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The importance of nuance, interview of Étienne Klein by Brut, July 21, 2021.

Étienne Klein > “Maybe the nuance, excuse me, but it's maybe a bit annoying. And people who speak without nuance give the impression of being right. Someone who doubts, because nuance has to do with doubt too, with uncertainty, with caution, we say: "That guy, he doesn't know what he thinks.”

Étienne Klein > “And so, a nuanced statement gives the impression of being weakened by the form it takes and that is what seems to me to be a threat, because we know very well that it is not in extreme positions that we find the truth, but in imbrications, in superpositions, in the nuance, precisely, that it is situated.”

Étienne Klein > “We see it clearly in certain media: someone who has just said something completely stupid on television or on the radio will generate a whole series of reactions that are much more numerous than someone who says something cautious, saying what we know, what we don't know, explaining the difference between the two, etc. ”

Brut > “Why do humans have so much trouble saying ‘I don’t know’? ”

Étienne Klein > “Well, I don’t know! No but... It’s a very good question but, I have no trouble saying ‘I don’t know’, but admit that if every time you asked me a question, I answered ‘I don’t know’, would you invite me back?”

Étienne Klein > “I have the impression when I look at social networks that you have to choose your side and, in fact, it is easier to click 'I like' or 'I don't like', it is even easier to hate, because there is still a lot of hate on social networks, it is easier to hate than to think.”

Étienne Klein > “But when I talk to people in the street, with friends, I don't have the impression that people react the way they do on social networks. In other words, when you are physically in front of someone, the nuance comes back. When you are in front of a screen,

without there being a limit to your own enthusiasm for this or that idea, it can indeed become radicalized much more quickly.”

Étienne Klein > “I was insulted on social media by people I ended up meeting, they were absolutely charming.”

Brut > “C’est rassurant alors, finalement, c’est que les comportements sur les réseaux sociaux ou à travers les écrans diffèrent de la vie classique ?”

Étienne Klein > “This means that it is reassuring in the sense that it shows that we are social animals, we need to meet people to discuss, to learn, to argue too, but it is the physical meeting which is the great characteristic of the social bond and the so-called social networks do not do this social work since, precisely, they lead to the radicalization of positions.

Brut > “If I follow you, the COVID crisis, in my opinion, is not going to help things too much since, by definition, there is social distancing, as they say. Can we imagine that by dint of being socially distant, we lose nuance?”

Étienne Klein > “I would prefer that we talk about physical distancing rather than social distancing because obviously, it is the space that is concerned, we have every right to discuss remotely, so we can have a social life while being physically distant. But, indeed, confinement, obviously, for everything we are discussing here, for the nuance, it is probably not very favorable.”

Étienne Klein > “This problem of the disappearance of nuance, in appearance anyway, in our societies manifests in my opinion a crisis of language. That is to say that we speak a lot with slogans, but shouting a slogan and thinking are two completely different things, and so I think that, and I would like to quote Proust if you allow me, Proust wrote somewhere this absolutely brilliant sentence, he says:

« J’ai toujours honoré ceux qui défendent la grammaire et la logique, on se rend compte 50 ans après qu’ils ont conjuré de grands périls. »

My personal translation :

“I have always honored those who defend grammar and logic, and 50 years later we realize that they have averted great dangers.”

Marcel Proust

And I think that we damage language by the fact that sentences are short, that argumentation disappears, that we provoke clashes rather than leaving room for nuance precisely and that the truth is probably not easy to say. I do not believe that there is a simple truth and therefore the truth supposes to be said fairly that the remarks that claim to name it are nuanced, even if there are radical truths. Even a radical truth must be said in a nuanced way.”

Étienne Klein > “What is new, and perhaps even a high-ranking anthropological mutation, is that in the past, information was an extremely rare commodity, people were constantly

lacking information and therefore information was precious. Today, we are bombarded with information and I think that our brain cannot handle it all at once and therefore must practice the absence of nuance to decide what it will give credence to, what it will reject out of hand, because our brain is not wired to handle so much different information at the same time and I think that in fact the excess of information limits our capacity to process it in a nuanced way.”

Étienne Klein > “Sometimes I realize that I get caught up in it. You’re waiting for a bus or a subway and you’re looking at your phone and it’s like your brain is constantly demanding to be carried away in a delirium that you can see is delirium, but that has a compelling power that ends up capturing you, you know. And so, it’s good to praise nuance, it’s good to see that we miss it, but it’s also good to learn to like it.”

Étienne Klein > “Salvation would consist in ensuring that moderate people engage in debates without moderation. Without moderation. Moderation must be expressed immoderately, because otherwise it is those who have polarizing and clear-cut discourses who will impose themselves and that will prevent debate. A debate is the complete opposite of trench warfare.”

Brut > “We are talking, we are going to make a video, it will be broadcast on Brut and under this video, there will be a lot of rather vague comments. What could you say to the people who will comment on this video?”

Étienne Klein > “Look, I would like to say to the people who are going to comment on this video that I thank them for taking the time to watch the video in question and I would like to let them know in advance that I will only answer comments that are longer than 10 lines.”

Brut > “Nuance is a matter of size?”

Étienne Klein > “Nuance needs length, indeed, time, which does not mean that long texts are always without nuance. You see how nuanced I am!”