

Editor's note: English translation of Chapter I of *La vida eterna*

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# Eternal Life

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The absolute doubt Descartes asks is as impossible to obtain in the human brain as a vacuum is in nature, and the intellectual operation by which we would achieve it would be, like the effect of Boyle's machine, an exceptional and monstrous situation. Whatever the subject, we always believe in something.

Honoré de BALZAC, *Une ténébreuse affaire*

## CHAPTER I

### THE ILLUSION OF BELIEF

The Air France plane had taken off from Paris's Charles de Gaulle airport. The delay had been long, the explanations short and confusing. I set about consoling myself for this all-too-common setback with the no less common method that usually works best for me: a long nap in the skies, dreaming that I am at home in bed dreaming I'm on an airplane... But it was not to be. In the seat on my left, separated only by the narrow aisle, an eloquent and persistent geyser of air theology gushed forth, an oracular shower capable of proposing and then solving all enigmas of our bitter condition, the unwavering lesson that soars

over all our trivial doubts and enthusiasms with its transcendent message, the vision of the third eye that never sleeps, the voice of the beyond that awakens consciences or at least won't let them sleep peacefully... Alas—a bore in action.

He was a guy about my age—whose perils I know especially well—and he was preaching to a younger woman, under forty, attractive in a conventional way and seemingly resigned to pay him some attention (at least her parachute was still under her seat). The orator knew all the tricks of the trade, so for the moment I imagined him having a clerical past—or a dissimulating present: he cleared his throat from time to time to emphasize something especially strong or daring, threw in a little smile here and there (as if to say that his statements contradicted certain common sense vulgarities with whose low nature he assumed his listener agreed) and never lost his zeal for emphatic finality, although he combined this with the greatest sensibility for the persistence of the mysterious. The perfect combination of the definitive and the enigmatic. He knew not only everything he knew but also what no one knew about everything. A sly one! The garbage he was rehashing (I noticed immediately a certain family resemblance to the *radio*) was of the eclectic kind, which comes up most often in these times of internet syncretism and culture, with special emphasis on the Hindu strain of cosmological house-cleaning. Along with some news from transcendental psychology (“the brain records everything, everything, our whole life long... and in our last moment, the film runs backward!”), other novelties of angelic anatomy (“the body is our best friend, but don't forget that it is only a husk”). Then, looking at the appealing “husk” of his neighbor, he sighed seductively: “And what other body would we choose after this one?” He permitted himself to flirt with heterodoxies: “No pope, past or present, knows what God looks like. That's why they imagine him as an old man with a white beard—ha, ha—a sort of grandfather. But it would be more precise (?) to imagine him as a boy of sixteen or eighteen, handsome and full of mischief.” How racy in his search for precision! Then he waxed pedagogical, described the functions and ranks of the Hindu celestial hierarchy: Mani is Power, Parvati is the Great Spirit (which he always pronounced “chpirit”), the body here, the mind there... He concludes (only because we are going to land, not because he's run out of steam): “It's just that nothing is material. And no one realizes it. Nothing, nothing, is material.” Bump—we land. The pilot, “chuperior.”

I almost blush for feeling so much hatred toward this trickster, who is probably no better and no worse than so many others in many different fields. But I have to admit that I really take supernatural cheats as a personal offense. I am especially revolted by my air preacher's tone of certainty. Without a waver or a doubt, he employs almost ironic touches, as if to say, “Poor things! The others believe, but they don't see the light, and it's so easy if you just look from the right perspective...!” No self-respecting scientist would have the nerve to talk so arrogantly about what can't be verified... Not even about what *can* be! The great physicist Richard Feynman says it well: “What isn't surrounded by uncertainty can't be true.” And the questions that crowd my throat on hearing this air trickster dispatch with matter as if it didn't exist and give a wealth of details about the “other” of the material, whatever that might be, are these: “And you, how in the devil—or by the gods— do you know? Who told you? What proof do you have? Where does he get all these ideas?” etc.

My smoldering indignation may come from my disgust at lying, which I feel with old-fashioned intensity. Of course, I don't know how endemic this complaint is, nor alas am I free of such relapses myself. "Lying, like breathing, comes naturally to human beings. We lie to hide our insecurities, to make others feel better, to make ourselves feel better, to distract attention from us, to make people like us, to protect the children, to extract ourselves from danger, to conceal our misdeeds, and for the sheer fun of it all. Lying is a universal, practiced with skill the world over."<sup>1</sup> Even so, the lie not only repels me—it horrifies me. I agree with Marlow, the protagonist of *Heart of Darkness*, as I explain elsewhere (see "Seeking the truth" in the appendices of this book). My opposition is not as extreme or indiscriminate as that of Kant, for whom the lie is the greatest violation that a human being—as a moral being—can commit against himself.... Yes, against himself and not against another, for the liar uses his physical body as a mere instrument (a machine for speaking) against its own inherent end, its ability to communicate thoughts and reasons. For Kant, no intentional falsehood is excusable. This seems to me a somewhat hysterical exaggeration,... although I find deep down and almost reluctantly that he wins my best human sympathy. To my most modest and cautious understanding, however, not everything we call a lie is really the same—not by a long shot. I believe we are only truly lying —if you'll excuse the oxymoron— when we willingly deny the truth to someone who has the right to expect it of us in a specific area. For example, I don't believe that President Clinton was obliged to discuss his sexual relationships—between consenting adults— *coram populo*, before all U.S. citizens: When they interrogated him like inquisitors and busybodies, he had every right to speak the first thought that came into his mind, that is, to try to deceive them. His obligations to the voters bound him to sincerity in public affairs, not private. Perhaps with Hillary, he might have had another kind of commitment,... but that was between them, not matter for a Congressional committee.

Of all lies, the ones that scandalize me most are the ones that give fraudulent explanations of natural processes or historical events. This might be due to my vocation as a teacher, but I consider it a true offense against the spirit to take advantage of someone's desire to know —one of the most noble and human desires— by inculcating him with falsehoods. A more or less relative ignorance is justifiable on most questions, as of course is doubt, so deceit can only spring from vanity or malice. But probably in most cases, whoever struts as a sage on

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Lynch, *True to Life—Why Truth Matters* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 147. For more research on this vast subject, see Miguel Catalán's *Antropología de la mentira* [*Anthropology of the Lie*], Taller de Mario Muchnick, 2005. Also María Bettetini's *Breve historia de la mentira* [*A Brief History of the Lie*], Catédra, 2002; and Ignacio Mendiola, ed., *Elogio de la mentira* [*In Praise of Lying*], Lengua de Trapo, 2006. Of course, to detest lying does not in any way mean one desires to *impose* the truth. Raoul Vaneigem says it well: "An imposed truth vetoes its own possibility of being humanly true. Any idea accepted as eternal and incorruptible exhales the fetid odor of God and tyranny." With friendly but debatable optimism (and the pleonasm is valid, since all optimisms share the same vices and virtues), Vaneigem refuses to discount the intellectual benefits we can gain from even the worst falsehoods: "The most disparate speculations, the most delirious assertions fertilize in their own way the field of future truths and prevent us from erecting the truths of an era with absolute authority. There is in the most unbridled fiction, the most shameless lie, a spark of life that can revive all of the fires of the possible." In *Nada es sagrado, todo se puede decir* [*Nothing is Sacred, Everything Can Be Said*], trad. Thomas Kauf, ed. Melusina, pp. 29-30.

questions about which he is ignorant does not dedicate himself consciously to lying but rather to speaking nonsense. The liar is more convinced, surer of itself in its attitude than in the specific contents it transmits. In a word, such a person is not a liar but a charlatan. This certainly describes the profile of my dissertating colleague on the Air France flight —and that of the charlatanry and nonsense we hear day after day from the mouths of politicians, prophets of all kinds, theologians and... ah yes, of course, from philosophers!

The best current study, already a classic, on this question is without doubt Harry G. Frankfurt's *On Bullshit*. According to Frankfurt, "Bullshit is inevitable where people are frequently impelled—whether by their own propensities or by the demands of others—to speak extensively about matters of which they are to some degree ignorant."<sup>2</sup> I suppose that such behavior may be excusable if one is subjected to grave threats or suffers torture, but most of the bullshitters I know are bullshitters by vocation, out of a desire to put on airs or get money. We must be careful to distinguish between the bullshitter and the liar. The liar knows and values the truth but hides and disfigures it to obtain some kind of advantage. In the end, he lies out of respect for the truth, which he considers a valuable weapon, since knowledge of it grants power over the deceived. The cynical epigram of the great Ambrose Bierce confirms this: "Truth is so good a thing that falsehood can not [sic] afford to be without it." Bierce recognizes the authority of truth while defying it to serve his own ends. As Frankfurt says, "The bullshitter ignores these demands altogether. He does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all. By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are." The liar knows or believes he knows the truth, and from this knowledge he falsifies what he truly knows. In contrast, the bullshitter is completely unconcerned with what the truth of an issue really is. Worse, he spews forth his nonsense, caring only about the effect it has on his listeners or the idea that they may have of him. (He wants to seem pious, exalted, sensitive, an initiate in the mysteries of the universe... a friend of the truth!) In his most intimate forum, in the unlikely instance of being capable of sincerity at least with himself, he should admit that veracity seems unachievable or irrelevant. The quatrain of Campoamor says the rest:

In this treacherous world  
Nothing's all false or all true;  
It's all in the shades of the glasses,  
The glasses though which you view.

Of course the worst bullshitters can have a heart, can even pretend to be politically correct according to the demands of the era. As Frankfurt indicates, the bullshitter navigates the reigning postmodern skepticism at full sail. This skepticism denies the possibility of achieving knowledge of any objective reality and discounts the possibility of knowing things as they really are. Given that there are no facts, only interpretations (according to Nietzsche's much-repeated and repeatedly misinterpreted pronouncement in *The Will to Power*), one is justified in renouncing the attempt to reach a valid intersubjective description

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<sup>2</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 63. Subsequent citations are to this brief essay.

of reality. “Instead of trying fundamentally to achieve precise representations of a world common to all, the individual dedicates himself to trying to obtain sincere representation of himself.” Truth is dead, long live sincerity—or “authenticity.” Adorno writes a lucid essay on this Heideggerian jargon, which is still more or less present in many authors who no longer even cite it. The bullshitter bares his soul, writes in a sentimental and preferably enigmatic idiom without any objective ground except the hypertrophied subjectivity of what he promotes as his most radical personality, never ceasing to look over his shoulder with disdain at the flat and laborious discourse of those who feel their way intently along, trying to realize what they realize. But, says Frankfurt, it turns out that “as conscious beings, we exist only in response to other things, and we cannot know ourselves at all without knowing them.... Our natures are, indeed, elusively insubstantial—notoriously less stable and less inherent than the natures of other things. And insofar as this is the case, sincerity itself is bullshit.”

Now, doesn't Frankfurt's proposal owe too much to an excessively neat and incontrovertible concept of the truth? Many people (generically included in the generous label “postmoderns”) view accepting this concept today with as much ironic condescension as it awakened indignation when the question was disputed in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Those who disdain or seriously undervalue the importance of assigning truth and falsehood in our debates on how things really are (let the name Richard Rorty suffice) should not, of course, be confused with the skeptics who seriously doubt that we might manage someday to reach incontrovertibly true relevant knowledge. The former do not grant truth any more importance than myths, legends, traditions, the impositions of political power or practical advantages that accompany certain opinions: in the best of cases, we will call “truth” that which a sufficient number of us as participants in a debate have finally accepted as a point of agreement. The latter think that truth is something objective, independent of our taste. They believe it would be valuable to know, but that it escapes us and will always escape us because of its difficulty, the limits of our cognitive possibilities and the many passions that cloud our intellect.

Frankly, it does not seem to me advantageous on the level of reflection to lose much time defending the concept of truth. It is a normative universal that exists in all languages for the simple reason that without it we would not be able to speak, nor would it make much sense to do so. When we encounter an interlocutor, we apply—from the start and of necessity—what Donald Davidson calls “the principal of charity;” we consider our interlocutor capable of using the language appropriately and expressing true propositions. And we expect this person to see us in the same way. Of course, even to deceive him it is necessary first to believe that we are able to speak the truth and well-disposed to doing so! “Truth” is certainly not a univocal term, and it functions analogously but differently according to the kind of “language game” —to use Wittgenstein's terminology— we play each time. There is a common element: when we speak, we share an objective world, and language attempts to take proper account of what is happening in the world we share. But it happens that the right perspective corresponds to different guidelines for relevance at different times. In this respect different modalities of truth can be compared to the variety of

kinds and scales of maps in existence, each of which is useful depending on what one needs it for.<sup>3</sup>

For any map or plan to function as such, it must correspond explicitly and intelligibly to the spatial distribution it represents, although its detail and points of reference may be very diverse, depending on whether it is a property map, the GPS, the Michelin guide to recommended restaurants, or instructions we draw on a napkin to help our friend find our office in the labyrinth of our workplace. Surely no current map aspires to the pretensions of the wise men in Borges' imaginary country. These wise men composed a map identical in all details, proportions, and relief to the country it represented; the map was completely superimposed on the country. The men's truthfulness made the map unusable, and it was abandoned. Years later, its enormous ruins were inhabited by vagabonds, and wild beasts took refuge there. In my view, many of the postmoderns who reject the concept of truth understand it in a sense as hypernaturalistic and unmanageable as the map invented by Borges' wise men. This is a grotesque abuse, a hyperbole in whose name they discard the rest of the usable and crucial modalities of true cartography. It is clear that the way each map approximates reality depends on the practical intentions of the person who uses it (in this, the pragmatic postmoderns are correct). But this approximation—which we call “truth”—is surely necessary in all modes... and corresponds to something *outside* the purposes of the person using the map. I advise us not to waste energy arguing about philosophies that discredit this evidence or minimize its importance.

Those who are skeptics about our possibility of ever knowing the truth are a different matter. In contrast to the postmoderns, who discount or undervalue the truth, these skeptics value truth so highly that their excessive scruples place it beyond our reach. On occasion, as Bernard Williams indicates, “the desire for veracity starts a process of criticism that weakens the conviction that there is any truth that is certain or expressible in its totality.”<sup>4</sup> One can sympathize intellectually with this diligent honesty, but not when such scruples lead to paralysis. It may be impossible to construct reliable maps of certain particularly unknown territories (to continue the comparison above), but it is clear that our representations function well enough in many other cases... It would be hard to get along if this were not the case! Taken to their most extreme, skepticism and cultural relativism—according to which we cannot either find any truth outside the tradition that gives it meaning or decide which is the “truest” among the many truths that present themselves—lead to an artificial position sustainable only in the researcher's study or the conference room and incompatible with the efforts of everyday existence. Angel Ganivet said that he would not believe the sincerity of any radical skeptic who refused all beliefs until he saw that skeptic sit on the railroad track and wait without fear for the arrival of the possibly illusory express. And in his recent work, *River out of Eden*, Richard Dawkins maintains that any cultural relativist is guilty of hypocrisy when he flies at a height of 30,000 feet. Airplanes are manufactured according to scientific knowledge, and we entrust our safety to this knowledge, by means of which the

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<sup>3</sup> See *La importancia de la verdad* [*The Importance of Truth*], p. 6off.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Williams, *Verdad y veracidad*, trad. Alberto Enrique Álvarez and Raquel Orsi, ed. Tusquets, 2006, p. 13. [*Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004].

device can propel itself through the skies to its destination. But the paper-and-glue airplanes of indigenous cargo cults or the wax wings of Icarus cannot do this, no matter how culturally respectable they are. Nor did our Don Quixote really fly in Clavileño, I would add, and whoever laughs at him is surely able to distinguish between Quixote's imaginary celestial journey and what any bird can do. It is more than likely that there are numerous truths beyond our reach (nor do they cease, therefore, to be truths), but it is grotesque to deny that we know many others well enough. And these are perhaps not the least important truths, at least for acting in everyday life.

But let's return to the beginning, to the bullshitter who ruined my flight from Paris to Madrid and his brazen humbug. I admit that all too often I have felt the same revulsion when listening to ecclesiastical or merely "religious" discourses in the broadest sense of the term. This is probably unfair to the good faith of many believers. Anyone could tell me now that he does not in any way deny the deplorable abundance of bullshitters who are indifferent to the truth and that he repudiates them as I do. And that he, as a believer, abominates the lie no less than Kant, who of course was also a believer and admits without qualms the effectiveness of scientific knowledge and the truths established by experiment. Nor does this believer, an enlightened person, pretend in any way that the truths of faith compete with those of science —Oh no! He does not subscribe to anti-Darwinian "intelligent design" or other forms of obscurantism characteristic of President Bush! But he does hold that religion is concerned with a different order of questions than science. That is, he not only believes that religion is dedicated to different subjects than science but also that its truth does not correspond to the scientific paradigm, a paradigm unquestionably adequate in its own territory but coarse and crude when applied to religious beliefs. Wittgenstein was ahead of postmodernity when he said that scientific discourse could not take religion into account, for discourse belongs to different language games. The true value of religious doctrines is not merely factual, much less experimental; it is rather symbolic, perhaps allegorical, and always full of moral implications. To reject religious beliefs as "false" is antiquated positivism, lacking in hermeneutic sensitivity and even in esthetic taste.

I realize that it is not easy for me to understand this position —and I have heard it so often! To attempt to understand it, I will return one last time to the comparison from cartography we used before to try to illustrate the different kinds of truth without in any way or case renouncing the importance of this concept as such. At the beginning of my favorite novel, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, one usually sees the simple, rough drawing of a map. It represents the island to which the schooner the *Hispaniola* is sailing, with its inlets, small fort, caves, hills... and naturally the location of the treasure. We assume that the map is a facsimile of the map Jim Hawkins finds in the trunk of the old pirate Billy Bones, the event that begins the great adventure. And this is true in more than one sense, for if the biographies are right, it was this map — drawn by RLS to entertain his adolescent godson— that later inspired him to write the novel we enjoy so much. We can also ask of this pleasant map —as of any atlas or road guide— in what geographic space it orients us. The answer is clear: in none. It serves to help us understand and better enjoy the story of which it forms part, but it will not serve as a reference to any real country or island. It belongs to the delicious cartography of the imagination, not to the

physical representation of our planet Earth. Would those who caution against verifying religious beliefs according to the usual experimental parameters of truth and falsehood wish to say that our attitudes are as philistine as those of people who protested these parameters, disappointed in not finding on the sea an island that corresponds to RLS's map? Frankly, I don't see it like this. It does not seem defensible to argue that the authenticity that believers grant to religious subjects is similar to the authenticity that fans of literature grant their favorite characters. Hamlet and Don Quixote are "real and true" in a certain sense; they count for us, for our reflection on life and our self-understanding as human beings. In this sense, they probably have more importance for us than many flesh and blood people we know... Even so, we will never confuse one with the other. We know that the map of *Treasure Island* is true when we are reading the novel, but not outside it. Bernard Williams expresses this perceptively in a somewhat melancholy formulation: "We know that it is true of Sherlock Holmes that he lived in Baker Street, and we could win in an easy quiz by saying so, but we know just as well that it is not true of Baker Street that Sherlock Holmes lives there."<sup>5</sup>

No one, however atheistic, denies the cultural, anthropological or even political relevance of different religious doctrines. But this relevance comes precisely from the fact that thousands and thousands of people believe religious dogmas in a way that is not merely cultural, anthropological or political. Herein lies the trickiness of the debate. I have nothing to argue, of course, with people who feel the same interest in the beauty and relevance of religious legends as they do in the creations of Stevenson, Conan Doyle or Cervantes. Nor with those who study the social effects of religious beliefs that they do not share, as seems to be the case with Régis Debray. But I do have trouble understanding people who claim that they are believers, even though they say they believe in a symbolic or allegorical way. And I have even more difficulty if they hold that this is the form most religious belief takes. Symbols of what?... Allegories... of what? Am I to understand that I could give up such symbols and allegories with no greater loss than the poetic exchange of metaphors? This minimalist retreat doesn't seem even minimally reliable. In his debate with Régis Debray recorded in an intense and passionate book, the scientist Jean Bricmont—who published the controversial but stimulating book *Intellectual Impostures* with Alan Sokal—maintains that the main ruse of contemporary religious discourse is the idea that religion is concerned with a different order of truths than science. And he argues against this ruse: "The existence of God, of the angels, of heaven and hell, or the efficacy of prayer are assertions of fact; if we really withdraw them, that is, if we admit that they are false, then I don't know what is left of religious discourse: How can one create, for example, meaning or values different from those of the atheists starting from the same factual base? [...] Let's suppose that we withdraw from religion the literal truth of the Bible, the efficacy of prayer and other things that might come into conflict with science (in the sphere of facts). What is left? Either purely metaphysical assertions (a god completely severed from our world) that interest almost no one or purely moral assertions. But how is this morality different from a nonreligious morality if we abandon all assertions of fact, divine punishments in this life and after, God's interest in his

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 169.



creatures, etc.?”<sup>6</sup> Does Bricmont simplify the problem more than he should from his scientific perspective? As I see it, he is rather challenging the equivocal complexity of consciously ambiguous approaches that continually change the ground of debate to avoid criticism.

Over the last two hundred years, many skeptics and anticlerics have perpetuated with polemical fervor the debate that religious doctrines are mere inventions of the clergy —*bullshit*, in Frankfurt’s terms — to trick the gullible and maintain unjustified power over them. This is certainly— this time, without doubt—a deceptive, unjust simplification in its generality, although plenty of examples, from the fraudulent donation of Constantine to the Holy Shroud of Turin, prove that these nasty-minded unbelievers are not always wrong. I recall a French science fiction novel that I read as an adolescent, entitled *The Sign of the Dog*, by Jean Hougron, a now forgotten author who also wrote *I Will Return to Kandara*, a novel highly respected in its day. The novel presents an intergalactic researcher sent to a remote planet where strange things are happening. The inhabitants live in a walled city, under permanent attack from huge and terrible monsters that descend periodically from the surrounding mountains to assault the city. No weapon can stop them. Only ascetics from a strange sect can fend off the monsters when the city’s destruction seems inevitable, through their sheer mental powers and their prayers. The assault is repeated again and again, as is the magic defense, and the ascetics, so necessary to the people, are venerated and obeyed by all citizens. Finally, the researcher discovers that the monsters were created by the ascetics themselves, to ensure and perpetuate their power. This fable—which I remember was powerfully narrated and which I would love to read again—exemplifies the clichéd view that many Voltairean cynics who lack the genius of their master have cultivated about religions. In reality, the problem is much more interesting and richer in questions about the human condition. The deceptions and charlatanry of some are not enough to explain the persistence of religious beliefs or their influence on the way many perfectly sincere people think and act.

First, we must recognize that such beliefs really exist (I admit that they are so foreign to me that for quite a while I always doubted a little whether the devoted were actually *faking*).<sup>7</sup> In the last extreme, we could say that many educated people —people who are rationalists in almost every other aspect of daily life— at least “believe that they believe,” as the title of a significant book by Gianni Vattimo puts it. Of course, “believing” does not mean merely accepting the cultural or poetic truth of certain doctrines; nor does it mean submitting to certain traditional rituals to conform socially. The believers we are interested in here are intimately convinced—perhaps with doubts, of course, but any rational person has doubts concerning his dearest convictions—that the description of the world and our destiny that their religion proposes is truer than the merely scientific or naturalistic view. William James, to whose thoughts we will turn many times in what follows, expresses it like this: “I myself believe, of course,

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<sup>6</sup> Régis Debray and Jean Bricmont, “A la sombra de la Ilustración” [“In the Shadow of the Enlightenment”], trad. Pablo Herminda Lazcano, ed. Paidós, 2004, pp. 102-04.

<sup>7</sup> Much later, I learned that someone more pious than I, Immanuel Kant, shared this apprehension concerning the extent to which belief in the incomprehensible can be *sincere*. See *La religion dentro de los límites de la mera razón* [Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone], trad. F. Martínez Marzoa, ed. Alianza, 2001, pp. 228-229, especially the footnote.

that the religious hypothesis gives to the world an expression which specifically determines our reactions, and makes them in a large part unlike what they might be on a purely naturalistic scheme of belief.”<sup>8</sup> To believe means to assume that something is true, that it is the case that a specific state of things really occurs—as opposed to other possible ones, which one discounts. I insist: religious belief is not for the person who simply has another way of interpreting the data and theories offered by the sciences (physics, psychology, sociology, etc.). It is a privileged perspective that reveals the foundation and entrails of what other forms of knowledge only glimpse mechanically and superficially. But of what fundamentally do religious beliefs, so ethnographically diverse, consist? Clearly, I do not have either the pretension or the least competence to attempt a phenomenology of religion across cultures and centuries. For what I am attempting in this essay, it is enough to concern myself with religions and their most relevant derivatives as they occur now in the main areas of culture. But to backtrack a little and return to William James, whom I cited above, “A man’s religious faith (whatever more special items of doctrine it may involve) means for me essentially his faith in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found explained.”<sup>9</sup> James also specifies that this belief is accompanied by the conviction that there is effective interest (beyond this mundane life but also actual) in practicing this faith. That is, religious belief permits us to understand our life better in its context, to live it better. It even opens the possibility of something better than life itself.

We return again to the essential question: *Why* do some people believe in the invisible as final explanation and practical orientation for coping with the visible? In most cases, we all try to have *justified* beliefs. As Bernard Williams explains, “A justified belief is one that is arrived at by a method, or supported by considerations, that favour it, not simply by making it more appealing or whatever, but in the specific sense of giving reason to think that it is true.”<sup>10</sup> Of course, sometimes pure desire supports a belief almost irresistibly to the point that we are half-disposed to accept it, even though we know deep down that it cannot be true. For example, many years ago, a small group of tourists was travelling through Egypt in a van, wandering the burning desert in search of famous ruins. We were overcome by almost unbearable thirst and heat. Every time we reached an archeological excavation, we found a vendor who hailed us with the tempting offer of cold soft drinks. What he actually had with him on the sand—under the implacable sun—was a small ice chest from which he took the bottles. The chest was not plugged in to any electric outlet and could not cool the bottles’ contents in the least. Even though we knew that all of the drinks he sold us at an exorbitant price were at a temperature closer to boiling than freezing, we all gathered hopefully around the little stand and even insisted that the man give us the bottles at the bottom of the useless ice chest, as if they would be colder... On the one hand, we knew perfectly that this was impossible; on the other, we wanted *to believe* that this time we had finally found the cool relief that we so much wanted. How many times have I insisted on cultivating beliefs that were just as unfounded, falsely hopeful and even disappointing!

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<sup>8</sup> *The Will to Believe*. William James, ed. Les Empêcheurs de Tourner en Rond, 2005, p. 63, note 1. [p. 30, note 1]. As in the other cases where no translator is specified, I am responsible for the Spanish translation. [Omitir?]

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 81 [51].

<sup>10</sup> *Op cit.*, p. 133[129—English version].

In broad terms, we can consider scientific parameters to be the best method for acquiring justified beliefs. However, most of us have some kind of *paranormal* belief—one that violates some rule or scientific principle—whether religious or profane (and in many cases both). The spread of and improvement in education generally cause a decrease in the influence of traditional religious beliefs, but this does not alter and sometimes even stimulates the number of believers in other paranormal phenomena of the more “secular” type—UFOs, fantastic health cures, crazy historical hypotheses, etc. In the scientific nineteenth century, irreligious, critical, reasoning minds like Schopenhauer’s believed firmly in the most spiritualist tall tales (not to mention the more credulous Conan Doyle and his photogenic fairies!). There was even a Nobel laureate—Alexis Carrel—who travelled to Lourdes and became an enthusiast of the miracles that occurred there. As T. S. Eliot observed irrefutably, the amount of reality that human beings can endure seems to be considerably less than our best-tested knowledge would let us realize.

In his classic *The Will to Believe* (1897), William James, perhaps the main inspiration behind the philosophical pragmatism that John Dewey and then Richard Rorty later spearheaded, advocated faith as an appropriate way of grounding our beliefs in certain cases. As James understood it, a radical empiricist cannot deny that there is “religious experience,” whose peculiar characteristics we cannot reconcile with the scientific method (for example, they are neither intersubjective nor reproducible at will). This does not mean, however, that we can simply dismiss these experiences, since they are truly important to our understanding of human life. According to James, this would be “a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule.”<sup>11</sup> In the end, the meaning of our beliefs is to motivate and guide our action in the world. What is important about them is thus not where they come from—intellectually—but where they lead in practice. The faith based on our desire to do or achieve something not only is legitimate but can be indispensable. (“The only escape from faith is mental nullity.” [p. 93]). “And often enough,” James writes, “our faith in an uncertified result is the only thing that makes the result come true.” [p. 59] “Suppose, for instance, that you are climbing a mountain, and have worked yourself into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap. Have faith that you can successfully make it, and your feet are nerved to its accomplishment. But mistrust yourself, and think of all the sweet things you have heard the scientists say of maybes, and you will hesitate so long that, at last, all unstrung and trembling, and launching yourself in a moment of despair, you roll in the abyss.”<sup>12</sup> An eloquent paragraph, but one that raises many questions—for example, those expressed by Pío Baroja, whose *The Tree of Knowledge* may respond directly to James:

“There must be a point on which we all agree; for instance, on the usefulness of faith for a given action. Within what is natural, faith undoubtedly has great strength. If I believe I can jump a meter, I will do it; if I believe I can jump two or three meters, I may also be able to do this.”

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 62 [18].

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 59 [35].

“But if you believe you can jump fifty meters, you will not do it, no matter how much faith you have.”

“Of course not; but that doesn’t prevent faith from functioning in the sphere of action of the possible. Then faith is useful, biological; then we have to preserve it.”

“No, no. What you call faith is nothing but the consciousness of our strength. This always exists, whether or not we want it to. It is best to destroy that other faith; to leave it is dangerous. From that door, which opens a philosophy based on utility, ease and efficacy onto the arbitrary, comes all human insanity.”<sup>13</sup>

When the difference between the possible and the impossible depends on our decision, faith can be very useful. But however much we wish it, this will not make what is impossible for us possible. To believe otherwise, as Baroja warns, can be the beginning of madness... or the way to drive the credulous people who listen to us mad.

In the end, the pragmatic position that James expresses with spirit is a variation on Pascal’s “*pari*,” since in the field of religion, the solid ground toward which we should leap, is on the other side of death. Various authors have shown the fragility of this kind of argumentation, among the most recent Donald Davidson.<sup>14</sup> Although certain purified desires incline us to specific beliefs that cannot be justified by any better confirmation than the desires themselves, there is the possibility of another desire no less strong —the desire for truth and honesty in our beliefs— that can act as a critical safeguard against them. Expressions like that of Dostoevsky’s character in *The Brothers Karamazov* (“If God does not exist, then everything is permitted”) or the much-repeated statement that, without God and the supernatural, life has no meaning, are not proof of arguments for these beliefs, but rather statements with a pathetic urgency that should make us doubt them. Nietzsche meant something like this when he stated in *The Antichrist* that, “Faith saves, *then* it is false.” The only real, incontrovertible position among these approaches is our *desire*: perhaps instead of attempting to comprehend the innermost reality from what we desire, we should try to understand precisely the real mechanisms of our rage to desire...

The social functions that religions fulfill are one thing —that is, the tasks that can provide reasons for their origin (supplying a transcendent foundation for the cohesion of the group, explaining where the world and each of its phenomena come from, sustaining taboos and duties, legitimating the established social order or rebellion against it in the name of higher justice, etc.). But the reasons that many people believe individually in religious doctrines and —what is even more astonishing— respect the clergy who administer them are another matter. Without doubt, in many cases people comply with the majority religion through pure social imitation. It is well known that, under normal circumstances and free of exceptional pressures of any kind, spontaneity leads human beings to do, think and venerate what they see others

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<sup>13</sup> Pío Baroja, “El árbol de la ciencia” in *La raza* [“The Tree of Knowledge” in *The Race*], Tusquets editores, 2006. pp. 447-478.

<sup>14</sup> For Donald Davidson’s opinion, with good commentary that extends and complements it, see the lecture “La voluntad de no creer” [“The will not to believe”], by Manuel Hernández Iglesias, Barcelona 28-1-2005. I do not know whether the lecture has been published. I obtained the text through private correspondence.

do, think and venerate. But now societies are heterogeneous, religion is less unanimous than before, and the supply of beliefs or forms of piety is increasingly diverse. Thus, devotees and believers can easily hold beliefs by personal choice, in their most intimate being. Both William James and Rudolf Otto, in another classic essay on the ulterior motives behind the religious entitled “The Idea of the Holy,” begin their thinking from a purely religious experience or shock that makes people feel called to dedicate themselves to these lofty matters and based on which they guide others on this transcendental path. It is from this experience that the will to believe is awakened or comes to life. Rudolf Otto even goes so far as to discredit the authority of the person who has not felt this peculiar shock to dedicate himself to studying religious psychology (such that these pages and probably this entire book should not exist, since their author entirely lacks this clarifying spasm). Truly, I mistrust the radical originality of such revelation. As I see it, it does not precede but proceeds from religious beliefs that are already in effect. La Rochefoucauld said that no one would fall in love if they had not heard talk of love, and I believe no one would have religious experiences if he or she did not know beforehand that there is a religion that demands faith and adherence.

I return therefore to human desires as the personal foundation of beliefs. Everyone can compose the list of his principles, as Stendhal did in his notes (in which he never forgot to note an erection of reasonable duration produced at will, a certain transport without delays or obstacles, some music of Cimarosa or Mozart when useful, etc.) We would all like to be the beneficiaries of miracles, and I stress that the miracle is more than a mere exercise in magic. Magic is ultimately just another mechanism; that is, when specific gestures and spells are performed, it occurs automatically, impersonally. Magic is an unusual variety of the usual causal necessity. Miracles, in contrast, do not come of necessity but from a will that distinguishes us with its favor. They are personalized—have our name on them—and satisfy a private inclination. Among the purest desires that religions can fulfill, I would mention the example of revenge. The defeat and punishment of enemies, the final humiliation of the evil who seem to have won, is a pious motive that doubtless inspires many prayers. Its literary paradigm could be “Sredni Vashtar,” the splendid and terrible short story by Saki, in which the orphan child finds the right god to purge his resentment against someone who takes advantage of his weakness. But it is not enough to do justice to those who offend us or to those who challenge the order we respect. We also seek another form of protection. And thus we arrive at the essential question, the irreparable consciousness of our mortality.

The majority of our most vital desires seek to avoid, postpone or conspire against death (ours or that of our loved ones). Seen from our current condition, it seems that, if we were immortal, we would no longer know what to desire. To know our mortality does not consist merely of anticipating ceasing to exist, but of the end of all things and everything we value. To know we are mortal is above all to know we are *doomed to destruction*. The worst is not exactly not enduring, but realizing that everything is destroyed, as if it had never been. Once we are born, once the link with our parents, who cared for us during a long and psychologically determining period, is broken (Freud describes this very well, even in its neurotic connection to religion), only love in the personal realm and public recognition in the social maintain the illusion that we are not completely

destroyed. Death arrives later, and we intuit that no one will ever take us in again. However unlikely, however unrealistic, God appears as a solution to the unsolvable. For Him, we will be someone and will continue to be someone for all eternity, even if we are thrown into the depths of hell. We will not have *occurred* in vain. In his *Theory of Religion*, Georges Bataille writes that the animals exist in nature “like water in water,” that is, without alienation or consciousness of any distance from what constitutes and surrounds them. But this is because they do not know that death is their fate, the source of all human alienation. Life is “strange” because we die and for no other reason. To die is to be lost. Whoever has been aware of himself and had a proper name cannot be resigned “like water in water.” We do not wish to be lost; in no way and under no pretext can we die just like that. We do not *believe* we deserve it. Even if definitive annihilation awaits us at the end of our trials, it should be a personal conquest, obtained after long effort, a personalized nothingness like the nirvana of the Buddhists: a radiant nothingness, *achieved*. Our greatest and most fundamental desire as mortals is to avoid destruction, to continue to be significant and relevant for Someone who understands what this means, what this imposes, even the humiliation it implies —incarnation through the great theological success of Christianity— to know you are “someone;” that we not be lost from sight, that we not be confused, that an eternal attention distinguishes us, even through disapproval.

We call this ultimate concern for each individual, for everyone, for myself, unrepeatable and fragile: *salvation*. Putting anthropological subtleties aside, religions today, the religious beliefs of modern human beings, are primarily... *technologies of salvation*, to use Hans Albert’s expression.<sup>15</sup> This desire is such that these mythological tricks satisfy it and require belief in some supernatural truth that guarantees them, without ever being able to resign itself to religious doctrines as one “way of speaking” among others, an empty poetic consolation. If we let ourselves be a bit cynical, everything else, the efficacy of these technologies of salvation, is more or less like the “placebo effect.” I just read that some North American researchers have discovered that simply hearing that one is going to take a pain killer makes the patient produce endorphins that begin to diminish the pain he suffers. Thus, although one only half believes the promise of religion, it serves for many to palliate the suffering we anticipate of our mortal destruction. In view of the anaesthetizing benefit that religion brings, believers overlook its lack of verisimilitude and negotiate their daily conduct as best they can relative to the prohibitions and mandates promulgated by the clergy, self-proclaimed administrators of the theological remedy.

Those of us who were initiated into philosophy over thirty years ago, at the end of the 1960s, would have found it difficult to believe that the reflective debate on the question of religion is still going on today, even strengthened by the heat of various fanatical assassination attempts. We thought the problem had been solved. We did not know again (like the Enlightenment thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) that religious belief does not depend on what we know or on what we think, but on what we irreparably desire. And on what we fear, clearly and above all on what we fear, as Lucretius indicated so

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<sup>15</sup>Hans Albert, *Racionalismo crítico* [*Critical Rationalism*], trad. Berta Pérez, ed. Síntesis. 2002, pp. 163ff.

long ago. What continues to surprise, however, is the permanent reverential respect that persists as the majority attitude of the incredulous toward religious beliefs. I insist: not toward the believers themselves—who of course deserve full respect, while they in turn submit to and do not violate their country's laws—but toward their own doctrines and dogmas. A little while ago, I heard a socialist leader in a debate on secularism admit that “unfortunately” he did not have faith. And in the recent glosses on the thought of José Ortega y Gasset on his anniversary, there was no lack of commentators who “deplored” his secular blindness to transcendence as an intellectual limitation of his philosophy. In contrast, I read in the newspaper today, Maundy Thursday according to the Catholic liturgy, an article by the Cardinal of Seville entitled “The Choir of Twilight,” condemning “rational demons” which he describes as “extinguishers of thoughts of the wide horizon.” He defines these demons boldly as “guarantors of all these pseudo-intellectual subworlds of self-sufficiency, egocentrism and blinders” which, according to him, can be conquered “with study, research, dialogue, intellectual honesty and hope.”<sup>16</sup> There is much indecency in this arrogance, which invokes the “intellectual honesty” of whoever does not submit to any of the author's controls, but also in those who do not share the willful blindness that uses the invisible to explain what we see that they lament as a deficiency, this attitude consistent with the “rationalist demon.” The “will to believe” emerges from all too comprehensible human weaknesses and anxieties, which no one can or should condemn with insipid arrogance. But disbelief comes from an effort to achieve a truth without deception and a human fraternity without transcendental “patches” that seems to me as a whole even more worthy of respect. This is not always evident and confirms me in my opinion that “out-dated” essays like the one that I am writing continue to be urgently relevant...

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<sup>16</sup> Carlos Amigo Vallejo, “El coro de las tinieblas” [“The Choir of Twilight”], *ABC*, 13 April 2006.