

A Rise in Humanity – Professor Felwine Sarr
Introduction to the 2021 Opening Lecture
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Dear Professor Sarr, dear Felwine, dear students, dear friends, dear colleagues, mesdames et messieurs, a very warm welcome at the Geneva Graduate Institute and to the Maison de la Paix.

It is an immense pleasure for me to welcome you all today.

It is an immense pleasure – first because we are finally able to re-open all doors to the Institute and to start the academic year with an on-site, face to face format. We are welcoming this year 495 new students in the incoming class. More than 95% arrived already in Geneva. This year the graduate institute will welcome a total of close to 1300 students, not counting exchange and visiting students. Altogether those students represent a total of 105 different nationalities – an amazing diversity which in itself is already an important part of our pedagogical project. A big welcome to the incoming class and welcome back to all returning students!

The other reason why it is such a great pleasure for me to welcome you today is that we will have in a few minutes the great privilege of listening to Professor Sarr who will deliver the opening lecture of our academic year. As you have seen the title of this lecture is – A Rise in Humanity. A title that is so relevant, so important, so much to the point and so well aligned with the way in which the graduate institute projects itself for the coming years!

In Greek mythology, Prometheus was a Titan, the race of gods that preceded the Olympians. Prometheus in Greek means “forethought” and Prometheus had a brother, Epimetheus, whose name translates to “afterthought”. Prometheus, in other words, was the “smart and cunning” one. And Epimetheus, well, the other.... The two brothers were charged by the Olympians to share attributes between living creatures. Epimetheus, with his characteristic impulsivity and limited foresight, bestowed strength and swiftness to some, dangerous claws and fur to others... but when time came to provide humans with attributes, nothing was left. Prometheus had to intervene. He stole fire from Zeus to bring it to humanity as a means to ensure its survival, but also, as it turned out, its control over nature and other species.

The symbol is clear. Prometheus is the agent through which we, human beings, are endowed with some degree of godliness. Fire is a symbol for reason, our divine spark – the attribute that connects us to the gods, makes us *an-thropos* in the etymological sense of the term, those who turn and look upwards (hence to the gods). Fire is also a symbol for the derivatives of this divine spark – technology, knowledge and science as tools that allow us to improve our lot, to thread a path to quote unquote “progress”.

A painting from 1907 by Jean Delville shows Prometheus in action, I would even say in majesty and potency. Prometheus triumphant carrying the torch of progress on behalf and for humanity, away from obscurity and towards the promise of a better, more luminous future. You will note, and i will make no further comment on this at this stage, the muscularity, the hypertrophied masculinity of this Prometheus triumphant....



But there is another side to the story of Prometheus as illustrated by the Prometheus-bound painting of Paul Rubens from 1618.



For what he has done, stealing fire from God and giving it to humanity, Prometheus gets punished. Zeus is outraged by this act of defiance, by this *hubris* to use the Greek word. So Prometheus is chained to a rock in eternal punishment. Everyday an eagle eats his liver and because Prometheus is eternal, his liver gets regenerated every night, to be eaten up the next day. Every day the sun is scorching him, every night the cold is freezing him. Prometheus bound and chained is a warning – there is a price to pay for hubris, for man pretending to be what he is not and cannot be, god and all controlling. Where triumphant Prometheus in the painting of Jean Delville projects total control – over nature and over other species in

particular – Prometheus-bound is subjected to the complete control of nature (the sun, the cold, the barren rock) and of other species (symbolically represented by the eagle).

It is interesting to push that image further, closer to our contemporary predicament. A Prometheus-humanity will end up being scorched by a violent sun – that is indeed more or less what climate change is promising us. We will be chained and doomed on a barren rock – here again an apt image for earth being depleted at a fast rate of its biodiversity. We can use the last public words of philosopher Hans Jonas, just before his death in 1993, to say the same thing:

It was once religion which threatened us with a last judgment at the end of days. It is now our tortured planet which predicts the arrival of such a day without any heavenly intervention.

So the scenario of humanity-god would seem to end, in a dialectical and quasi-necessary kind of manner into a scenario of doom... but does it? Is this dialectical scenario completely predetermined, necessary? Is there no alternative? Do we necessarily have to run the full course of our promethean *hubris* – which dialectically will bring about a scenario of doom and imply, at best, a long period of confinement to the rock of our punishment before, who knows, we may rise again from the ashes? Or can we still branch off into a radically different direction? Can we expect a rise in humanity as Felwine Sarr will explore – or as I regularly say can we work towards the re-enchantment of humanity?

We are *an-thropos*, those who look upwards to the gods, who aspire to godliness... but we are also humans – coming from and returning to earth – *humus*. In an ineluctable, essential way. There is no planet B, at least for a long foreseeable future. The dream of immortality is just that, a dream.... Although the search for both immortality and a planet B generates the outflow of huge amounts of money right now, particularly within the community of transhumanist businessmen on the northern shores of California.

If there is no planet B, no immortality, how do we then re-enchant humanity, how do we bring along a rise in humanity? I am very much looking forward to what Felwine Sarr will tell us on that.

But I would just like to underscore at this stage that at the Geneva Graduate Institute we have collectively worked over the last year towards the elaboration of a common compass that projects us towards what is definitely the challenge of our times.

1. International collaboration for peace is inscribed in the historical DNA of the institute. Hence it remains an important structuring element of our compass.
2. But it becomes everyday clearer that peace is unthinkable, impossible to maintain or regain without an urgent consideration of sustainability and equity issues
3. This furthermore cannot happen without a profound rethinking if not reinvention of multilateralism

4. Neither can it happen without a rebuilding of trust as one of the conditions to attempt to save democracy
5. And the ultimate means and end of all this is to re-enchant humanity or to provoke, as Felwine Sarr says it, a *rise in humanity*.

Hence it becomes very clear, I would guess by now, why Professor Sarr was the right person to deliver the Keynote Lecture for this new academic year. Felwine Sarr is a modern renaissance man - and it is important to underscore this as this has become a very endangered species. Our academic world indeed still finds transdisciplinarity difficult to handle and structurally favors a narrow scientific division of labor. Felwine Sarr is a philosopher and an economist as well as a musician and a humanist. Professor Sarr is the Anne-Marie Bryan Chair in French and Francophone Studies at Duke University. Earlier Felwine Sarr taught at the Gaston-Berger University in Saint Louis, Senegal, where he was also for a while Dean of the Economics and Management Department. This fall, Professor Sarr holds the prestigious Chaire de Litterature et Culture Francaise at the ETH in Zurich. Felwine Sarr has made academic contributions in development economics, econometrics, epistemology, history of religious ideas and so much more. I will not cite all his articles and productions here - just a few of his books which are particularly relevant to today's lecture and which I would really strongly encourage you to read. *Afrotopia*, first published in 2016. *Habiter le monde*, in 2017. And in 2021, *l'Economie à Venir*, a dialogue with Gaël Giraud, former chief economist of the Agence Francaise de Développement. But Felwine Sarr is also, as I mentioned above, a poet, a musician, a humanist and a philosopher. Before I give him the floor, I propose to show you a very short illustration of the other side of this renaissance man. Dear Felwine, it is a great honor for us to welcome you today, it is the perfect way to start this new academic year. On behalf of our entire community, I would like to extend my warm thanks to you for being here. And before I give you the floor for your lecture, we listen to Felwine, the musician for a few seconds!