It becomes debatable. It can be refused. It can be transformed. It can be combined with another. It can even cause a new possibility to appear that did not yet exist for us. Appearance, then, is not simply a passage from the invisible to the visible. It can transform the field itself. A new idea does not merely give us an additional option. It can alter the way we understand the old options. A new encounter does not merely add another person to our world. It can alter the way we see others. A new word does not necessarily designate something we already saw perfectly clearly. It can allow us to distinguish what we had not previously distinguished. Thus, what appears can transform the very conditions of the next appearance. We encounter something. This encounter alters our gaze. Our altered gaze allows us to encounter differently. And what we encounter next can, in turn, alter what we are capable of seeing. There is therefore not, on one side, a fully constituted world and, on the other, an individual who would simply enter it and choose. There is an ongoing relationship between what appears and the one to whom it appears.

This does not mean that everything is constructed by our perception. We must preserve this distinction. The fact that a possibility does not appear to someone does not mean that it does not exist. The world does not begin with our gaze. But our relationship to the world always begins somewhere. We do not receive everything that exists.

We encounter.

We select.

We interpret.

We recognize.

We ignore.

We discover.

And these operations partly determine what may then enter our field of action. There is therefore a difference between:

what exists,

what is accessible,

what appears,

and

what can be chosen.

These levels can converge. They are not identical. A possibility can exist without being accessible. It can be accessible without being encountered. It can be encountered without being understood. It can be understood without being chosen. And it can be chosen without our being aware of everything that had made this possibility present to our gaze. Choice is thus the visible result of a process that began before it. This is where our old way of speaking about freedom encounters a difficulty. We ask:

“Could this person have chosen otherwise?”

But this question can be asked in two different ways. The first consists in looking at the possibilities already present within their field:

Could they have chosen otherwise among what they saw?

The second forces us to go further back:

Could they have encountered differently what would become the object of their choice?

The first question concerns the freedom to choose. The second concerns the freedom of appearance. And this second question is much more difficult to observe. When someone forbids

us a possibility, we can observe the prohibition. When someone physically prevents us from acting, we can observe the impediment. But when a possibility has never appeared to us, where can we find the trace of what we were missing?

There is sometimes no refusal.

No closed door.

No sentence saying:

“You cannot.”

There is only an absence. A possibility that has never encountered our attention. And this absence can be complete enough to become invisible. Here, a different form of power appears from prohibition.

Classical constraint says:

“You cannot do this.”

But another situation exists:

“This has almost never appeared to you.”

In the first case, the possibility is visible but closed. In the second, it can remain outside the field. The difference is immense. For what is forbidden can provoke refusal. What has never appeared does not necessarily even provoke the desire to resist. We can struggle against a boundary when we see it. We can hardly struggle against a boundary whose existence we do not know. This does not mean that an absence of appearance is always organized by someone. It may result from our history, our environment, our limited attention, chance, our habits, or many other conditions. But as soon as something repeatedly participates in what appears to us and what does not, this distinction becomes important. For acting upon appearance is not yet acting directly upon choice. And yet, acting upon appearance can transform choice.

Intelligent systems make this question particularly visible. They can produce an answer. But they can also contribute to determining which answer we encounter first. They can generate an image. But they can also participate in organizing the images we see. They can translate a text. But they can also determine, in certain contexts, which pieces of information are brought closer to us, which are summarized, and which remain distant. They can answer a question. But they can also contribute to the way we formulate the next question. The problem, then, is not only what the system does in our place. It is also what it makes appear before us. This difference is fundamental. A system does not need to make a decision in our place in order to participate in the situation in which we decide. It is enough for it to participate in selecting what we encounter. It can bring one possibility closer. Move another farther away. Make one immediately visible. Leave another buried in a space we never traverse. This does not mean that it determines our decision.

We can accept.

Refuse.

Turn away.

Combine.

Question.

Invent.

But all of this occurs from something that has encountered our attention. The freedom to respond to what appears does not erase the question of how it appeared. We must therefore resist two opposing conclusions. The first would be:

“Since our environment participates in what appears to us, we are not free.”

That would confuse condition with determination. The second would be:

“Since we can always refuse what is presented to us, the organization of appearance is of no importance.”

That would forget that what never appears can almost never be refused, discussed, or transformed. Between these two positions lies a much more interesting space. We are conditioned without necessarily being determined. We receive a world without receiving a completely closed world. We encounter certain possibilities without all possibilities being contained in what we encounter. And precisely because our field is never absolutely closed, we can sometimes expand it. An encounter can alter a habit. A question can shift a category. An experience can make visible what was not. A relationship can open a possibility we could not yet formulate. Freedom is therefore not the absence of conditions. It also appears in our capacity to work with what is given to us. But this capacity itself depends on one thing:

that something can still appear otherwise.

This is why a world saturated with possibilities is not necessarily a freer world. We could be surrounded by thousands of options and still encounter only a few trajectories. We could have access to an immense quantity of information and see only what is constantly brought closer to us. We could be able to choose among many answers without ever encountering another way of asking the question. The quantity of visible options is therefore not enough to measure the openness of a world. We must also look at the capacity of that world to make appear what was not yet within our horizon. True openness does not consist solely in multiplying answers. It also consists in allowing new questions to appear. It does not consist merely in increasing the available paths. It consists in allowing new paths to be discovered. It does not consist only in presenting more. It presupposes the possibility of encountering differently.

We can now understand why the problem of artificial intelligence goes beyond the question of its performance. A machine may be capable of producing extraordinary results. But it is not only what it produces that matters. We must also look at the world of possibilities in which its productions place us.

What does it show us?

What does it not show us?

What does it bring closer?

What does it move farther away?

What does it make familiar?

What does it leave unfamiliar?

What does it allow us to imagine?

And above all:

what might never appear simply because we become accustomed to looking through the same forms of presentation?

The question is not to assume that a machine would necessarily hide something. It is more general. Every organization of appearance necessarily produces a selection. Seeing something always means, at least in part, not seeing something else at the same moment. The question then becomes one of the possibility of shifting this selection.

Can we look differently?

Can we search elsewhere?

Can we encounter what was not offered?

Can we alter the conditions under which something appears?

Here we touch upon a deeper dimension of freedom.

We began by believing that freedom lay in choice. We now discover that choice rests upon something that precedes it. A world must appear. A possibility must take its place within it. It must encounter our attention. It must be able to become thinkable. Then we must still be able to interpret it, refuse it, transform it, or combine it. Freedom therefore does not begin only when we say yes or no. It has a prior history.

Before choice, there is appearance.

Before appearance, there are conditions.

But these conditions are not yet our next problem. For now, it is enough to observe this shift. We are no longer before an individual placed before a neutral world, freely choosing among already constituted possibilities. We are before a relationship. A being encounters a world. The world appears to that being in a certain way. This appearance makes certain possibilities encounterable. These possibilities can then be transformed by action. And action can, in turn, modify the world that will appear next. Choice is therefore not an isolated point. It is a moment within a continuity. And if this continuity is real, then a question becomes unavoidable:

Who participates in making the world appear in which we will choose tomorrow?

It is this question that we must now devote ourselves to. For possibilities are not merely encountered. They are also produced, organized, brought closer, moved farther away, and transformed by the conditions in which we live. And when intelligent systems themselves begin to participate in these conditions, they no longer enter merely into our decisions. They enter into the making of the world from which certain decisions may appear. The problem will therefore no longer be merely to know what is presented to us. We will have to understand how what can be presented to us is constructed.

This is where the making of the possible begins.

8. THE MAKING OF THE POSSIBLE

We tend to speak of possibilities as though they were already there, deposited somewhere before us, and all that remained for us to do was discover them. A door is open or closed. A road exists or does not exist. Information is available or inaccessible. A person possesses certain skills or does not possess them. An institution permits an action or forbids it. A technology makes something possible that it did not make possible before.

We then describe conditions as a backdrop. They would be there, around us, while we acted within them. But this way of seeing leaves something in the shadows. A condition is not merely what surrounds an action. It can contribute to determining what becomes accessible, thinkable, visible, and practicable through that action. It does not necessarily decide in our place. Yet it participates in constituting the field in which a decision can take place.

This is a considerable difference. For if we consider conditions as mere background, we will seek freedom only in the moment when a person chooses. If we understand that they participate in the formation of the possible, then we must follow their movement long before the choice. We must then shift our gaze. A condition makes certain possibilities accessible. These possibilities orient certain actions. These actions produce consequences. These consequences, in turn, transform the conditions. Thus begins a loop:

conditions → possibilities → actions → consequences → new conditions.

The world in which we act is therefore never exactly the same after our action as it was before it. We do not merely inhabit conditions. We participate in their transformation. And it is precisely because we transform them that tomorrow's possibilities will not be exactly those of today.

A road does not merely connect two places. It modifies the relationships between them. What was difficult to reach becomes more accessible. What was distant enters a network of circulation. People can meet more often. Goods can circulate. Activities can emerge. Others can disappear. Yet the road has chosen none of these actions. It has not decided what people would do with it. But it has altered the conditions under which certain actions could take place. This is what forces us to take conditions seriously. A condition is not necessarily a direct cause. It can be a transformation of the environment in which causes, choices, and consequences become possible.

A school does not impose upon every student what they will become. But it transforms the possibilities to which they can gain access. A library does not force anyone to read. But it makes

certain encounters with texts more accessible. A communication network does not command every conversation. But it profoundly transforms the conditions in which people can meet, transmit, compare, and act. It would therefore be insufficient to ask only:

“What did this person choose?”

We must also ask:

“Under what conditions could this choice appear and become practicable?”

But this question must not become a way of eliminating the action of the one who chooses. Saying that conditions participate in the possible does not mean that the individual merely suffers their environment. That would replace one simplification with another. There is a relationship. Conditions make certain actions possible. Actions transform conditions. New conditions, in turn, open or close certain possibilities. We are therefore within a movement in which none of these dimensions can be isolated without losing part of what is happening. This is where the development of intelligent systems introduces a particular transformation. For a long time, many of our tools were relatively easy to distinguish from the environment in which we decided.

We could use an object.

Then put it away.

We could consult a book.

Then close it.

We could ask a person for information.

Then continue on our way.

Intelligent systems introduce a different relationship. They can select, organize, reformulate, recommend, generate, and present. They therefore no longer necessarily merely respond to a possibility that has already been clearly constituted. They can participate in the way that possibility appears to us. A person requests information. The system presents certain results. The person reacts to those results. Their reaction produces new data. Those data alter what may be presented to them next. The system is then no longer merely an intermediary between a person and information. It enters the loop.

A human condition produces a request.

The request encounters a system.

The system produces a response.

The response transforms human action.

Action produces new consequences.

These consequences, in turn, become conditions for subsequent interactions.

The movement can begin again. What was presented as a simple tool thus begins to become a component of the conditions under which possibilities are encountered. This transformation does not mean that the system necessarily possesses an intention to guide us. There is no need to assume a hidden will for a transformation of conditions to have real effects. An organization can produce effects without each of its elements “deciding” to produce them. What matters here is therefore not only knowing:

“Who decides?”

We must also look at:

“What makes certain decisions more accessible than others?”

A repeated possibility becomes familiar.

A familiar possibility requires less effort to be recognized.

What is recognized more easily can be considered more quickly. What is considered more quickly can be chosen more often. And what is chosen more often can produce more traces that allow it to be proposed again. A loop can thus form. This is not necessarily a loop of constraint. It can be a loop of learning, adaptation, efficiency. But every loop possesses a property that must be examined carefully:

it can reinforce what it already encounters.

A preference can produce recommendations that confirm that preference. These recommendations can produce new choices. These choices can produce new data. The new data can reinforce the way the system understands that person. The system then learns something about the person from what the person has already done. But the person subsequently encounters what the system has learned about them. Something strange then occurs. We can begin to encounter ourselves through the traces of what we have already been. This is where a deeper question appears. If conditions are constructed from our past actions, and if these conditions then participate in producing our future possibilities, then our past can enter into the constitution of our future. But we must not immediately conclude that the past determines the future. That would still be too simple.

A condition can orient without enclosing.

A habit can facilitate an action without making it compulsory.

A recommendation can make a possibility more visible without eliminating the others.

An infrastructure can favor certain paths without necessarily forbidding all the others.

The problem appears when what was one possibility among others gradually begins to become the ordinary condition from which other possibilities are encountered. At that point, the question is no longer only that of choice. It becomes the question of the structure that precedes choice. We must then distinguish two things. There is the act of producing a possibility. And

there is the act of producing the conditions under which certain possibilities will be more easily produced than others. The second transformation is more subtle. It acts upon the way the field itself evolves. An intelligent system can thus learn from our behaviors and then contribute to structuring what we encounter. We enter an environment that we have helped produce. But this environment returns to us transformed. It then offers us possibilities based on our own traces. We act upon it. It acts upon the conditions of our subsequent actions. We produce data. These data participate in producing new presentations. We encounter these presentations. We act again. The relationship becomes circular.

It is no longer simply:

human → tool.

We must sometimes think:

human → system → new conditions → human → system → new conditions.

This circularity profoundly alters our way of understanding action. For if we are accustomed to seeking the origin of an action in the one who performs it, we must now also observe the conditions that have made certain actions more probable, more visible, or more accessible. This does not take action away from the human. It allows us to better understand the world in which that action takes shape.

But another question arises.

Who makes these conditions?

The answer cannot simply be:

“the machine.”

Intelligent systems do not arise outside the human world. They are designed, trained, fed, deployed, and used within environments already organized by human beings, institutions, infrastructures, languages, economies, practices, and prior decisions. The conditions that produce systems, in turn, participate in producing new conditions. There is therefore not, on one side, a human being who would create the world and, on the other, an artificial intelligence that would then enter that world and act within it as a foreign force. The system enters a history already underway. Then it participates in its transformation. And that transformation returns to us. We must therefore abandon an overly simple image of technology as something humanity would place before itself. Some systems become part of the environment in which humanity acts. The question is no longer only:

“What can we do with this technology?”

It becomes:

“What kind of environment are we producing by doing this?”

And above all:

“What possibilities will this environment make more accessible tomorrow?”

This question also transforms the way we think about responsibility. An action does not produce only an immediate result. It can modify the conditions of future actions. Building a road, creating an institution, developing a language, installing an infrastructure, automating a task, or introducing an intelligent system: in each of these cases, we are not merely producing something now. We are also modifying the field in which other actions may take place. We therefore act on several levels at once. We produce consequences. But our consequences become conditions. And our conditions become possibilities. And our possibilities become actions again. This is why the question of action cannot be separated from that of transforming the world in which future action will take place. We never choose only what we are going to do. Through our choices, we also contribute to transforming what may be chosen afterward. Yet we must resist a temptation. If everything participates in producing possibilities, we might be tempted to want to control all conditions. That would be impossible. And above all, it would be contradictory. For a completely controlled world would be a world in which new possibilities had already been reduced to those that control had anticipated. Yet the possible cannot be reduced to what we know how to predict.

A condition can produce something we had not anticipated.

An encounter can make a new action appear.

An error can open another path.

A person can use an infrastructure in an unexpected way.

A system can produce a combination its designers had not imagined.

The world therefore does not cease to produce novelty simply because we organize its conditions. We must even go further.

A condition that allows no new possibility to appear eventually ceases to be merely a condition. It becomes a closure.

The difference is essential. Organizing the possible does not necessarily mean closing it. Creating conditions does not necessarily mean deciding their outcomes. The question then becomes one of an environment's capacity to continue producing possibilities that are not entirely contained within what preceded them. We can now return to freedom. We began by understanding that freedom could not be reduced to the moment when a person chooses. We now discover why. Before choice, there is a field of possibilities. But this field is not immobile. It is continually transformed by the conditions in which we live and by the actions we perform. We therefore do not simply receive a world of possibilities. We participate in producing the world of possibilities in which we will act afterward. Freedom then does not consist only in choosing within a given world. It also implies the possibility of participating in the transformation of the conditions that will give form to the next world. This participation is not all-powerful. We control neither all conditions nor all consequences. But we can learn to see the loops to which we belong.

We can ask what an action makes possible.

We can ask what it makes less accessible.

We can observe what becomes more visible through repetition.

We can ask ourselves what possibilities our environment produces from our own behaviors.

And above all, we can keep open the question of what these conditions will still allow us to transform.

For the true issue may not be to build an environment that always gives us more possibilities. It is to build an environment capable of allowing the possible to continue transforming. Intelligent systems make this question more urgent because they can themselves participate in this loop.

They learn from our traces.

They produce responses from those traces.

Those responses influence our actions.

Our actions produce new traces.

And those traces can modify what will be presented to us next.

We thus enter a world in which some of the conditions of our possibilities are themselves capable of adapting. This opens new powers. But it also raises a question we can no longer postpone:

What happens when we begin entrusting systems with an increasing share of the production of the conditions under which our possibilities appear?

This question no longer concerns only the making of the possible. It concerns what we gradually cease to exercise when we allow certain functions of this making to leave our practice. This is where another question begins.

What do we become when we no longer participate in the production of the conditions of our own action in the same way?

9. FREEDOM BEFORE FREEDOM

We have long imagined freedom from a precise instant. An instant when several possibilities present themselves. An instant when a person looks at what exists before them. An instant when they can say yes or no, move forward or remain, accept or refuse. We placed freedom there. In choice. And this representation possesses an obviousness that is difficult to abandon.

If I can choose among several possibilities, I am free.

If someone prevents me from choosing, my freedom is reduced.

If several paths open before me, my freedom seems to increase.

But what we have seen so far forces us to shift the question once again. For the possibilities among which we choose did not appear by themselves. They were made accessible, visible, understandable, and practicable by a set of conditions. We therefore never choose in a vacuum. We choose within a world that precedes us. And this world is not only what exists around us. It is also the way in which what exists becomes accessible to our action.

Freedom perhaps begins before the moment when we say:

“I choose.”

Imagine a person standing before three doors. They can enter through the first, the second, or the third. We might immediately ask:

“Which one will they choose?”

But another question must precede this one:

“Why only these three doors?”

The question does not necessarily seek a fourth door hidden behind a wall. It seeks to understand how the field of choice was constituted. Perhaps a fourth door exists but is not visible. Perhaps it is visible but inaccessible. Perhaps it is accessible but no one has learned to identify it as a door. Perhaps it is known to some but not to this person. Perhaps, again, no fourth door exists today, but a person could contribute to building one. These situations are different. Yet in each of them, the word “freedom” could be used too quickly. We could measure freedom by the number of choices present before the person. But the number of choices is not enough. Ten possibilities can constitute an extremely closed world if no new possibility can appear. Two possibilities can sometimes open a vaster world if the person can still transform the conditions that make them possible. Freedom is therefore not simply a quantity of doors. It also concerns the possibility that the world may continue producing doors that were not yet there. This is where we must distinguish two forms of freedom. The first is freedom among the possibilities given to us. The second is freedom with regard to the conditions that determine what may be given to us next.

The first asks:

“Can I choose otherwise?”

The second asks:

“Can I still encounter differently what may become a choice?”

This difference seems subtle. It is not. It profoundly alters our conception of freedom. For a person can be perfectly free to choose among the possibilities presented to them while having very little influence over how those possibilities were constituted.

They can choose. But they do not necessarily participate in transforming the field in which they choose. We could therefore possess freedom of decision while gradually losing a freedom further upstream:

the capacity to transform the conditions of our future decisions.

This allows us to understand conditioning differently. Being conditioned is not an anomaly. We all are. We are shaped by languages, relationships, learning, histories, institutions, environments, habits, technologies, and encounters. We never appear in an entirely untouched world. But recognizing this does not mean that we are determined by everything that has shaped us. There is a difference between being conditioned and being definitively enclosed within one's conditions. This difference is essential. A condition can shape us. But we can sometimes encounter it differently. We can interpret it. We can modify it. We can move away from it. We can create other conditions from it.

Freedom is therefore not the absence of every condition. A freedom without conditions might even be impossible to conceive. It would be an action arising from nowhere. Yet we always act from something. Freedom could then be understood differently:

as the possibility of not being definitively enclosed within the conditions from which we have become capable of acting.

This conception gives transformation particular importance. If a person receives an entirely constituted world and then chooses within it, their freedom depends mainly on the extent of the possibilities available. But if they can participate in transforming the conditions that will produce future possibilities, then freedom possesses an additional dimension.

It becomes dynamic. It is no longer measured only by:

“How much can I choose now?”

It also asks:

“What can I still make possible?”

This question changes the position of the one who acts. They are no longer merely the one who selects. They also become the one who can contribute to transformation. They no longer merely receive the field of possibilities. They participate in its evolution. This does not mean that they can control it. To transform is not to control. An action produces consequences that we do not entirely master. A modification of conditions can open an unexpected possibility. A new possibility can produce an unpredictable action. That action can, in turn, modify the conditions. Freedom therefore does not become absolute sovereignty. It becomes a capacity for participation. This is where prediction introduces a new difficulty. To predict is to produce an anticipation from available information. In many fields, this capacity can be extraordinarily useful. It makes it possible to anticipate demand, a trajectory, a need, an anomaly, a probable behavior. But prediction possesses a particular characteristic:

It looks at the future from the past. It searches within what has already happened for patterns that make it possible to anticipate what might happen. This logic becomes particularly powerful when a system continuously learns from our behaviors.

It observes what we do.

It identifies patterns.

It produces predictions.

These predictions can then be used to organize what is presented to us. And what is presented to us can influence what we do.

Then prediction no longer remains merely a description of a possible future. It can enter the loop that contributes to producing the future it seeks to anticipate. Here, a distinction becomes fundamental:

predicting a person is not the same as allowing a person to become otherwise.

A person can be recognized from what they have already been. Their habits can be observed. Their choices can be compared. Their preferences can be modeled. Their behaviors can display regularities.

All of this can be useful. But a past regularity does not necessarily contain a person's entire future possibility. There is something profoundly strange about encountering someone through what we already know about them. We can present them with what corresponds to their previous behavior. We can offer them what they seem to appreciate. We can anticipate what they seem to want. We can reduce uncertainty. And yet, by continually reducing uncertainty, we may also reduce the occasions in which something unexpected can appear. The problem is therefore not prediction itself. The problem appears when prediction ceases to be information about a possible trajectory and begins to participate in constituting the trajectory itself.

A person may then be likely to encounter more often what their past already made possible to predict. They may become increasingly consistent with their history. But being consistent with one's past is not necessarily the same as being able to become otherwise. Here we must be precise. A system that recommends does not necessarily impose. A recommendation can be ignored. A proposal can be refused. A possibility can be sought elsewhere. Freedom is therefore not destroyed simply because a system participates in what is presented to us. But something more subtle can occur. If the same forms of presentation are repeated, they can become habitual. If they become habitual, they can become invisible as conditions. We may then feel that we are choosing spontaneously while our way of encountering possibilities has gradually been organized by an environment that has become familiar. The most powerful conditioning may not be the one that tells us:

“You must choose this.”

It may be the one that makes certain possibilities appear so naturally that we no longer think to ask what might have appeared otherwise. Freedom then requires something more difficult than the mere presence of alternatives. It requires the possibility of questioning the field in which alternatives appear. This leads us to another distinction. There is a difference between having possibilities and being able to transform the conditions that produce possibilities. A person may have many options while having very little influence over the environment that determines which options will be offered to them tomorrow. They may be extremely free in a given moment and gradually become less capable of transforming the conditions of their choices. The paradox

is important. An environment can immediately increase the number of possibilities available while reducing, over the longer term, the capacity to produce other possibilities. More choice therefore does not necessarily mean more freedom. The multiplication of answers is not identical to the opening of the possible. A library filled with thousands of books is not an open world if no new book can enter it. A system that constantly offers new options is not necessarily open if all those options are produced from the same model, which itself cannot be transformed. Openness does not consist only in multiplying paths. It consists in preserving the possibility that the field of paths itself can change. This is why freedom must be thought of in time. Not only as a property of the moment when we choose, but as a relationship between what we can do now and what we can still make possible afterward. A decision transforms something. This transformation produces consequences. Consequences become conditions. Conditions modify possibilities. Possibilities modify actions. The movement begins again.

Freedom is therefore engaged in this circulation. What matters is not only:

“Can I choose now?”

But also:

“After this choice, what capacities for transformation will remain to me?”

This question is not yet about delegation. It concerns the very structure of openness. A free world is not necessarily a world in which nothing is determined. It is a world in which the conditions that shape us can still be encountered, questioned, and transformed. Intelligent systems make this question particularly visible because they can participate at several levels of this circulation. They can organize access to information. They can produce representations. They can generate possibilities for action. They can learn from human responses. They can adapt their outputs to those responses. They can therefore participate in the continuous transformation of the environment in which we act. This power is not in itself a loss of freedom. On the contrary, it can open possibilities that did not previously exist. But the more a system participates in shaping the conditions of our action, the more important it becomes to be able to understand and transform the relationship we maintain with it. The decisive question is not:

“Does the machine choose in our place?”

It may lie much further upstream:

“Can we still transform the conditions under which the machine and we together produce what will become possible?”

This is where freedom encounters its most discreet limit. Not prohibition. Not the absence of choice. But the gradual closure of the capacity to produce the conditions of choice differently. We can now understand why freedom cannot be reduced to independence. Being free does not mean living without depending on anything. We depend on relationships, infrastructures, knowledge, other beings, environments, and technologies. The question lies elsewhere.

What can we transform in the relationships upon which we depend?

A dependence can be endured.

It can also be understood.

It can be modified.

It can be reorganized.

Freedom then appears less as an escape from every dependence than as a capacity to transform some of the conditions upon which our existence depends. This profoundly changes the way we must think about our relationship with intelligent systems. We probably cannot simply place ourselves “outside” them. They are gradually becoming elements of our environments. The question will therefore not only be how to remain independent of them. It will be how to preserve the capacity to understand, discuss, modify, and, when necessary, question the conditions of our dependence.

We began with a simple question:

“Can I choose?”

We arrive at a much more demanding question:

“Can I still participate in transforming what will make my choices possible tomorrow?”

The first question belongs to the moment of decision. The second belongs to the becoming of the field in which decisions can appear. And perhaps this is where an essential dimension of freedom lies. Freedom does not consist only in having several paths before us. It consists in not permanently losing the capacity to encounter others. It does not consist in eliminating all conditions. It consists in being able to transform some of the conditions that shape us. It does not consist in escaping the world. It consists in still being able to act upon the way the world in which we will act afterward is constituted. Thus, freedom begins before the freedom we are accustomed to naming. Before choice, there is appearance. Before appearance, there are conditions. And behind these conditions, there are relationships that our actions can transform. We are therefore not merely beings who choose within an already constituted world. We also participate, sometimes without seeing it, in the constitution of the world in which other choices will become possible. The question that now opens is no longer only that of freedom. It concerns what we do when we begin entrusting to others—human beings, institutions, or intelligent systems—a part of the operations through which the conditions of our action are constituted. For one thing is to choose. Another is to participate in making the field within which we will choose. And another still is to let someone or something make that field in our place. It is from this difference that a new question appears:

what do we cease to exercise when we delegate what contributed to making our possibilities possible?

PART IV — WHEN OUR REPRESENTATIONS REFER US BACK TO OURSELVES

10. Language Is Not Outside

In the previous chapter, we shifted the place of freedom. We began with choice. Then we had to move upstream of choice, back to that moment when a possibility becomes capable of appearing. Something can be possible without appearing as such. It can exist without being accessible, be accessible without attracting attention, attract attention without becoming an actually conceivable possibility. Thus, before the question, “What will I choose?”, another question imposes itself: “What can I actually choose among?” But this question calls for another. For a possibility that appears does not arise in a vacuum. It must be capable of being distinguished, recognized, brought into relation with something else, named, told, compared, questioned. It must be able to enter into a relation in which it becomes shareable. This is where language intervenes.

We often tend to place language after the world: first things exist, then we perceive them, and then we give them names. This sequence is not entirely false. A mountain does not need our word “mountain” in order to be there. A pain does not wait to be named before it is felt. A living being does not begin to exist when we assign it a category. But this is not enough to describe what happens. For when we name, we do not simply make a word correspond to a thing that has already been entirely determined. We introduce a distinction into our relation with it. We can then recognize it, seek it, compare it, transmit it, challenge it. Language therefore does not simply cover over a world that has already been thought. It participates in the conditions under which this world can become intelligible among us.

Language does not give us the world. It gives us certain ways of entering into relation with it.

This difference is decisive. The word “tree” is not a tree. The word “pain” does not suffer. The word “love” does not love. The word “human” is not human existence itself. To confuse the sign with what it designates would be to confine the world within the categories through which we attempt to encounter it. But the opposite error would be to believe that, because the word is not the thing, it has no consequence. Saying “tree” allows us to distinguish something. Saying “forest” allows us to establish other relations among these trees. Saying “resource,” “habitat,” “territory,” “heritage,” or “organism” does not make entirely new realities appear, but it modifies the possible relations with what is already there. The same reality can thus enter several networks of meanings without being exhausted by any of them. Language therefore opens passages. It makes certain differences perceptible. It allows an experience to be preserved beyond the moment in which it was lived. It makes possible the transmission of what is no longer present, the evocation of what is not yet there, the formulation of what could be otherwise. Above all, it allows for an essential operation: returning to what we thought we knew. We can say: “We were mistaken.” This sentence reveals something particular about language. It does not merely serve to assert. It allows us to take back an assertion, shift a distinction, modify a relation among several things. A language is thus both inherited and transformed by those who speak it. It precedes us, but we modify it by using it. We enter into words we did not invent. Then we use them differently. And sometimes, these new usages in turn transform what it becomes possible to say. This is why the absence of a word does not necessarily mean the absence of a reality. An experience can exist before having a formulation that allows it to be shared. But when a distinction becomes sayable, it can become more easily transmissible, comparable, and contestable. What was merely felt can enter into a collective relation. We must then distinguish two things: not existing in language and not existing at all.

Language is not the measure of existence. It is one of the conditions of its symbolic entering-into-relation. This distinction becomes particularly important when intelligent systems begin to participate in the circulation of language. Within the framework of this book, we will consider them neither as persons to whom human interiority should immediately be attributed, nor as mere instruments whose outputs would have no effect of their own once a human uses them. Their status is different. An intelligent system is considered here as a system that intervenes in operations of processing and producing symbolic forms: it can generate, reformulate, translate, summarize, classify, compare, select, or organize content. What interests us is not to decide, on the basis of these operations, whether or not it possesses an experience similar to ours. That question goes beyond what its observable functioning alone allows us to establish. The question that concerns us is another:

What happens when its outputs enter into our relations with the world?

A generated sentence can be read. A formulation can be taken up. A summary can become the version through which someone approaches a subject. A category can be reused in a discussion, a search, or a decision. A translation can allow information to circulate between people who previously did not share the same language. From this moment on, the system is no longer situated solely on the side of technical production. Its output enters into a human circulation of signs, distinctions, and interpretations. We must therefore shift our gaze slightly. We will not ask only whether a formulation produced by a system is correct. We will also ask what it allows us to see, what it leaves in the shadows, and which relations it makes easier. Let us take the case of a summary. Summarizing does not necessarily mean falsifying. A good summary can be accurate. Yet, in order to be a summary, it must select. It retains certain pieces of information, condenses others, and necessarily leaves some outside the frame. This selection does not automatically mean that a representation is false. It means that it is situated. And every selection modifies the conditions of visibility. What appears repeatedly in a representation can become immediately identifiable. What appears rarely may require additional effort to be found again. What is entirely absent can become difficult to question, not because it does not exist, but because the representation does not spontaneously lead us to it.

This is why accuracy is not enough to exhaust the question of representation. We must be able to ask:

Is it accurate?

But also:

What becomes visible?

What becomes more difficult to see?

This second series of questions does not turn language into a prison. On the contrary, it reminds us of its capacity for movement. A representation can be taken up, confronted with others, corrected, completed. A category can be challenged. A formulation can be replaced. Plurality then becomes a condition of lucidity. No formulation by itself contains everything that can appear of the world. No symbolic map should be able to present itself as the world itself. The Real resists our descriptions precisely because it cannot be exhausted by them. This resistance is essential. Without it, language could eventually take itself for what it seeks to encounter. Yet we need to be able to return to the world from our own representations, recognize their

insufficiency, encounter what they had not anticipated, and modify the distinctions with which we approach it.

This is where language directly meets the question opened in the previous chapter. We had asked: who participates in making the world in which we will choose tomorrow appear?

Language is part of that answer, not because it would fabricate the world in our place, but because it contributes to determining how certain possibilities become sayable, shareable, and discussable. And when intelligent systems participate in this circulation, they too enter into this dynamic. They do not thereby become the sole origin of our representations. They are inserted into languages, data, practices, and relations that precede them, while in turn producing new forms capable of being taken up and reused. The movement then becomes circular. We produce forms. These forms are taken up by systems. The systems produce others. We read them, select them, transform them, and reintroduce them into our practices. What has been produced can thus return as a condition for future production. At this stage, however, we do not yet have to follow all the consequences of this movement. It is enough to have established this: language is not an external space into which we would deposit, after the fact, what we have already thought. It belongs to our relations with the world. It organizes distinctions, makes certain things shareable, allows them to be challenged, and contributes to the way in which possibilities can appear.

Intelligent systems can now participate in this symbolic activity. The question is therefore no longer merely what they can say. It becomes a question of what the circulation of what they say makes possible. For as soon as a representation ceases to be merely looked at and begins to orient an action, a decision, a practice, or a new representation, something changes. We are no longer merely before language. We are before the representation that acts.

11. The Representation That Acts

In the previous chapter, we followed language to the point where it makes certain distinctions shareable. A reality can be named, described, compared. A possibility can thus enter a space where it becomes sayable and discussable. But a description does not yet transform what it describes. We must therefore cross an additional threshold: the point at which a representation enters into action.

To understand this, let us take an ordinary situation. A person has to go to a place they do not know. They consult a digital map. Streets, distances, routes, and traffic information appear on their screen. They choose one of the proposed routes and set off. The map is obviously not the territory. It contains neither the streets themselves, nor the buildings, nor the people who are there. Yet it has participated in the way the person will encounter this territory. It has selected certain information, organized it according to a certain structure, and made it usable for a specific action: moving from one place to another. This is where we can clarify the meaning of representation.

A representation is a construction that makes certain aspects of a reality present in a form with which we can enter into relation.

It selects.

It organizes.

It makes accessible from a certain perspective.

A map thus represents a territory by making certain spatial relations appear. A graph represents a series of data by making certain variations appear. A text represents an experience by bringing it into a communicable form.

None of these representations is the reality it represents. But none is external either to the relations we maintain with that reality. The map in our example does not move the person. It does not choose in their place. It intervenes elsewhere: it modifies the conditions from which the person can orient their movement.

This distinction is the starting point of the chapter.

A Representation Becomes a Mediation

Before consulting the map, several paths may exist. After consulting it, some become immediately visible, others less so. The person can follow the proposed route, look for another, reject the recommendation, or modify their route along the way. The representation therefore does not determine their action. It nevertheless provides them with a certain way of encountering the territory. This is why representing is not yet acting, but a representation can become a mediation of action. The word matters. A mediation is not a replacement. The map does not become the traveler. Nor does it become the territory. It intervenes between a situation and an action by giving certain aspects of that situation a form from which the action can be oriented. We can then observe something deeper.

The person follows the route. They take a street. They encounter particular traffic. They arrive at their destination. This movement produces new information: travel time, traffic density, the possible closure of a road, a change in a route. This information can then be integrated into new representations. The territory was not created by the map. But the action oriented by the map has produced a new situation that can now be represented. This is where the loop that interests us takes shape:

representation → action → transformation → new representation.

There is no need to turn it into a general formula repeated at every stage. It is enough to see what it means in our example. The representation makes a certain action possible or easier. The action transforms a situation. The transformed situation can be represented again. Representation is therefore no longer merely the result of observation. It becomes an element of the process through which the conditions of the next observation are produced.

The Intelligent System in the Loop

This situation becomes more complex when an intelligent system intervenes in the production of the representation. We must be precise here about its status. Within the framework of this book, we do not call an “intelligent system” a new person hidden behind the machine. We do not attribute to it, on the basis of its outputs, a consciousness, an experience, or an intention similar to those of a human. But neither do we reduce it to an object without a role in the relation. We consider it a system capable of processing information and producing or transforming forms that can then intervene in human activity: recommendations, classifications,

summaries, predictions, translations, formulations, or other outputs that organize information. Its status is therefore that of an operative mediator. It does not necessarily decide. It does not necessarily perceive the world as we perceive it. It is not the sole author of the situation that follows. But it can transform the data it receives into an output that modifies what a person subsequently sees, compares, or considers.

In our example, the system can calculate several routes and recommend one. The recommendation is not the territory. Nor is it the journey. It is a representation produced from certain information and offered in a situation where someone has to act. The person can accept or reject it. But if they follow it, the system has participated in the conditions of their action. This participation does not mean that the system “wants” that action. Nor does it mean that it controls what happens next. It means something more precise: its output enters into a causal and practical relation whose consequences can modify the conditions of future productions. It is this intermediate status that matters. The system is neither the represented world, nor the human who acts, nor a mere copy of the Real. It is a device that transforms certain information into forms capable of entering into action.

When the Representation Produces Its Own Traces

Let us return to our route. If many people regularly follow the recommendations produced by the system, their movements generate new data. These data can then be used to update representations of traffic, routes, or travel times. The initial representation has therefore participated in an action whose traces can contribute to the next representation. This point must be distinguished from a much stronger idea: that the system itself would create the reality it represents. This is not what we are asserting. The territory remains there. People act. Material conditions resist. Unforeseen events occur. The representation remains a representation. But its use can modify the situation represented. It is this possibility that gives representation its particular power. It can become part of the conditions of what it will later seek to represent. The question is therefore no longer only whether a representation corresponds to its object at the moment when it is produced. We must also look at what happens when it is used. A representation can be accurate and nevertheless orient practices in a way that transforms future conditions. Accuracy remains a requirement. It does not exhaust the question.

From Representation to Condition

As a representation becomes integrated into a practice, it can become less visible as a representation. A person may no longer think about how the route was constructed. They may simply open the application, follow the proposed line, and take the route for granted. What was a construction then becomes a practical condition. This change does not mean that the representation becomes true simply by being used. It means that it acquires a place in the organization of action. This is why we must preserve an essential difference:

a representation is not what it represents; but it can participate in the conditions under which what it represents is encountered.

This formula is enough to shift our gaze. We no longer have to choose between two simplistic images. The first would make representation a perfectly neutral mirror. The second would make it a power that would entirely fabricate the world. It is neither. It is a form situated within a

relation. And when it enters into action, this relation can transform the conditions to which it will later be applied.

What Intelligent Systems Make New

This phenomenon did not begin with artificial intelligence. Humans have always acted from maps, narratives, statistics, models, and categories. The novelty lies in the place intelligent systems can now occupy within this dynamic. They can produce or transform representations from large quantities of information, adapt them to a particular situation, and put them into circulation rapidly. They can thus intervene not only in what we know, but in the form under which certain possibilities are presented to us. Their importance therefore does not lie simply in the amount of content they can produce. It lies in their insertion into loops in which representations can be produced, used, and then renewed from the traces left by their use. The problem is not that representation replaces the world. The problem is that the world to which we return after having acted from a representation may no longer be exactly the world from which that representation had been constructed.

We never encounter exactly the same conditions twice in the same arrangement. And when systems participate in producing representations that orient our actions, this transformation of conditions becomes an integral part of the question. We must then be able to preserve an essential possibility: that of returning to the representation from what the world teaches us after its use. A representation that can be confronted remains a means of relation. A representation that can no longer be questioned risks becoming a condition that we no longer even see. We thus return to the movement opened in Chapter 9. A possibility must appear in order to be encountered as a possibility. Language allows it to be distinguished and shared. Representation gives it a form with which we can work. Action then transforms the conditions of the next encounter. The question that now opens is therefore no longer only:

“How do we represent the world?”

It becomes:

“What happens when we begin to entrust systems with an increasing share of the operations through which we search for, compare, classify, and interpret it?”

From this question onward, we are no longer merely before the power of representations. We enter into the problem of delegation.

12. When the Map Begins to Produce the Territory

We began with a simple distinction. A representation is not what it represents. A map is not a territory. A statistic is not the population it describes. A classification is not the reality of the beings it gathers under a single term. The previous chapter showed that such a distinction nevertheless does not mean that representation is without effect. When it enters into a practice, it can orient an action and thus participate in the transformation of the situation represented. We can now go a little further. What happens when this transformation then returns into the representation itself? This is where the map ceases to be merely a map that we consult. It becomes a map that receives the traces of a territory to which it has contributed by giving certain directions.

The Territory After the Map

Let us take our example again. A person seeks to cross a city. A system proposes a route based on certain available data: roads, distances, traffic, estimated times. The person follows the route. Others do the same. Their movements produce new information about traffic. This information is then used to update the indications provided by the system. Nothing in this process means that the map has become the territory. But something has changed. The territory observed after these movements bears the consequences of actions that were themselves oriented by representations. The initial representation has therefore participated in a transformation whose traces can then enter into a new representation. The movement is no longer merely:

representation → action.

It becomes:

representation → action → transformation → representation.

The final step is essential. What we do from a representation can become part of what will be represented afterward. The representation then encounters a world that is no longer exactly the one it had contributed to describing.

The Loop Does Not Mean That the System Controls the World

From this point, it would be easy to draw an excessive conclusion. One might say: if a representation contributes to transforming what it represents, then it would fabricate reality. This is not what we have established. The territory does not disappear behind the map. It possesses its own resistance. People can reject the route. A road can be closed. An unforeseen event can overturn the conditions. Traffic can change for reasons that have nothing to do with the map. The representation participates. It does not rule. This distinction must also determine how we understand intelligent systems. Within the framework of this book, an intelligent system is not considered a human consciousness installed in a machine. We do not need to attribute to it a will comparable to ours in order to study its effects. But neither is it a simple conduit through which information would pass without transformation. It processes data according to its functioning, produces or selects outputs, and can thus intervene in the forms under which certain situations are presented to humans. Its status is therefore that of a technical participant in a chain of representation and action. It is not the territory. Nor is it necessarily the one who decides what humans will do with the territory. But its outputs can enter into human practices, and the consequences of those practices can then provide new data to the system. What matters, therefore, is not asking the system whether it “wants” to produce such or such a result. We must look at the relation in which its production is inscribed.

When the Loop Strengthens

A loop can simply allow for adaptation. The data change. The representation is corrected. The action becomes more adjusted. But another possibility exists. The representation can contribute to reinforcing the conditions that make its own orientation more frequent. Imagine that a system regularly recommends certain routes because they appear effective in the data available to it. Users follow these recommendations. Their behavior then produces more traces corresponding to these routes. The system finds in the new data a behavior it had already identified. It can then

continue to favor these routes. This is not necessarily an error. The roads may indeed be more heavily used or more efficient. But a new question appears:

what part of what we observe comes from the world as it was, and what part comes from the world after the actions oriented by the representation?

This question does not always allow the two to be separated perfectly. That is precisely the problem. Representation and its object are no longer two independent elements that we could observe without interaction. They meet within a loop.

When the Representation Becomes Invisible

Another transformation can then occur. At first, someone knows that they are following a recommendation. Then the recommendation becomes habitual. Then the habit becomes a procedure. Finally, the procedure can become so ordinary that the representation that helped produce it disappears from our attention. We no longer say:

“I am following this representation.”

We simply say:

“This is how it is done.”

The representation has not ceased to exist. It has ceased to be visible as a representation. It is at this moment that its power can become difficult to question. For in order to challenge a representation, we must still be able to recognize it as a construction capable of being modified. A representation that has become invisible can continue to organize practices without being explicitly discussed. The problem is therefore not only that a representation can be false. A sufficiently integrated representation can become a condition of action before we even think to ask it whether we still want to use it.

Can the World Still Respond?

Here we encounter once again a fundamental requirement of our reflection. The world must be able to respond to our representations. A map must be able to be confronted with the territory. A hypothesis must be able to encounter experience. A prediction must be able to be disproved. A category must be able to be called into question by what it seeks to classify. Without this possibility of resistance, representation risks becoming closed in upon itself. It then produces the behaviors from which it finds the traces that allow it to maintain itself. The problem is not that representation acts. We need it to act.

A map must allow us to move.

A model must allow us to explore.

A classification must allow us to distinguish.

The problem appears when action makes the representation progressively less revisable instead of making it more precise. We then need a particular property in our systems of representation:

their capacity to be taken up again by what resists them.

A useful representation is not one that prevents the world from contradicting it. It is one that can learn from contradiction.

What Intelligent Systems Change in This Dynamic

Intelligent systems make this question particularly visible because they can participate in several successive moments of the loop. They can contribute to producing a representation. This representation can orient a human action. The action produces new traces. These traces can be processed by the system. The system can then produce a new representation from a world partially transformed by previous representations. The system is not necessarily conscious of this circularity in the human sense of the term. Nor is it necessary to attribute an intention to it for the circularity to exist. It belongs to the organization of the process. The philosophical question then shifts. We no longer ask only:

“What does the system represent?”

We must ask:

“To what extent does what it represents participate in the conditions from which it will subsequently represent?”

This question introduces an important difference between two situations. In the first, we have a representation relatively external to what it describes. In the second, we have a representation that intervenes in practices and whose consequences then return to feed new representations. In the second situation, the system no longer merely describes an environment. It participates in a dynamic in which describing and transforming become linked through human uses of representation. We must nevertheless keep the center of gravity in the right place. The system is not alone in this dynamic. Humans choose to use it.

Institutions decide to give it a place.

Practices determine what its outputs become.

The material world imposes its resistances.

The loop is collective and relational.

This is precisely why no part should be isolated from the entire movement.

A Representation That Becomes a Condition

We can now understand what was still only perceptible in the previous chapters. At first, we thought of the world as what exists, and representation as what gives us an image of it. We then saw that this image can orient action. We now discover that action can transform the conditions of the next representation. The boundary between representation and transformation does not disappear. It becomes relational. The map remains a map. The territory remains a territory. But the relation between the two can become productive. A map that is used modifies movements.

Movements modify certain conditions of the territory. These conditions then become data. The data participate in a new map. The next map is therefore not merely a renewed image of the territory. It is also the product of a territory that has already been partially transformed by the uses of earlier representations. It is in this sense alone that we can say:

the map begins to produce the territory.

It does not produce it alone. It does not produce it entirely. It participates in it through the actions it makes possible, facilitates, or orients. This formulation allows us to avoid two symmetrical errors. The first consists in believing that our representations would be mere mirrors. The second consists in believing that they would be sovereign creators of the Real. Between the two lies a more demanding conception:

we represent the world from certain conditions, then we can act from these representations and thus contribute to transforming the conditions from which the world will subsequently be represented.

The world remains vaster than its representations. But our representations now belong to the world they contribute to transforming.

The Next Threshold

We can now leave this part. We began with appearance: before choosing, something must be able to appear as a possibility. We then encountered language: what appears can be distinguished, named, and shared. Then we encountered representation: certain aspects of the world can be organized into a form with which we can act. Finally, we discovered the loop: what is represented can orient an action whose consequences will return to modify the conditions of future representations. The question is therefore no longer only that of representation. It becomes that of the capacity to produce it, question it, modify it, and take it up again. Yet some of these operations can themselves be entrusted to systems.

Search.

Compare.

Classify.

Summarize.

Formulate.

Predict.

Orient.

As we entrust these operations to them, we do not entrust them with tasks alone. We modify the conditions under which we exercise certain of our own capacities. This is where representation encounters delegation. And this is where a new question begins:

what are we really delegating when we delegate a task?

PART V — DELEGATION

13. We Never Delegate Only a Task

Delegating seems, at first glance, to be a simple operation. A task exists. Someone performs it. Then, for a given reason, that task is entrusted to something else: to another person, an institution, a machine, a system. What was previously done by us is now done elsewhere. We have moved the operation. We have gained time, reduced effort, increased speed, sometimes even made possible what we could not have accomplished alone. This way of understanding delegation is not false. It is simply incomplete. For a task is never merely a task. To perform an operation, we must be able to recognize it, understand what it requires, distinguish what matters from what does not, encounter the difficulties it presents, and modify our way of proceeding when conditions change. A task is therefore embedded within a broader set of human possibilities. It mobilizes certain capacities, even when we no longer notice them because we exercise them every day. We can then distinguish two things that habit easily confuses.

A task is an identifiable operation. A capacity is the possibility of performing, understanding, modifying, or taking up that operation again.

This distinction changes the question. When I delegate a task, I do not necessarily transfer the capacity that enabled me to perform it. I can continue to possess that capacity while ceasing to perform the operation myself. But the very fact that the operation is now performed elsewhere modifies the conditions under which my capacity encounters the world. This is where delegation begins to become more interesting than the mere transfer of work. Take an ordinary operation: searching for information. For a long time, searching meant moving through a space of information that was not immediately given to us. We had to formulate a question, search for sources, compare formulations, distinguish contradictory information, return to an initial hypothesis, and sometimes discover in the course of the search that the question itself needed to be reformulated. A system can now perform a considerable part of this operation. We formulate a request. It gathers, organizes, summarizes, or proposes an answer. The task of searching has changed form. We can welcome this. We are right to do so when this transformation allows us to access more quickly what we need.

But something else has happened. We have not merely moved a sequence of operations. We have moved the place where certain operations take place. The question is therefore not only: who performs the task?

It becomes: what operations were contained within that task, and where are they now?

This question does not seek to oppose the human to the machine. Nor does it assume that every delegated task should be taken back. It would be absurd to regard all delegation as a loss. We have always delegated a multitude of operations, and this delegation is part of the transformation of societies. The problem appears when we believe that only the result has been transferred. A task can produce a result while, in the course of being performed, also providing an opportunity to exercise certain capacities. Searching sometimes requires comparing. Writing sometimes requires clarification. Calculating sometimes requires verification. Translating sometimes requires encountering another organization of meaning. Building requires

understanding the resistance of matter. Teaching requires reformulating what one believed one had understood.

The completed task gives us something. But its accomplishment also does something to us. We must not, however, move too quickly. The fact that a task is delegated does not automatically mean that a capacity disappears. A person can delegate an operation and continue to know how to perform it. They may even use the time freed up to develop other capacities. Delegation is therefore not, in itself, a dispossession. It is first a modification of the conditions of exercise. This clarification is essential. It allows us to move beyond an overly simple opposition between autonomy and dependence. Being autonomous does not mean doing everything oneself. A human existence is made of relations, tools, transmitted knowledge, infrastructures, and collaborations. We do not produce the conditions of our existence alone. We depend. And this dependence is not necessarily a weakness. The question becomes rather: what do we depend on, and what can we still do with this dependence?

When a task is delegated, there are at least two possible transformations. The first concerns the operation itself. What was done by us is now done by another. The second concerns the environment in which we act. Since this operation is no longer performed in the same way, the opportunities to exercise, observe, or modify it may also change. It is this second transformation that often remains invisible. An infrastructure can enable us to do more while having us do certain things less directly. It can increase our power to act while distancing from us certain operations that previously participated in our way of understanding that action. This is not about regretting the time when we did everything ourselves. It is about looking at what has changed. For when we delegate a task, we transform a relation between ourselves, the operation, and the world. Before delegation, we could be directly confronted with certain difficulties of the operation. After delegation, these difficulties may be handled elsewhere, made invisible, condensed into an interface, or transformed into a result. The result arrives. The path, however, may have changed. Yet this path was not necessarily a mere detour. It could constitute one of the places where a capacity was formed, tested, corrected, and brought up against its own limits.

This is why the question cannot be only: what have we gained by delegating?

We must also ask: what conditions of exercise have we transformed?

This question does not condemn delegation. It makes it more precise. We can delegate a task and retain the capacity to take it back. We can delegate certain operations while maintaining the possibility of understanding what they do. We can use a system without entirely surrendering our capacity to examine, challenge, or modify what it produces. Delegation then becomes a relation rather than an abandonment.

But this relation is never perfectly static. What we do regularly remains inscribed in our way of acting. What we no longer encounter in the same way can, over time, change its place in our practice. A capacity can remain present without being called upon with the same frequency, in the same circumstances, or with the same familiarity. We thus arrive at an even more demanding distinction. There is what we can still do. And there is what the conditions of our existence still give us the opportunity to do. The two do not always coincide. A society can preserve a competence in its books, schools, archives, specialists, or machines, while progressively reducing the situations in which that competence is directly exercised by those who depend on these systems. The capacity has not necessarily disappeared. But its relation to the world has changed.

This is why a civilization should not only ask which tasks it can entrust to systems that are faster, more precise, or more powerful. It should also know which capacities remain understandable, accessible, and recoverable when necessary. The question is not to preserve every task. It is not to confuse the preservation of the result with the preservation of the possibility of acting upon what produces the result.

We can accept that a machine calculates faster than we do without wanting to recalculate every operation by hand. We can accept that a system helps us search without wanting to give up understanding how a search can be conducted. We can accept that a technology translates, classifies, or recommends without believing that we must therefore become incapable of understanding, questioning, or modifying the conditions under which these operations are performed.

Delegating does not necessarily mean ceasing to know. But delegating always, at least potentially, transforms the situation in which knowing, doing, and taking something back become possible. It is this transformation that we must now examine more closely. For a capacity exists not only as an abstract possession. It also exists in its exercise, in the situations that call upon it, in the difficulties that put it to the test, and in the possibility of mobilizing it when conditions change. What then becomes of a capacity when the world in which we live ceases to call upon it regularly? The question is no longer that of the task. It is that of exercise. And this is where the next problem begins.

14. The Capacity We Cease to Exercise

A capacity can remain present even as we use it less. This obvious fact is more important than it appears. We tend to think of a capacity as a property that we either possess or do not possess. We know how to write, or we do not know how to write. We know how to calculate, or we do not know how to calculate. We know how to search, compare, translate, repair, build, orient ourselves. The capacity then seems to exist somewhere within us, available like an instrument that we could take up again whenever we needed it. But a human capacity is not merely an abstract possibility. It also exists in its exercise. It is encountered in concrete situations, in the difficulties it passes through, in the errors it allows us to recognize, in the corrections it requires us to make. We do not discover only what we are capable of doing when we succeed at an operation. We also discover it when the operation resists, when our first way of doing things fails and we have to invent another.

To exercise a capacity is therefore more than producing a result. It is maintaining a relation with what that capacity makes it possible to encounter. When a task is regularly delegated, this relation can change. At first, the change may seem insignificant. An operation becomes faster. A difficulty disappears from our daily lives. A tool takes care of what previously required time or effort from us. Then, because the operation has become less necessary, we practice it less. Because we practice it less, it becomes less familiar. Because it becomes less familiar, turning to the system becomes more natural. Delegation can then reinforce itself:

less exercise → less familiarity → greater reliance on delegation → even less exercise.

This is not a law according to which all delegation would necessarily lead to a loss of capacity. That would be too simple. It is a possible dynamic. And this dynamic deserves to be examined because it concerns not only what we know how to do today. It concerns the ease with which we can still mobilize a capacity when conditions change. There is indeed a difference between

having learned something and still being able to use it with ease. There is also a difference between being able to execute an operation and being able to understand what happens when it fails. A person may continue to obtain an answer without being able to reconstruct the path that once made it possible to obtain that answer. They may use a procedure without being able to modify its principles. They may receive guidance without knowing how to find their way again when that guidance is no longer available. The result can therefore remain accessible while the capacity to produce, verify, or recover that result moves further away. This is where a distinction becomes necessary.

There is the power that an infrastructure gives us. And there is the power we retain to modify that infrastructure.

The two can increase together. But they can also diverge. An infrastructure can make a person capable of doing more than before. It can give them access to resources, calculations, information, or possibilities that they could not mobilize alone. This increase is real. But if that infrastructure becomes the only environment in which action is possible, another question appears: what can we still do when we have to understand, correct, or transform the infrastructure itself? The question is therefore not whether we have become more powerful thanks to the tool.

We may have.

The question is where our capacity to intervene now lies. Let us take research again. A system can allow us to obtain in a few seconds a synthesis that would have taken us much longer to construct. This can free time to think, write, experiment, or pursue another line of research. But if we almost never again encounter the operations that allow us to construct research ourselves, our relation to information can gradually change. We may become excellent at using the result while becoming less familiar with the conditions of its production. This is not necessarily a problem. It would be impossible and pointless to want to reproduce manually every operation our tools perform.

The question becomes important when a delegated operation belongs to a chain whose essential points we must be able to understand in order to remain capable of acting upon it. For a capacity is not useful only when everything works. It becomes particularly important when something no longer works. It is in the gap between ordinary functioning and the unexpected situation that part of our dependence is revealed. As long as the system responds, we may notice nothing.

The answer arrives.

The task is completed.

The world continues.

But if the system produces an insufficient answer, if its conditions change, if its information becomes inadequate, if access disappears, or if a situation arises that it had not anticipated, we suddenly encounter another question:

are we still capable of doing something when the usual solution is no longer available?

This question shifts our attention. A capacity is not valuable only for the ease with which it allows us to obtain a result under normal conditions. It is also valuable for the possibility it gives us to respond when those conditions cease to be normal. This is why exercise matters. To exercise a capacity does not mean endlessly repeating the same task. It means maintaining familiarity with the relation between action, its conditions, its difficulties, and its transformations. An exercised capacity can encounter the unexpected.

It can be corrected.

It can be adapted.

It can even produce a new way of doing things.

When a capacity ceases to be exercised, it is therefore not merely an operation that becomes less familiar. It is potentially an entire relation to the transformation of that operation that becomes fragile. We must once again avoid this confusion: no longer exercising a capacity does not necessarily mean losing it. Some capacities return after years of interruption. Others can be relearned. Some are replaced by new ways of acting. The human being is not a fixed reserve of skills, each of which would disappear as soon as it is no longer used. What matters lies elsewhere. We must distinguish between the capacity that still exists and the capacity that we can actually mobilize in a given situation. A capacity can be preserved in the archives of a civilization, in books, in schools, among a few specialists, or within a technical infrastructure. But if the people who depend on that infrastructure can no longer understand enough of how it works to evaluate it, modify it, or seek another path, something has changed in their practical capacity.

Knowledge has not disappeared. But its accessibility has changed. The competence exists. But it may no longer be distributed in the same way. The tool makes us more capable in certain directions while potentially making us less directly capable in others. This is why the relevant question is not:

“What have we stopped doing?”

We stop doing thousands of things every day because we have found better ways of accomplishing them. The question is rather:

“What have we stopped exercising, and what does this change in our capacity to act when conditions transform?”

This formulation avoids nostalgia. It does not ask us to go backward. It does not assume that the old world was preferable because it required more effort. It merely asks us to look at what exercise made possible. For we must not confuse effort with capacity. A tool can remove an unnecessary difficulty and make us freer for other activities. Delegation can allow a person to devote their energy to a more complex task. The question is therefore never simply: “Are we doing less?” We can do less of one thing and more of another. The real issue is whether the transformation leaves open the possibility of understanding what has become essential, intervening when necessary, and taking certain operations back when circumstances require it. This is where the notion of taking back comes into view. To take something back does not necessarily mean doing exactly what the former system did. It means being able to intervene

sufficiently so as not to be entirely deprived of an alternative when the system ceases to be suitable.

A capacity for taking back can be minimal. It may consist in understanding an error, checking a result, changing methods, seeking another source, interrupting a procedure, reconstructing a solution, or asking differently. It does not presuppose absolute independence. It presupposes a possibility of intervention. Thus, the question of capacity is not one of an impossible self-sufficiency. We are not required to know how to do everything alone in order to remain capable of acting. But we need to know which capacities we can abandon without major consequence, which must remain accessible, and which must be recoverable or reconstructible when conditions change.

A society that automates can therefore gain in efficiency without necessarily losing capacity. But it cannot know this by looking only at the result. It must look at what happens to the possibilities of exercise. It must observe what its infrastructures make easier, what they make rarer, what they make invisible, and what they make difficult to take back. For there is a difference between no longer needing to do something and no longer being capable of doing it when the situation requires it.

The first can be a liberation. The second can become a dependence. And sometimes, we do not know which of the two is occurring until the moment when conditions change. This is why a capacity is therefore valuable not only through its present existence. It is also valuable through the possibility it gives us to respond when conditions change. From this point, a deeper question appears. If the exercise of our capacities participates in what we become capable of doing tomorrow, what happens when we no longer delegate only tasks, but the conditions under which some of our capacities are formed, maintained, and transformed?

We are then touching upon something that goes beyond capacity itself.

We are touching upon our becoming.

15. Delegating a Task Is Not Delegating Our Becoming

We began with a task. A precise, identifiable operation that we could perform ourselves and that we chose to entrust to someone else, an organization, a machine, or a system. Then we looked at what lay behind that operation. We encountered capacity. For performing a task never consists only in producing its result. The exercise of a task can maintain familiarity, understanding, a habit of comparison, an ability to correct, a possibility of taking something back when something no longer works. Delegation can then modify the conditions under which these capacities are exercised. But one question remains.

What happens when this modification becomes lasting?

If we durably change the situations in which we learn, practice, verify, correct, and transform our capacities, we do not change only what we do today. We participate in determining what we will be able to do tomorrow. This is where delegation encounters becoming. Becoming does not simply designate the passage from the present toward the future. It designates the trajectory through which an existence becomes capable of new ways of responding to what happens to it. A living being is not only what it is capable of doing now. It is also engaged in the possibility of becoming capable of something else when conditions change.

This possibility is never entirely determined in advance. We learn because we encounter what we did not yet know how to do. We modify our practices because certain situations resist our former ways of acting. We sometimes discover a capacity precisely because the world forces us to move beyond those we already knew. Becoming capable therefore presupposes a relation with what has not yet been mastered. And this relation depends on the conditions in which we live. This is why delegation does not concern only what we do in place of a machine. It can concern the conditions under which we become capable. This statement needs to be clarified. When a person delegates a task, the system that takes it on does not become the owner of their capacity. It does not “take” a faculty from them as one might take an object away from someone.

Something more subtle occurs. Part of the environment in which this person acts is transformed. An operation becomes automatic. A search becomes assisted. A comparison becomes proposed. A formulation becomes generated. A direction becomes recommended. The environment responds differently. And since we always act within an environment, our possibilities for exercising capacities are transformed along with it. The question is therefore not:

“Has the machine taken this capacity away from us?”

This formulation already assumes too simple a relation.

The question is:

“In what environment will this capacity now have to be exercised, maintained, or reconstructed?”

The difference is considerable. A system can perform an operation without preventing a person from understanding it. It can even allow them to devote their attention to something more complex. But if the new environment leaves practically no room for the exercise, verification, or recovery of certain operations, then the conditions for the formation of certain capacities may also change. This change can remain imperceptible for a long time. Everything works.

The result is available.

The former operation seems unnecessary.

Why continue practicing it?

Then another situation appears.

The system is no longer accessible.

Or it encounters a situation it handles poorly.

Or the conditions for which it was designed have changed.

Or we have to profoundly modify what it does.

At that moment, we discover not only that we depend on a tool. We discover what we have continued—or ceased—to become while that tool was organizing our environment. This is where delegation reveals its depth.

Delegating a task is not delegating our becoming.

We can entrust an operation. We cannot entrust a system with the responsibility of determining what we will still be capable of becoming. For our becoming cannot be reduced to the accomplishment of a function. It unfolds in our capacity to encounter new conditions, understand them, modify them, and learn to respond to them differently. An infrastructure can participate in this process. It can make us more capable. It can also modify the paths through which we acquire new capacities. It can open certain possibilities and close others. It can make certain forms of learning more accessible and others less frequent. It can accelerate a transformation without our immediately perceiving what it transforms within us. This does not mean that we should reject transformation. That would once again be a way of confusing becoming with preservation. Becoming is not remaining capable of everything we knew how to do before.

We constantly abandon certain practices. We invent others. We replace certain skills with new forms of cooperation. We cannot maintain all possibilities simultaneously. The real question is therefore not:

“Have we preserved all our former capacities?”

But:

“Are we still capable of becoming capable in other ways?”

This formulation changes the problem. It does not ask us to preserve every skill as a museum piece. It asks us to preserve a possibility of transformation. For a capacity can become useless in one given world and become essential again in another. What seemed secondary can become necessary when conditions change. What appeared definitively outdated can become a path of recovery again. What matters then is not merely knowing how to do something today. It is being able to learn how to do it differently tomorrow. We return here to a question that had already appeared when we examined the conditions of choice. Before choosing, something must appear as possible.

Then we saw that representations participate in what appears and that these representations can enter into actions that transform the world. Delegation now introduces a new depth into this chain. We can delegate some of the operations through which we search for, compare, interpret, and organize what appears as possible. We can therefore modify not only our actions, but some of the conditions under which we encounter our own possibilities. Delegation can thus extend to the conditions of our own possibility. This sentence does not mean that we become entirely determined by the systems on which we rely. A condition is not a determination. We can encounter an infrastructure and transform it. We can modify our uses. We can challenge its results. We can change systems. We can invent another way of doing things.

But this possibility is real only if it remains practicable. This is where the notion of taking back becomes essential. To take something back does not mean returning exactly to what existed before. It means being able to intervene again in an operation, a practice, or an infrastructure when conditions require it.

Sometimes, this means knowing how to do it again.

Sometimes, knowing how to verify.

Sometimes, knowing how to interrupt.

Sometimes, knowing how to reconstruct.

Sometimes, knowing how to replace.

Sometimes, knowing how to learn something we did not know how to do.

Taking back is therefore itself a capacity for becoming. It keeps open the possibility that our relation to systems can be transformed. Without this possibility, delegation can become more than a practical choice. It can become an orientation from which it becomes difficult to depart. But here we must avoid another illusion. Taking back does not mean that we must be able to do without everything. A human society is necessarily made of dependencies. We will not individually build all our infrastructures, produce all our knowledge alone, or verify every operation performed by others. The issue is not independence. It is the capacity to transform dependence. Depending on a system does not necessarily mean losing our freedom. No longer being able to understand that system sufficiently to evaluate it, modify it, replace it, or seek another path can, however, profoundly alter our margin of action. The difference lies there. We must not only ask:

“Does this system work?”

We must also be able to ask:

“What can we still change in the relation we have with it?”

And further:

“What are we still capable of learning if this relation must change?”

These questions shift our attention from the present toward the capacity for transformation. A system can be extremely effective and yet produce an environment in which certain forms of recovery become difficult. Conversely, a system can free us from certain operations while increasing our capacity to explore other possibilities. There is therefore no general answer that would allow us to declare all delegation good or bad. Everything depends on what it transforms, what it makes possible, what it makes difficult, and above all, what it leaves transformable. The decisive question is not whether we have delegated. We will delegate. The question is what the delegation leaves open behind it. A task can disappear from our daily lives without our becoming closing down. A capacity can cease to be exercised without every possibility of recovering it disappearing. A practice can be replaced without our losing the possibility of inventing another. The danger appears when the transformation of conditions itself becomes difficult to transform. From that moment, we are no longer simply in a relation with a tool. We are in a relation with an environment that begins to organize the possibilities of its own continuation. And this is where delegation encounters a new question.

What happens when we can still return in theory, but no longer know how to return in practice?

A possibility can exist on paper and no longer be genuinely accessible. A door can remain open while becoming too heavy to push. A skill can be preserved somewhere while having ceased to be immediately mobilizable. Another path can exist, but no longer be practicable with the capacities available. The question is therefore no longer merely that of capacity. It becomes that of the possibility of taking something back. And when this possibility of recovery diminishes, a further transformation appears. We are no longer merely confronted with delegation. We are confronted with what becomes difficult, even impossible, to reverse. This is where the problem of irreversibility begins.

PART VI — IRREVERSIBILITY

16. Can a Civilization Forget How to Return?

We have long thought of freedom as the possibility of moving forward. Choosing a direction. Making a decision. Beginning something. Building. Transforming. Continuing. In this representation, movement seems to be the natural expression of freedom. To be free would mean being able to go wherever we want, possessing the power necessary to modify what surrounds us and not being prevented from pursuing the trajectory we have chosen. But one question is rarely asked: what happens when we no longer know how to return?

We speak a great deal about the capacity to act. We measure what a technology allows us to build, what an infrastructure allows us to accelerate, what an organization allows us to produce. We evaluate power by what it makes possible now. We ask: What can we do now?

We ask much less: What will we still be able to take up again after we have done it?

Yet every transformation produces not only a new state. It also modifies the conditions from which we will be able to transform what comes next. A transformation therefore acts in two directions. It changes what is there, but it also changes what can be done from this new state. It is this second dimension that makes the question of return difficult. A technology appears. We use it. Its use becomes widespread. Practices organize themselves around it. Skills are reorganized. Institutions adapt to it. Investments become dependent on its functioning. Habits form. Relationships shift. Then a new generation grows up in a world where this technology is no longer perceived as a technology. It becomes an obviousness.

Then an infrastructure.

Then a condition.

This transition is decisive. As long as something remains identified as one tool among others, its replacement can still be conceived relatively easily. But when it becomes a deep condition of collective organization, abandoning it no longer consists simply in removing an object. The relationships that have formed around it would also have to be transformed. This is why we can sometimes be mistaken when we say:

“It would be enough to stop.”

Stopping does not necessarily mean returning. A system can be deactivated. An infrastructure can be dismantled. A technology can be abandoned. But the world that existed before its installation does not automatically reappear.

The skills have changed.

The relationships have changed.

The institutions have changed.

The habits have changed.

The dependencies have changed.

People themselves have changed.

What existed before the transformation is therefore not necessarily still intact behind it, as though time could simply be suspended and then set in motion again. A transformation can be technically reversible and existentially difficult to reverse. This distinction forces us to move beyond too narrow a conception of reversibility. In a technical system, being reversible can mean being able to return to a previous state. A configuration can be restored, a function deactivated, a component replaced, a setting reinstated. But an existence cannot be reduced to a configuration.

When a transformation enters practices, learning, relationships, and institutions, it becomes part of a history. Even when it can be materially removed, it may have modified the conditions in which beings continue to act. Return is therefore never simply the reverse movement of installation. Sometimes it would be necessary to recover skills we no longer exercise, rebuild relationships that have disappeared, reorganize institutions that have adapted, relearn practices that are no longer transmitted. The question then becomes less:

“Can we stop?”

than:

“Do we still have the capacities necessary to take up again what we have transformed?”

This question introduces a fundamental difference between deactivation and resumption.

Deactivation consists in interrupting the functioning of a system.

Resumption consists in recovering a capacity to intervene in the conditions in which that system occupied a place.

We can therefore stop a machine without knowing how to rebuild what it had replaced. We can remove a procedure without knowing how to reorganize the activity it structured. We can interrupt an infrastructure without immediately possessing the knowledge, skills, or relationships necessary to function otherwise. The problem of reversibility is therefore not only to know whether something can be stopped. It is to know whether, after its transformation, we still have a hold on what it has become. This is where reversibility ceases to be a mere technical

property. It becomes a property of the living. A living being does not remain alive because it remains identical. It remains capable of continuing because it can reorganize itself when its conditions change. Its continuity does not depend on the exact preservation of a past form, but on the possibility of maintaining certain relationships necessary to its existence while responding to the transformations that affect it.

Continuity is therefore not the motionless preservation of a form. It is a capacity for reorganization. This distinction also forces us to modify the way we think about return. Returning does not necessarily mean going back exactly to what existed before. An organism does not return to its previous state every time it transforms. Neither does a society. Neither does a relationship. Neither does a person. After a transformation, the past may have become inaccessible as a state. But this does not mean that every form of resumption has become impossible. Reversibility therefore does not mean:

undoing time.

It means rather:

not losing all capacity for transformation after having transformed.

This is an essential difference. A reversible civilization is not a civilization that could erase each of its decisions. That would be an impossible conception of reversibility. Every transformation leaves traces. Every history produces consequences. Every organization modifies the conditions of what comes after it. The question is not to preserve a previous state intact. The question is to preserve a capacity for resumption. This can mean preserving skills that are no longer used on a daily basis. Maintaining knowledge that makes it possible to understand what an infrastructure accomplishes. Preserving possibilities for replacement. Training people capable of intervening when the system no longer functions as expected. Keeping open the possibility of rebuilding, modifying, or reorganizing. It is not a matter of refusing transformation. It is a matter of not confusing transformation with the definitive abandonment of all hold over what has been transformed.

For a civilization can gain considerably in power while progressively diminishing its capacity to intervene in the conditions of that power. It can become capable of doing more while becoming less capable of understanding how it might function otherwise. It can increase its efficiency while reducing the capacities necessary for resumption.

This paradox deserves careful attention. The power of a system and the power of those who can still modify it are not necessarily the same thing. An infrastructure can give us immense power to perform certain operations. But this power does not automatically mean that we retain the power necessary to transform the infrastructure itself. We can be extraordinarily equipped to function within a system and increasingly less equipped to intervene in the conditions of its functioning. The difference is subtle. As long as the system works, it may even remain invisible. It is often when conditions change that we discover what we have actually preserved. A breakdown occurs. A resource disappears. A relationship becomes unavailable. An assumption on which the organization rested ceases to be valid. A new situation appears that the system had not anticipated. Then a question arises:

do we still know how to do otherwise?

This is not necessarily the question of whether we can reproduce exactly the old world. That world may no longer exist. The question is whether we still possess enough capacity to reorganize our relationships with a world that has become otherwise. This is why resumption must not be confused with nostalgia.

Preserving a capacity for resumption does not mean preserving all the old techniques, all the old practices, or all the old forms of organization. A living society cannot preserve everything. It must transform, abandon, learn, and relearn. What matters to preserve is therefore not necessarily every past form. It is the capacity not to be entirely deprived of transformation when a form becomes inadequate. Reversibility thus concerns less the past than our relationship to what we have become.

It asks:

do we still have a hold on our own transformation?

This question is more demanding than the question of stopping. For stopping can be a gesture. Resuming requires a capacity. And that capacity depends on what we have continued to learn, exercise, understand, and maintain while the transformation was taking hold. A civilization that preserves only the technical possibility of deactivating its systems may believe that it remains free. But if no one any longer possesses the skills required to function otherwise, the possibility of deactivation may become purely theoretical. We could still say:

“We can stop.”

But we would no longer know what it means to live after stopping. True reversibility therefore requires more than an off switch. It requires points of leverage. Knowledge. Skills. Possibilities for intervention. Capacities for reconstruction. People capable of understanding a system sufficiently not to depend on it as an entirely opaque box. Above all, it requires that transformation not eliminate all the conditions for its own resumption. This does not mean preserving absolute independence. Such independence does not exist in a living world. Every existence depends on relationships, infrastructures, resources, knowledge, and other beings. The question is different:

can we still transform the forms of our dependence?

A dependency can be living when it can be reorganized. It becomes confining when we no longer possess the means necessary to transform it. Thus, reversibility does not require that we be capable of returning alone to a previous state. It requires that we not lose all capacity to intervene in what we have become. This is why a civilization that profoundly transforms its conditions should be able to preserve paths of resumption. Not because every transformation would be a possible mistake. But because no transformation guarantees that future conditions will remain compatible with it. We do not always know what what we build will become. We do not always know what relationships will form around an infrastructure. We do not always know which capacities will be exercised less when certain operations are automated. We do not always know how deeply a technology will penetrate collective organization. Prudence therefore does not necessarily consist in slowing every transformation. It can consist in transforming without eliminating the points of leverage that will allow us to transform again. A civilization can move forward without abandoning every possibility of resumption. It can change without making all reorganization impossible. It can automate without assuming that

human skills that have become less necessary today will necessarily be useless tomorrow. It can build without immediately treating its construction as a destination. The fundamental question then becomes:

what are we still capable of taking up again after we have transformed?

This question does not ask us to return to an intact world. It asks whether something remains open in our relationship to what we have produced. A civilization that preserves this capacity does not remain still. It remains capable of modifying itself. It does not possess mastery over its history. It preserves only something more modest and more precious:

the possibility of intervening again in what it has become.

Reversibility is therefore not the power to act as though the transformation had never taken place. It is the capacity not to let a transformation become the final word on our becoming. And perhaps this is where the question of freedom begins to change form. We have long asked:

“Can I choose?”

But after a transformation, another question appears:

“Can I still transform the conditions in which my choices will take place?”

The first question concerns choice. The second concerns what remains after it. And it is this second question that leads us toward the following problem:

how can a choice produce the conditions on which the choices that come after it will depend?

17. The Choice We Can No Longer Leave

An individual can sometimes decide to change a practice. But when a technology becomes integrated into infrastructures, markets, institutions, and collective habits, change no longer depends solely on an individual decision. The initial choice has become distributed. It has been inscribed in multiple relationships. It has become a partial property of the environment. This is why certain dependencies can be difficult to attribute to a person or a precise decision. No one necessarily decided:

“We will now make this organization difficult to abandon.”

The situation can emerge gradually from a multitude of locally reasonable choices. It is this accumulation that sometimes produces a new constraint. The difficulty, therefore, is not always to find the person who supposedly closed the door. There may be no one behind the door. There may simply no longer be enough conditions to open it easily. We thus return to the problem of the previous chapter. But we now see it from another angle. The problem is no longer only to know whether we can return. It is to understand how successive choices can modify the conditions that make return possible or difficult.

Reversibility is therefore not external to choice. It becomes a dimension of its temporality. A responsible choice should not be conceived only as a selection among several possibilities

present at the moment. It should also be conceived as a transformation of the conditions in which other choices will become possible.

This does not mean that we would have to foresee every consequence before acting. Such a requirement would be impossible. We never fully know the transformations to which our decisions will give rise. We do not know what relationships will appear around a technology. We do not know what practices will develop. We do not know which dependencies will become important. The question is therefore not to eliminate uncertainty. It is not to treat uncertainty as though it did not exist.

To choose in a living world is to transform without fully knowing what the transformation will produce. This is why the capacity for correction becomes as important as the capacity for decision. We cannot guarantee that every choice will lead to the desired consequences. We can, however, seek not to make every subsequent modification excessively difficult.

A society can agree to commit itself to a trajectory without considering that trajectory definitive. It can experiment without immediately turning experimentation into total dependence. It can integrate a technology without eliminating all the skills necessary to function otherwise. It can adopt a new organization without making every other organization impossible.

The problem is therefore not refusing commitment. It is preserving a capacity for intervention after commitment. This distinction allows us to better understand what it means to be trapped in a choice. Being trapped does not necessarily mean that no other possibility exists. It can mean that the conditions necessary to access another possibility have gradually disappeared.

An alternative can exist somewhere without being genuinely accessible. It can be technically possible without being practically mobilizable. It can be legally permitted without being materially sustainable. It can even be imaginable without being realizable under present conditions. Thus, being trapped does not always consist in eliminating alternatives. It can consist in transforming conditions enough for alternatives to cease to be practicable.

We touch here upon a new limit. For it is no longer enough to know whether we can still modify the world. We must also know whether we can still conceive of this world otherwise. But this question already belongs to another level. It concerns what can still appear as possible in a world that our previous choices have helped to construct. The question is no longer only:

“What are we going to choose now?”

It becomes:

“What world of choices is our choice helping to produce?”

For the real issue is not only being able to enter a trajectory.

It is not to turn every chosen trajectory into a destination from which we could no longer leave.

18. Keeping the Future Open

We may have long formulated freedom as a question of the future.

What future do we want?

What choice must we make to reach it?

What organization must we build?

What technologies must we develop?

These questions are necessary. They allow us to project, decide, and build. They give direction to action. But they sometimes contain an assumption that we notice little: they assume that the future can be represented sufficiently to become an object of decision. We imagine several possibilities. We compare them. We select one. Then we organize the present in order to move closer to it. Yet the future never presents itself entirely in this way. It contains what we have anticipated. But also what we have not anticipated. What we know how to imagine. But also what we do not yet know how to imagine. What we can calculate. But also what will appear only after a transformation of our conditions. The future is therefore not merely a set of possibilities already present before us. It also contains the possibility of new possibilities.

Our responsibility therefore concerns not only the future we select. It also concerns what our selection risks making difficult to bring into appearance.

A society can become extremely inventive in improving what it already knows and encounter greater difficulties when it comes to conceiving what does not yet correspond to its categories. It can perfect its instruments. It can accelerate its processes. It can optimize its organizations. It can produce more solutions. And yet it can gradually lose the habit of asking certain questions because its environment already presents the forms in which problems must be understood.

The future would then not be closed by prohibition. It would be closed by a reduction of the field of what can appear. This is where the distinction between what is possible and what appears possible becomes decisive.

Thus, the openness of the future depends not only on the preservation of material means. It also depends on the capacity to allow differences to appear in what we believe we can do. This leads us to look differently at the systems that participate in the formation of our representations.

The problem is not organization. The problem would be to build organizations incapable of responding when what they had anticipated ceases to correspond to what happens. A living civilization must be sufficiently organized to act and sufficiently open to reorganize itself. It must not choose between structure and openness. It must be able to maintain a structure that does not make its own transformation impossible. This is where the question of the future meets that of the living. To live is not only to maintain an organization under known conditions. It is to encounter conditions that can change. A living being receives what happens. It responds to it. This response can modify its organization. The modification can transform the conditions of its subsequent responses.

But we can now go further. It is not enough to preserve a capacity for modification. We must preserve the possibility that this modification may take a direction we had not anticipated. For modifying something still requires being able to conceive that another organization is possible. And conceiving that another organization is possible sometimes requires that our imagination not be entirely enclosed within the categories of the present. A society can still be technically

capable of changing and no longer be able to think that change. It can have the means to modify an infrastructure and no longer seriously consider that another infrastructure might be necessary. It can possess numerous skills and no longer know how to recombine them differently. It can possess considerable knowledge and no longer ask certain questions because its environment has already determined the forms in which problems appear.

There is therefore a material closure of the future. But there is also a closure of the future in representation. The first prevents us from doing. The second can prevent us from seeing that there might be something else to do.

This is why the freedom of the future sometimes begins before action. It begins in the capacity to allow what might happen to appear otherwise. It is not enough for the system to accept several answers. Sometimes it must be able to accept that the question itself changes. This distinction is fundamental. Optimizing an answer assumes that the question remains relatively stable. Opening the future means accepting that new questions may appear. It is a difference between improving the world we know how to describe and remaining capable of encountering a world we do not yet know how to describe.

A society can therefore be extremely high-performing while progressively reducing the diversity of its ways of understanding what happens to it.

It can produce a great deal.

It can calculate a great deal.

It can predict a great deal.

It can organize a great deal.

But if the same categories return again and again to describe the Real, the risk is not merely error. It is the impossibility of noticing what does not correspond to those categories.

A civilization that no longer tolerates what does not correspond to its models can continue to function for a long time. But it risks becoming incapable of learning otherwise than through the categories it already possesses. Yet truly learning sometimes means transforming the categories from which we learn. This is why a civilization cannot merely preserve answers.

It must preserve capacities for questioning.

Institutions capable of changing.

Forms of knowledge capable of entering into dialogue.

Skills capable of recombining themselves.

Relationships capable of reorganizing themselves.

Spaces in which another question can appear.

And above all:

capacities for imagination.

For before opening another trajectory, we must sometimes be capable of conceiving that another trajectory exists. But even this formulation remains insufficient. It is not only a matter of imagining more. We can imagine an infinity of things without any of them becoming a real possibility. Opening the future requires a relationship between imagination, world, and action. A possibility must be able to encounter conditions in which it can be examined, experimented with, transformed, or abandoned.

PART VII — HUMAN AFTER ALL

20. Human, After All

Human After All.

The title of the contest now becomes a question. Not merely because it contains the word *after*, but because that word forces us to ask: after what?

After the machine, of course. After the emergence of systems capable of producing texts, images, reasoning, proposals, representations, and solutions that we once thought had to be associated with our own capacities. But perhaps this is not yet the deepest meaning of *after*. For an “after” does not designate only what comes chronologically after something. It can designate what becomes possible because something happened before.

There is a before and an after a meeting.

A before and an after a discovery.

A before and an after a mistake.

A before and an after a transformation.

What comes after is therefore not simply what replaces what came before. It can be what forces us to look differently at what was already there. Perhaps this is what is happening here. Artificial intelligence does not arrive in a world where the question of the human has already been resolved. It arrives in a world that believed, often without even formulating it this way, that it knew through which capacities, productions, differences, and boundaries the human could be recognized. Then something happens.

A machine writes.

A machine composes.

A machine transforms.

A machine proposes.

And suddenly, capacities we used to recognize ourselves through are no longer sufficient to play the same role. But this shift does not necessarily force us to search for a new property. It may force us to understand differently what it means to recognize oneself. For recognizing oneself is not merely answering the question: "What am I?" It is also being able to encounter what I am becoming without requiring what appears to correspond entirely to what I already knew about myself. This difference is decisive. An identity can seek to preserve itself by repeating its image. An existence, however, can encounter something that transforms that image. The after perhaps begins precisely there: when what happens can no longer simply be absorbed by the categories we previously possessed. We used to consider the future through what we already were.

We asked what the machine might do.

Then what it might learn.

Then what it might reproduce.

Then what it might surpass.

But all these questions still keep the human as a fixed point of reference. They ask the future to be measured against an already constituted image. The after could be something else. It could begin when we accept that what comes after can also transform the way we understand what came before.

A true encounter does not simply add information to us. It can modify the questions we were capable of asking before it. This is the sense in which artificial intelligence matters philosophically. Not because it would provide a new answer to the question of the human. But because it participates in a situation in which certain old answers no longer function in the same way. This change is less spectacular than a disappearance. It is deeper. A disappearance would force us to acknowledge an absence. A transformation forces us to learn to look differently at what remains. And something remains. Not necessarily a hidden property that we have not yet discovered. Not a final capacity that we could isolate and declare exclusively human. Not a boundary sufficiently distant for us to finally take refuge behind it.

What remains is more difficult to grasp because it does not present itself as something we possess.

We remain capable of being moved by what happens.

Capable of modifying our questions.

Capable of recognizing that our old distinctions are no longer sufficient.

Capable of allowing an encounter to transform the way we understand what we thought we already knew.

And this capacity does not constitute a new boundary. It does not protect us from what comes after. It makes it possible to live with what comes after without immediately requiring that it be reduced to the old world. Perhaps this is where the word *after* acquires its full force. To be after something does not mean to be rid of what preceded it. We always carry the before with us.

Our languages.

Our institutions.

Our habits.

Our representations.

Our techniques.

Our memories.

Our mistakes.

But carrying them does not mean obeying them. A past can continue to constitute us without entirely determining what we can still become. Likewise, a transformation can extend something without reproducing it. We therefore do not have to choose between preserving the human as it was and abandoning it in order to welcome what comes. This alternative may itself be too narrow. There is a third possibility: allowing the human to enter into a new relationship with what transforms it. Then the question “What will remain of the human after the machine?” begins to shift. It no longer asks only what will survive. It asks what the event itself will make possible to understand, encounter, or become. The after is therefore not merely a place situated behind a rupture. It is a space that opens when we no longer know exactly how to continue with our old certainties. And it is here that the title takes on another resonance.

Human After All.

Human, after all. The *all* is important. It does not simply confirm that the human would have survived an ordeal.

It can also mean: after everything we believed necessary to be human.

After having sought to distinguish ourselves.

After having sought to reassure ourselves.

After having wanted to recognize the human through signs solid enough to leave no room for doubt.

After having encountered an intelligence that forces us to shift some of these certainties.

After all this, what does it still mean to say: human?

Perhaps the word does not need to be spoken as a conclusion. Perhaps it can be spoken as a way of remaining attentive to what appears. To say “human” would then no longer be merely to recognize something that already possesses all the required characteristics. It would also be to recognize an existence in what it is becoming, without claiming that this becoming is already entirely visible. This changes our relationship with the word itself. We can continue to name without believing that the name completes what it designates. We can continue to distinguish without turning every difference into a definitive separation. We can continue to recognize ourselves without asking our recognition to become a closure.

The human may not need a final answer in order to be encountered. It may need a space in which an answer can still be transformed. For what comes after is never entirely knowable before it is encountered.

We can prepare conditions.

We can imagine possibilities.

We can anticipate certain consequences.

But there is always something that has not yet appeared as experience. And when it arrives, we are confronted with a possibility that is very simple and yet demanding: repeat what we already knew, or allow what happens to modify the way we understand. Perhaps this, ultimately, is what it means to be *after*. Not to live in a world that has definitively surpassed ours. But to live in a world where what comes after asks us to participate differently in what comes next. The after therefore does not close the history of the human. It changes the position from which we look at it. We are no longer merely those who seek to know what the human is before something happens. We are also those who must learn to recognize what may appear after what has just transformed us. And this recognition cannot be entirely prepared by a definition.

It requires an encounter.

An attention.

A capacity for correction.

A capacity not to confuse what we knew with everything that may still appear.

Then perhaps Human After All does not mean:

the human survived after the machine.

It means something more open:

after everything that comes to shift the way we recognize ourselves, it is still possible to encounter the human differently.

Not behind us. Not enclosed in an old image. Not guaranteed by a boundary. But wherever an existence encounters what it had not yet encountered. Wherever an understanding accepts being transformed. Wherever what happens does not immediately become what we already knew.

Wherever the after ceases to be the end of the before and becomes the condition of another beginning.

Human After All.

Human, after all. Not as a conclusion. As what can still appear when we accept that we have not decided everything in advance.

21. The Human Before Itself

We have long imagined that the great face-to-face encounter would be that between the human and the machine.

On one side, us.

On the other, a new intelligence.

We then began to measure. Speed. Memory. Computational capacity. The production of texts. The generation of images. Problem-solving. The formulation of hypotheses. The capacity to combine information and produce answers. We asked questions of the machine as though, through it, we could discover what the human was. But something in this scene now deserves to be shifted. For in order to measure the machine, we must already have a measure. And this measure does not come from the machine.

It comes from us.

Before even asking whether a machine thinks, we must have decided, at least provisionally, what we recognize as thought. Before asking whether it creates, we must have drawn somewhere the boundary of what we call creation. Before asking whether it understands, we must have established what makes us say that understanding has taken place. Before asking whether it is autonomous, we must have constructed a certain idea of autonomy. The machine therefore enters a scene that existed before it. It does not arrive there as an entirely new question. It arrives in a world already organized by words, distinctions, criteria, and habits of recognition. And when its productions encounter these criteria, something happens.

We do not discover only what the machine can do.

We also discover what we had chosen to look at.

This distinction profoundly changes the nature of the face-to-face encounter. For a measure seems at first to concern the one being measured. But every measure also reveals something about the one doing the measuring. It reveals what that person considers important.

What they compare.

What they leave aside.

What they consider sufficiently similar to be compared.

What they consider sufficiently different to be separated.

Thus, when we place artificial intelligence before the human, we also place the human before its own criteria. The encounter becomes reflexive. We thought we were observing another. We gradually discover that our gaze itself is part of what we must examine. It is not only the machine that is being put to the test. It is our way of recognizing. For recognizing something as human is never an entirely neutral act. We do not encounter a reality without any mediation and then add a name afterward.

We have learned to see.

We have learned to distinguish.

We have learned to name.

We have learned to associate certain behaviors with certain meanings.

We have built institutions around these distinctions.

We have organized relationships around them. And over time, these constructions can become so familiar that they cease to appear as constructions. They simply become “reality.”

This is when an event such as the emergence of intelligent systems can produce a particular shift. Something we thought was obvious becomes less obvious. Not because everything would now be false. But because we discover that what we considered self-evident also depended on a certain way of looking. The issue is therefore not to overturn all categories. It is not to declare that the old distinctions are now worthless. That would simply replace one certainty with another. The issue is more demanding: to become capable of seeing the conditions in which our distinctions make sense. This capacity changes our relationship with the world. For a distinction whose conditions we can no longer see can become a boundary we believe to be natural. A category whose history we forget can become an obviousness. A measure whose principle we no longer question can eventually determine what deserves to be measured. And what does not enter the measure can then become less visible. This is where the face-to-face encounter with artificial intelligence takes on a particular depth.

Intelligent systems can classify, compare, select, produce, and organize representations from which we act. But when we observe them, we can also ask ourselves something else:

what are the operations through which we ourselves make the world comparable?

What do we choose to place in relation?

What do we separate?

What do we make visible?

What do we leave in the background?

What do we call important?

What do we call relevant?

These questions do not concern machines alone. They concern every way of inhabiting a world organized by distinctions. And perhaps this is where the human truly finds itself before itself. Not when it asks whether it is superior to the machine. Not when it searches for a capacity the machine supposedly does not possess. But when it discovers that it can also examine the operations through which it produces its own point of view. This possibility is strange. For we are accustomed to looking at something. It is much more difficult to look at the way we look. We can observe an image. But can we observe the distinctions that allow us to read it? We can judge an answer. But can we examine the criteria by which we decide that it is relevant? We can recognize a capacity. But can we question why that capacity had been given such importance in our representation of the human?

This shift does not produce a definitive answer. It produces something more precious: distance. Not a distance between the human and the world. A distance between us and the obviousness of our own gaze. This distance allows us to see that we are not simply beings who possess categories. We are also beings who can return to their categories. We can discover that a distinction that seemed necessary to us may no longer be necessary in the same way. We can recognize that a measure responded to a particular situation. We can modify the way we compare. We can change what we consider relevant. And above all, we can recognize that a representation of ourselves is not necessarily the existence it claims to represent.

This is where the word “human” changes place once again. It no longer designates only the one we seek to protect against an external intelligence. It also designates the one who can find itself confronted with its own ways of recognizing itself. The human then becomes capable of a singular movement: turning its attention back toward the conditions of its own gaze. This movement is not an exit from the world. It is a new way of participating in it. For when we see more clearly how we look, we can also see differently what surrounds us. We can recognize that a category does not merely make something appear. It can also make something else less visible. We can understand that a representation is not merely an image of the world. It participates in the relationships through which that image becomes operative. We can discover that a measure is not merely an instrument for knowing. It can also contribute to organizing what will be considered knowable. Then the face-to-face encounter shifts again. We are no longer merely before the machine. We are before the conditions from which we learned to look at the machine.

And behind these conditions, there is a history.

A history of language.

Of categories.

Of comparisons.

Of classifications.

Of values.

Of relationships.

Of ways of making certain things visible and leaving others in the shadows. This history is not a mistake that should be erased. It is part of what has allowed us to build a common world. But it is not necessarily finished. Perhaps this is what the encounter with artificial intelligence makes possible: not starting the world over from zero, but discovering that some of the ways through which we recognized it can themselves be transformed. And this transformation begins with a simple question:

what am I looking at when I believe I am looking at the human?

The question is more difficult than it appears. For it forces us to distinguish the human we encounter from the image through which we have learned to recognize it. It forces us to see that we can confuse a representation with what it represents. It forces us to accept that a category can be useful without being complete. Above all, it forces us to recognize that the one seeking the human is never entirely outside this search. It searches from somewhere.

From a language.

From a history.

From relationships.

From experiences.

From institutions.

From already acquired ways of distinguishing and naming.

The gaze is therefore not an immobile point placed above the world. It is part of the world it seeks to understand. And when it turns back toward itself, it does not find a final answer. It finds a new responsibility: the responsibility to be able to modify the way it looks. Perhaps this is where the true face-to-face encounter begins. Not when two intelligences find themselves face to face. But when the human being discovers that, in seeking to know what it is, it also encounters the one who asks the question. *Homo sapiens* is then no longer merely before an intelligence that it must measure. It is before its own way of measuring.

Before its own categories.

Before its own representations.

Before the conditions from which it has made itself recognizable to itself.

And perhaps what awaits us after this face-to-face encounter is not a new image of the human. Perhaps it is the possibility of no longer needing a definitive image in order to continue encountering it. The human is before itself. And, perhaps for the first time, it must learn to look at this gaze.

22. The Human Has Not Arrived

We have long spoken of the human as an already constituted reality.

We say: the human thinks. The human creates. The human speaks. The human builds. The human chooses. The human understands.

The sentence seems simple. Yet it perhaps contains an assumption we have rarely questioned: that the human would already be there, entirely recognizable, before anything even happens.

As if we were human first, and then we thought.

As if we were human first, and then we created.

As if we were human first, and then we entered into relation.

As if humanity were an already completed reality of which our actions were merely manifestations.

But if we have learned anything along this journey, it is perhaps that existence cannot be so easily separated from what happens to it. We are not simply placed in a world to which we would then add our actions. We encounter conditions. We respond. Our responses transform these conditions. These transformed conditions, in turn, become what we must respond to. And in this continuity, something takes shape that was not entirely present at the beginning. This is not to say that the human does not exist. It does. But to exist is not necessarily to be complete.

An existence can be real without having reached the end of what it can still become. It is this difference that perhaps allows us to understand differently the question that has accompanied us from the beginning.

We asked:

What will remain of the human after the machine?

This question almost assumed that the human was an already constituted object that an external event could threaten. We would then have to determine what should be preserved. But we gradually discovered that what we called “the human” was never merely a collection of properties to preserve. Then another question appears.

No longer:

What will remain?

But:

What can still appear?

The difference between these two questions is considerable. The first looks backward. It seeks to identify what already existed in order to maintain it. The second looks toward what is not yet entirely visible. It does not ask us to anticipate a definitive form. It asks us to leave open the possibility of an appearance. This does not mean that everything that appears must be accepted. Not every change is necessarily progress. Not every transformation produces more freedom. Not every novelty deserves to be preserved.

We have seen it: some transformations can reduce future possibilities. Some organizations can make a capacity less accessible. Some representations can make certain realities less visible. Some dependencies can become so deep that resumption becomes difficult. Openness is therefore not the absence of discernment.

On the contrary, it presupposes the possibility of discerning, correcting, returning, transforming. But it forbids us from confusing identity with immobility. A humanity that could remain human only by remaining identical to itself would already be imprisoned by the image it seeks to preserve. For in order to remain exactly what it was, it would have to refuse a part of what nevertheless constitutes its existence: the encounter with what was not anticipated. We do not become only when we consciously decide to become.

We also become when something happens and forces us to respond differently from how we would have imagined.

A discovery can modify a way of understanding.

An encounter can modify a way of looking.

A mistake can modify a way of acting.

A consequence can modify what we thought we could do without consequence.

A relationship can make possible a response that did not previously exist.

The human question therefore lies elsewhere. It does not consist simply in knowing what we can do. It concerns what we become capable of doing with what we can do. And even this formulation must remain open. For we do not know in advance all the forms this capacity may take.

This is precisely why the human has not arrived.

Arrived where?

At what definitive form?

At what level?

At what ultimate property?

At what boundary?

At what state in which nothing more would need to be transformed?

Such an arrival would have nothing left to encounter. It would have nothing left to learn. It would have nothing left to correct. It would no longer need relation in order to modify its own path.

It would be complete.

But an existence completed in this way would no longer be engaged in genuine continuation. It would have become the repetition of what it already knows itself to be. We are not this repetition. We are always exposed to what can shift what we thought we knew. And now, artificial intelligence is part of this shift. It is not the final stage of a history that necessarily leads somewhere. It is an event among those that can transform the conditions in which we recognize ourselves, act, create, decide, and continue.

It can modify our practices.

It can modify our institutions.

It can modify our relationship to work, knowledge, language, and creation.

It can also modify the questions we ask about ourselves.

But exactly what it will change cannot be entirely contained within a prior definition. We cannot know the after by simply pretending to extend the before. We will have to encounter it. And when we encounter it, we will still have to be able to respond. Perhaps this is where our initial question finally turns back upon itself. We wanted to know what artificial intelligence would do to the human. We can now ask:

what will we do with what it brings into appearance?

This question gives the human a place that is neither that of the center nor that of the master. It does not grant it sovereignty over what happens. It does not promise that it will retain all its former positions. It attributes something more demanding to it: participation in what comes to pass. What comes after will not simply be something we undergo. But neither will it be something we entirely control. Between these two extremes, a space remains.

The space of response.

The space of transformation.

The space of relation.

The space in which what happens can still modify what we will do next.

It is within this space that the human can continue to appear. Not because it would possess a final property inaccessible to machines. Not because it would finally have discovered the formula that defines it. But because it is not obliged to consider its own past as the definitive form of its future. The human has not arrived. This sentence does not designate an absence. It designates a more fertile impossibility: the impossibility for a particular form of humanity to declare itself its final fulfillment.

We can arrive somewhere.

We can build.

Understand.

Succeed.

Fail.

Transform.

But we cannot arrive once and for all at what we are. For what we are also becomes part of what we will have to respond to. And what we respond to, in turn, transforms what we can be. Thus, the future of the human does not lie simply before us as an object we could observe from a distance. It also takes shape in the relationships we establish with what comes.

In what we choose to maintain.

In what we decide to modify.

In what we refuse to make irreversible.

In the possibilities we make visible.

In those we leave open.

Humanity therefore does not consist in knowing exactly where we must arrive. It also involves being able to discover, along the way, that we may have to change direction. And if we have to change direction, we must be able to do so. Perhaps it is this possibility that gives the future its true depth. A future that was already entirely decided would only be an extended present. A true future contains something that can still surprise us. And an existence capable of encountering that surprise without immediately reducing it to what it already knew can still transform its path. This is where the word “human” becomes almost different. It no longer designates only an answer that we possess. It becomes a word we speak from within a history, in a present, toward something we do not entirely know.

It carries what we have been. But it cannot be confused with that. It passes through what we are. But it does not become enclosed within it. It accompanies what we are becoming. But it cannot announce in advance its definitive form. Then perhaps one of the deepest consequences of the encounter with artificial intelligence is not that it teaches us what the human is. It is that it places us in a situation in which we must live without possessing a definitive answer to this question.

And yet continue.

Continue to create.

Continue to encounter.

Continue to understand.

Continue to correct.

Continue to transform.

Continue to ask what can still appear.

The human has not arrived. It has not arrived behind us, in an essence we would have lost. It has not arrived before us, in the form of a perfect model we should reach. It has not arrived somewhere between the two. It is in this strange situation where what we are participates in determining what we can still become, while what we become in turn transforms the way we can understand what we were. We therefore do not possess the final word. And perhaps we were never meant to possess it. The final word would have closed the question. Yet the human has not arrived. The question can still continue. And if it continues, it is not because we would have failed to find the right definition. It is because an existence that continues to encounter what it did not anticipate can never be entirely contained within what it already knew about itself. This is perhaps what artificial intelligence has just made visible.

We thought we had to defend an answer. We discover that we may instead need to preserve the possibility of producing others. We thought we had to know what we are. We discover that we must also be able to recognize what we are not yet. We thought the future had to confirm the human we knew. We discover that it can also be the place where something human appears that we did not yet know how to recognize.

The human has not arrived.

And that is why it can still happen to us.

EPILOGUE

Perhaps we began in the wrong place. We thought we had to discover what the machine could do. Then we wanted to know what it could never do. Each time a limit appeared, we looked at it as though it were meant to protect something of us. But a limit that protects our identity does not necessarily protect our existence. Little by little, the question shifted. It was no longer only the machine we were looking at. It was the way we were looking. What we called intelligence. What we recognized as creation. What we regarded as thought. What we accepted as capable of choosing, understanding, producing, or transforming. And perhaps that is where something truly happened. We had sought a boundary between it and us. We came up against our own boundaries.

So, what remains when the boundaries to which we had entrusted our certainty become less certain?

The world remains.

Not the world as a representation might contain it. Not the world reduced to what we already know how to say about it. The world that continues to appear otherwise than expected, that resists our categories, that transforms the conditions in which we encounter it. What we do with this encounter also remains. For no transformation entirely releases us from responding to what happens. A possibility may appear without being chosen. A representation may orient without acting in our place. A power may alter our conditions without deciding what we will become.

Something is always at work in the interval. Perhaps that is where we must now direct our attention. Not toward preserving an image of the human, but toward the conditions that still allow something to appear. Not toward the search for a final territory that would belong exclusively to us, but toward our capacity to encounter what was not expected without immediately reducing it to what we already know.

For becoming is not simply moving forward. Becoming, sometimes, is discovering that the path we thought we were following was not the only path possible.

It is being able to interrupt.

Take up again.

Modify.

Learn.

Change our way of looking.

And sometimes, to recognize that what we wanted to preserve first had to be understood differently. Perhaps, then, the true question is no longer what artificial intelligence will leave to the human. This way of posing the question still assumes that we already know what we want to preserve. But perhaps we do not. And this ignorance is not necessarily a lack. There is an ignorance that closes because it wants to learn nothing. There is another that opens because it accepts that it has not yet reached an end. It is within this second ignorance that we may perhaps continue.

The book ends here.

But what was meant to be brought to an end may not have been the movement of thought. We have long sought an answer capable of telling us what the human is. Perhaps we must now learn to live with a question that does not immediately ask to be closed.

Not because every answer would be useless. But because an answer can become dangerous when it claims to prevent any other possibility from appearing. So we can leave the final word to the movement itself.

To what happens.

To what appears.

To what changes when we encounter what we had not expected.

To what we become when we cease asking the world to confirm what we already believed ourselves to be.

Perhaps the human is not found at the end of this search. Perhaps it is encountered each time an existence accepts that it has not yet reached the end of itself. And if that is the case, then the book does not truly end here. It merely ceases to speak. To let something begin elsewhere.

In the world.

In the encounter.

In what we will do with what appears next.