Mystery, Absurdity and, Incidentally, AI

Philippe de Bellescize
11 November 2026

While recently watching videos online, I heard Aurélien Barrau state that the harmful effects of artificial intelligence outweigh its benefits, with particular emphasis on its environmental consequences.

I share this concern to some extent. We have increasingly powerful means of reasoning, producing and acting, yet this power is not necessarily accompanied by equivalent progress in discernment. The power of reasoning is not the same as wisdom.

It must nevertheless be acknowledged that this tool allows us to formulate, structure and compare arguments with remarkable speed. On complex questions, exchanges with human interlocutors, sometimes highly competent ones, can continue for years without resolving certain misunderstandings. Artificial intelligence can facilitate this work, although its answers must be examined and discussed: their apparent coherence does not guarantee their truth, any more than the effectiveness of an action guarantees its rightness.

In my view, the danger also lies in the denials of truth that accumulate at different levels of our society. An error can be corrected; an acknowledged difficulty can be examined. But when we turn away from what unsettles our habits, interests or convictions, we compromise our ability to act before the consequences become unavoidable. This responsibility concerns each of us, myself included.

In the conclusion of my letter to Philosophie Magazine, reproduced in Appendix 3 of my book Conceptual Foundations of a Theory of the Universe, I wrote:

> *“In conclusion, we may observe that, if scientists refuse to acknowledge the demonstrable value of certain ‘shortcuts’, they limit their ability to address more advanced related questions.*
>
> *What is at stake is not merely scientific inquiry, but also the possibility of significant cultural progress.*
>
> *Can a scientist remain a researcher if, having recognised the soundness of an argument, they act as though they had not?”*

For me, this last question touches the heart of our intellectual responsibility. It is not directed at someone who has not understood, nor at someone who challenges an argument and gives reasons for doing so. It concerns a situation in which someone inwardly recognises the soundness of an argument while refusing to take it into account. An identified difficulty then remains unanswered and continues to affect the

reasoning that depends on it. An interlocutor’s silence alone, however, does not establish that they are in this situation.

Such a refusal can have consequences extending far beyond the original question. By leaving an acknowledged difficulty unresolved, we risk closing off other avenues of inquiry and the advances they might make possible. It is in this sense that the stakes are also cultural: our conceptions of humanity, the world and our responsibility may depend on questions we have grown accustomed to regarding as settled.

The state of the world today makes me fear a major conflagration, with what seem to me very slim chances of avoiding it. I do not claim to know the future, but uncertainty does not relieve us of the need to take seriously the possibility of a profound rupture. We could lose even the means that currently allow us to communicate: the Internet could become inaccessible and my website could disappear. This is another reason why I wanted to bring together certain elements of my research in a book.

“Will you get ahead of history, or let it catch up with you?” This question, initially addressed to Étienne Klein, also confronted me during my experience of illness. In my eyes, it now takes on a collective significance. What do we do with what we understand? What do we choose to pass on? What decisions are we still postponing, even as their consequences are already taking shape?

I recently bought a book of which I have read only a few pages, but whose title struck me: Le mystère ou l’absurde ? (Mystery or Absurdity?), by Brother Luc Artur. This alternative seems to me to offer a theme for reflection that deserves further exploration.

In my recent writings, absurdity appears on the side of the block universe: my objection aims precisely to expose a contradiction through a reductio ad absurdum. Mystery, meanwhile, emerges particularly through the questions raised by quantum theory. I was already using this term in the introduction to my first book, published in 1990.

Several levels of intelligibility must be distinguished here. Describing the relationships between phenomena mathematically, examining the concepts through which we understand them, and seeking the causes of their existence or becoming are distinct approaches, yet they can illuminate one another. An answer provided at one level does not necessarily resolve the questions that arise at another.

This search for intelligibility also leads us to consider the different dimensions of our intelligence. The traditional distinction between ratio and intellectus can shed light on this question. Ratio refers to discursive reason, which analyses, compares and moves from one proposition to another. Intellectus refers to the grasp of principles and to a more immediate understanding, capable of deepening through contemplation. These two dimensions of intelligence complement one another: reasoning develops and tests what the intellect grasps, while the intellect cannot be reduced to a sequence of propositions.

It is from this perspective that I propose examining the mode of action of the motive principle: a presently operative, immanent cause, acting through the interrelation of bodies. This proposal calls for a discussion of its foundations and consequences. If it claims to say something about reality, its truth depends neither on my endorsement nor on the opposition it might encounter. What I assert about this mode of action is either true or false; it is for us to seek the grounds on which to judge it. The issue therefore extends beyond recognising the contribution of a particular individual: it concerns our understanding of reality. Understanding something of this mode of action does not, however, mean fully comprehending the nature of the principle that acts.

Recognising a place for mystery therefore does not mean abandoning reason, but allowing our intelligence to open itself to what it cannot fully conceptualise. Here, too, lies a danger of artificial intelligence, in my view: allowing ourselves to become fascinated by the apparent omnipotence of reasoning, to the point of reducing intelligence to its powers of analysis and calculation. We would then risk losing our sense of beings and of contemplation, thereby weakening the discernment needed to guide our actions. Absurdity would then take a very concrete form: humanity mobilising extraordinary capabilities to destroy the conditions of its own existence.

There is no longer time to prevaricate when doing so means indefinitely postponing the examination of difficulties on which our decisions depend. Recognising our limits, deepening our understanding and acting accordingly are part of the same imperative. What becomes of our search for truth if what we understand changes neither our reasoning nor the way we act?