

Dan Corjescu

FUTURE BELIEF

Between God and Science

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Be Light

Un calife autrefois, à son heure dernière,
Au Dieu qu'il adorait dit pour toute prière:
«Je t'apporte, ô seul roi, seul être illimité,
Tout ce que tu n'as pas dans ton immensité,
Les défauts, les regrets, les maux, et l'ignorance.»
Mais il pouvait encore ajouter *l'espérance*

Voltaire

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Introduction: Who is this book for and what is it about?

In his most recent (2022) best seller, *Rationality*, Steven Pinker mischievously writes: I'm often asked whether I "believe in progress." The answer is no. Like the humorist Fran Lebowitz, I don't believe in anything you have to believe in.

Of course I don't think that Pinker was being quite serious here. A moment's reflection will reveal that there is no such thing as a human being that believes in *absolutely nothing*. Every human believes in something. If someone were unable to believe in something they would not be able to function as human beings and would perish from this earth.

As far as we know animals do not need to believe in something. Neither do our most sophisticated versions of AI. For now, the need to believe seems to be a quintessentially human condition. It is a special organic/metaphysical necessity that requires us to make some sense of ourselves and our place in the world; our relationship with others; and, finally, the purpose and meaning of our lives.

Many modern thinkers and philosophers have said that those two final questions, the "purpose" and "meaning" of life, are illegitimate. They have been interpreted as an unfortunate quirk of language but are themselves meaningless. For these writers, childlike "Why" questions are nonsensical. You can ask them but they do not deserve a serious response. For this type of thinker Questions like "Why are we here?" "What is the meaning of my existence?" "Does existence have a purpose" are cultural fossils of an ancient superstitious world consisting of unclear thought and troubled soul.

Yet while the clarity of such thoughts are still a legitimate target for inquiry the troubled soul of man has not gone away. Indeed millions if not even billions of our fellow men, women, and children are as much enthralled and demanding of answers to

such questions as was Tolstoy when he wrote in *Anna Karenina*: Without knowing what I am and why I am here, life is impossible.

Keeping this descriptive fact in mind, I am strongly inclined to dismiss the analytic arguments of many of our best thinkers concerning the legitimacy of such questions and go, at least in this, with the majority of mankind and say that, yes, “why” questions matter and matter terribly whether they meet the strictest standards of logic or not. Humans throughout the world still feel the urgent need to ask them and many spend their lives searching for an answer. I think that it is only fair that we take both them and their questions seriously.

In our contemporary world dominated by cold commerce, fetishistic consumption, and soulless concupiscence the need for Man to believe has not diminished. His need to find meaning for himself and his world has not gone away. Indeed, billions still cling to the old religions despite the Enlightenment Expectation of the inevitability of their fading away. On the other side of the spiritual divide, a growing number of people declare themselves to be without any particular faith or belief whatsoever but this does not mean that their need to believe in something or many things has evaporated entirely for, in the end, they are still human and thus believing creatures just as much as rational ones. Indeed, it shall be argued that Atheism, for instance, is, in part, a belief just as much as is Buddhism or any other religion; an assertion that often leaves many “non-believers” incensed and confused.

And so it is that Man must believe to live. If this is true, then the nature of his beliefs become very important both for his individual trajectory and the destiny of the world. If we grant the a priori human necessity for belief we might ask ourselves what, if anything, is *good* to believe in in the twenty-first century?

In this book we shall be arguing, among other things, for a belief or set of beliefs that neither requires God or is necessarily incompatible with such a spiritual presupposition. It is our view that modern belief does not require God, but may, nevertheless let Him in if so desired. What is most important though is that belief be viewed as a metaphysical-existential category of being that

precedes every other category. Thus, for a human to be a human at all he or she must first believe.

Therefore I primarily write for those who are neither convinced by traditional religions or who have not yet been soundly converted by the New Atheists. I also write for those who in their hearts and minds waver between the practice and theories of modern science and the traditional contents and moral prejudices of ancient belief.

Religion has not died. God is still with us. And faith continues to be a power in the world. And although there are many who believe they can do without all three of these things, there are, I suppose, many more who would welcome at least a convincing modern substitute for them.

Chapter One: Why Believe in Belief?

Werthe legte erst der Mensch in die Dinge, sich zu erhalten, - er schuf erst den Dingen Sinn, einen Menschen-Sinn! Darum nennt er sich "Mensch", das ist: der Schätzende.

Aber wer das Land "Mensch" entdeckte, entdeckte auch das Land "Menschen-Zukunft". Nun sollt ihr mir Seefahrer sein, wackere, geduldsame!

Nichts ist wahr, Alles ist erlaubt`: so sprach ich mir zu.

--Nietzsche

Believe that life is worth living and your belief will help create the fact.

— William James

Believing is the most mental thing we do.

— Bertrand Russell

Not satisfied with life, afraid of death

--Mathew Prior

quaestio mihi factus sum

--St. Augustine

Die geistige Freiheit des Menschen, die man ihm bis zum letzten Atemzug nicht nehmen kann, läßt ihn auch noch bis zum letzten Atemzug Gelegenheit finden, sein Leben sinnvoll zu gestalten.

--Viktor Frankl

La persuasione che la vita ha uno scopo è radicata in ogni fibra di uomo, è una proprietà della sostanza umana.

--Primo Levi

Der Mensch ist nicht fähig, nicht zu glauben

---Karl Jaspers

Imagine if you will a human being who is incapable of believing in anything. Would he or she be able to get up in the morning, go to work, live a life, create a future for themselves? I think we would all agree that the existence of such a being would be inconceivable. But the interesting question is why?

Why must we believe in order to live?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines belief, in part, in this way:

Any proposition (1) that is accepted as true on the basis of inconclusive evidence. A belief is stronger than a baseless opinion but not as strong as an item of knowledge. More generally, belief is conviction, faith, or confidence in something or someone.

Action or conduct indicating belief in, obedience to, and reverence for a god, gods, or similar superhuman power; the performance of religious rites or observances.

Since this is not a book about religion or religious belief per se, I would like to first concentrate on the assertion that belief is “conviction, faith, or confidence in something or someone.”

Clearly, in order to simply function we must *at the very least* believe that our lives are worth living.

This is an assumption that is not based on any fact. For instance, the fact that evolution has arguably fashioned us into “survival machines”, as Richard Dawkins once memorably put it, does not directly lead to the conclusion that we must believe that to be a necessarily good thing. That most of us *feel or experience our continued survival* to be a good thing is a descriptive fact but does not and cannot serve as the essential ground for our belief that life is worth living.

If we want to seek the reasons for our belief that life *our life* is worth living we must look elsewhere other than in the world of facts and their multiple relationships with one another irrespective of whether or not they lie in the realms of culture, politics, biology, or common sense. None of these areas of knowledge can serve as firm philosophical ground for believing in the value of our own life.

It might be strange at first to say that belief in reasons for living cannot be based on facts. However this is just a slight variation of Hume's famous “ought/is” distinction that basically

says you cannot cleanly derive an “ought” from an “is”. For example, just because we are all members of the human species it does not follow from that fact alone that any of us possess “human rights”. That we all belong to the human species is a fact. That we all possess human rights is a strong and widespread belief but not, itself, based on any independent facts. We do not *actually* possess human rights but we *believe* we do and thus pass laws and build institutions to thankfully promulgate, sustain, and spread these rights/beliefs the world over. But make no mistake about it, *human rights* like our positive or negative valuation of our own life is ultimately an existentially a priori act of will plus imagination.

We will and imagine both *human rights and our own lives to have value*. We believe in these two things and many other things besides. However, once we believe, through a primary act of will and imagination that these things exist and have value in the world; they then *become cultural, institutional, historical facts*. Thus it is that our beliefs spring from our will and imagination but once formed enter the world of facts sociologically, psychologically, practically. In this way, beliefs may not be initially based on facts but become factual once they are articulated, acted upon, and eventually institutionalized.

Nothing of this is new. Over a century ago Max Weber wrote his most famous book *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* explaining just such an idea. For Weber, Protestant beliefs helped lead to the growth and spread of modern day capitalism. Protestant ideas and concepts differed significantly from either Catholic or Orthodox Christian beliefs creating the conditions for new ways of living, doing, and thinking in the world laying, inadvertently, the foundation stones for modern life. The historical trajectory of Protestantism serves as an example of a set of beliefs that became *social facts in the world resulting in enormous and fundamental material change*.

Many of you might be disturbed by the idea that our beliefs about ourselves, our world, our morals, our very existence cannot be based on facts. That they are all creatures of our will and imagination. Just such an idea was expressed in the works of Nietzsche who believed that Man was the only animal to give

"things" their value. For Nietzsche, man was not so much wise or rational as value creating. Indeed, today we know that many animals display some form of rationality sometimes even quite sophisticated but we know of no animal that gives values to both things and themselves in just quite the same way that humans do. Animals do not, as far as we know, inquire about the meaning of their life and existence in general. Only humans do that. In this way we begin to see how closely tied are questions of belief and of value.

We call "this" "good" and "that" "bad" and we create upon these fundamental axes of value the coordinates for the construction of multiple historical/social worlds. In one world "slavery" was "this good thing" and a human world based on it lasted for thousand of years. In another world "Jews" were "that bad thing" and a horrific world of extermination camps was born. In yet another world "non-Europeans" were neither "good nor bad" but "primitive" and novel systems of exploitation were created. And finally throughout most of our world "democracy" "human rights" and "empathy" are "those good things" worth living and dying for.

Thus we believe because we are, perhaps above all else, value creators. We give meaning to everything in our lives including ourselves. But those meanings and beliefs are historically arbitrary no matter how much we wish they weren't. The history of the human race reveals a tableau of values many of them radically opposed to each other as in the case of the "goodness" and "badness" of slavery. In one epoch, a great philosopher such as Aristotle would argue for its "naturalness" while thousands of years in the future another great philosopher such as John Stuart Mill would argue for its "unnaturalness". Who was right? Surely today we side with John Stuart Mill and other moderns subtly arguing over our abilities for empathy, reason, and justice to furnish us with a firm moral ground to keep us safe from such evils as "racism" "sexism" and "xenophobia". Nevertheless even though faulty reasoning and strong institutions can and do give us a semblance of safety from these historical evils they will never be based on independent facts but rather on our

willing and our imagination as the value creating animal that we are. We are magicians who call forth novel values which in their turn enchant new worlds.

But if values and beliefs are always changing how can we be sure that we possess the “right” ones? The short answer is: we can't. All that we can do is work to either maintain or create the world that we collectively want but that will only be accomplished through will and imagination that crystallizes itself within strong institutions. If at any time our will and imagination either changes or weakens then the institutions that we once built and confidently found to be “good” will crumble to the ground as did the Egyptian Pyramids, Greek Temples, and, most recently, Totalitarian Idols.

There are no guarantees. Beliefs and values are inherently variable and unstable. They change and will change sometimes rapidly, sometimes imperceptibly. Thus life is not only a struggle for survival but an “eternal war of idols” as Max Weber once noted. In matters of values and beliefs we, as a global civilization, are very much in an existential situation not unlike the one described by Sartre in his famous *Existentialism is a Humanism*: We must everyday choose and choose again the world that we want. We must everyday reaffirm what we believe. There is no rest when it comes to maintaining the value system of the world that we want. There are no *self-evident truths*. There is only the strength or weakness of the human will and imagination to fashion a world that we deem to be better if not necessarily the best. The sad *fact of the matter* is that we have *not* forever banished the concentration camp, or slavery, or torture, or injustice of all kinds. Their perpetual possibility and, thus, eventual unwelcome return will remain with us forever but the good news is that we can keep them at bay indefinitely with courage, struggle, wit, fortitude, conviction, and, above all, cooperation and wisdom.

This last attribute, wisdom, is interesting. What is it? It too is linked to belief and values. Wisdom is not solely or necessarily based on facts only; even if they form an essential part of wisdom. Wisdom is a deep knowledge of as many historical/actual forms of human life as possible and their material and spiritual consequences as well as the ability to form novel beliefs and