FLANDERS LITERATURE

Seeking Untruth

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An extract

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Introduction

We all entertain illusions. But do we actually need them? Or is the notion that we can live without illusions the greatest illusion of all? Most of the friends and acquaintances to whom I put this question think that a life without illusions would be intolerable. Take the truth as your guide, is the prevailing view, but don't become enslaved to it. Allow yourself a few pleasant fantasies. In the Book of Ecclesiastes (1:18) we read: 'For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.'[i] Is it true that too much knowledge is a troubling thing? Are we sometimes better off not knowing the truth, or putting an illusion in its place? In *À la recherche du temps perdu* Marcel Proust wrote, 'We are all of us obliged, if we are to make reality endurable, to nurse a few little follies in ourselves.'[ii] There is no need, according to Proust, for grandiose fantasies; a few judicious illusions are sufficient to lighten the yoke of truth. Its full weight, he believed, was impossible for anyone to bear. We have to bend the truth or we may get knocked down by it.

But what has the truth done to us that we need to flee it en masse? Let me begin with an aspect of reality that we all share. The universe we inhabit is obscenely big and unfathomably old, mostly empty and almost everywhere incapable of sustaining life. Our planet, to quote Carl Sagan, is a 'pale blue dot' in an immeasurable nothingness.[iii] All our joys and sorrows are played out in a wafer-thin layer on the outer surface of that dot, shielded, for now at least, by a fragile atmosphere. Anywhere else in the universe we'd be dead within a few seconds. The world exhibits no trace of a higher purpose or a moral order. The evolution of life on our planet is like the lurching walk of a drunkard: a succession of coincidences. Humankind is merely one branch of the tree of life, which might just as well not have existed. Everything we think and feel during our lives is no more than the chemical discharge of a kilo and a half of pulpy matter inside our skulls. After death, which is both inevitable and permanent, the brain rots and our consciousness is destroyed forever.

This is pretty much the basic story, according to our current scientific understanding. Perhaps you might also like to know that the universe itself is on the road to destruction. The good news is that by the time it reaches its end you'll be long gone and therefore in no position to care, as will your descendants. By then all life on earth will have been extinct for aeons. When our sun approaches its demise it will swallow up its closest planets, including our own. That will mark the end of the human species – assuming it has survived that long, of course.[iv]

So much for the global picture. We're all going to die, no one can leave, everything will perish. But what about the reality here and now, while we await our end? On top of the bad news

about the cosmos we may be aware of some unpleasant truths about ourselves: our shortcomings and wrong choices in life, our failed relationships, the futility of our pursuits, our bleak prospects. These small truths, however insignificant in the face of the cosmos, are perhaps even harder to bear. We don't share this bit of our reality with other people because it's different for each of us. For some it's undoubtedly more endurable than for others. Nevertheless, Proust, and many others with him, believed we all needed a few illusions, whoever we were and however well we were doing. Not even those who are extremely well off compared to their fellow humans can escape the *condition humaine*. Death is the great leveller and nobody who reads this sentence will read it again in a hundred years from now. The cosmos – you have to admit – is at least impartial.

The question is: do all those truths keep us awake at night? If they don't, then we have no need of illusions to fend them off. In the film 'Stardust Memories', Woody Allen, playing his own disconsolate self, buttonholes colleagues on the film set about what he's just read on the front page of the *Times*. The universe is expanding and all the matter in it is decaying. 'Am I the only one that saw that? The universe is gradually breaking down. There's not going to be anything left.' Not everyone feels the yoke of cosmic truth like Woody, however. The people around him simply shrug and are eager to get on with their work, unconcerned about the ultimate fate of the universe and humankind. In the film 'Annie Hall' little Alvie, a young version of Woody Allen, descends into depression after hearing precisely the same news about the cosmos. He is listless and no longer wants to go to school. But his mother remonstrates, 'What has the universe got to do with it? You're here in Brooklyn! Brooklyn is not expanding!' Our own deaths are a good deal closer than that of the universe, yet even so not all of us allow ourselves to be thrown by the fact. The philosopher Epicurus shrugged at his own mortality: 'Death does not concern us, because as long as we exist, death is not here. And when it does come, we no longer exist.' What are we worrying about?[v] Awareness of the finite nature of everything and everyone can even lead to peace of mind and an ability to put things into perspective. Of course life is absurd and death's the final word, as Monty Python sang, but think about it: you come from nothing and you're going back to nothing. What have you lost? Nothing! Always look on the bright side of life. The same question could be asked about our personal shortcomings and failures. Do those small truths upset us so much that we need to shield ourselves from them? Are illusions our only means of escape?

Let me assume, taking Proust's lead, that we all need a few illusions if we are to be happy, whether they concern us or the cosmos. In which of them should we lose ourselves? Not foolish, mindless, crazy illusions, that goes without saying. Those commonly bring us up against reality with a bang. We want only sophisticated and carefully considered illusions, wholesome for body and mind. The sugar coating to the bitter pill. Or illusions that are useful to the community, that preserve the social fabric or promote solidarity. This book is a quest for these advanced-level illusions. What kind of illusions are they? How can we find them? And are we prepared to sacrifice the truth for their sake?

Advanced-level illusions

Illusions are beliefs that don't square with reality. A belief is like an arrow that we fire at the world. If we hit our target we call the belief true. If we come close to the bull's eye, it's pretty much true. If we miss the mark altogether, we call the belief an illusion. The people I've questioned about this in my modest survey seem convinced that no one can live without illusions (or not happily, at least). But could they identify their own illusions? What arrows have they consciously shot off-target? Often they were unable to give me an answer. That's hardly surprising, since those who are able to point to their own illusions are in danger of puncturing them by that very act.

Perhaps we need to consult science after all, the smart aleck that confronts us with all kinds of disagreeable truths about ourselves and the cosmos. Even within that bastion of

scholarship, where truth is considered of paramount importance, it's possible to find advocates of illusions. Only the better sort of illusions of course, for the more exacting among us. Psychologists champion what they call positive illusions, mild misapprehensions about ourselves that are healthy and beneficial: the illusion that we are superior to and more competent than our neighbours, that the future smiles on us, and that our children – if we have them – are (if possible) even more intelligent, talented and attractive than we are. Those of us who are not susceptible to these illusions are believed to have a greater tendency to depression. It's a less than cheering thought: the depressed have a more accurate view of themselves than people in the segment of the population that prides itself on being mentally healthy. So who is mentally ill, a person wrapped in self-delusion or a person who goes through life burdened by truth? Psychiatrists would do better to prescribe a few advanced-level illusions for everyone – themselves included – as spoonfuls of sugar to be taken with the truth. If only the Greeks had known this when they chiselled 'Know thyself' on the forecourt to the Temple of Apollo.

Positive illusions are beliefs intended for personal use, enabling people to face the harsh reality about themselves and their future. Then there are the illusions we share with each other about a broader reality, like faith in a life after death, in a deity, or in reincarnation. Philosophers have declared that God is dead, but some psychologists think that gods, no matter which gods, bring a wealth of advantages with them: beacons of certainty, chicken soup for the soul, glue for the social fabric, a pedestal for morality. Faith in the afterlife or in reincarnation is described as a useful fabrication that enables us to cope with our own mortality. Some evolutionary psychologists believe that faith in a divine being originated as a biological adaptation, a propitious illusion, in other words, that allows us to overcome a range of social and mental problems. Religion makes us all better, is the idea. *Homo sapiens* without God is like a bird with a broken wing: able to survive, perhaps, but vulnerable and hopeless.

Paradox

Imagine psychologists did indeed, after extensive research, arrive at the conclusion – the truth, as it were – that all these illusions are not only safe to use but beneficial for body and mind. We feel better if we believe that we have immortal souls, that everything in life happens for a reason, that we will see our deceased friends and family in the afterlife, that we will never get cancer, that we are tremendously talented, intelligent, funny – and modest besides. Such delightful notions. Now that we've discovered the truth about the benefits of illusions, it's time to make the truth disappear. Imagine we decide to embrace these salutary illusions. We turn a switch in our brains through sheer willpower – and we believe them!

Unfortunately a belief is not an item of clothing that you can take off the rack in a shop to try on and then put back. A belief is an assertion about the world that thrusts itself upon you, that barges in like an unwanted guest and is difficult to remove. You can't just decide with a snap of the fingers to believe in an afterlife, or in a long and contented mortal existence. What if it were my firm conviction that such a leap of faith would make me happy? I'd still be incapable of making that leap.

The novel *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, which tells a tragic yet hilarious story centred on a US Air Force captain called John Yossarian during the Second World War, takes its title from a logical paradox in the book. The 'catch-22' of the title is symbolic of the absurdity of war. It goes as follows: every pilot was duty bound to take part in military operations unless he could prove he was mentally deranged. If you were of sound mind then naturally you did not want to fly and risk your life; you'd have to be crazy to want to do that. Anyone who flew voluntarily was therefore mad and for that reason had no obligation to fly. Conversely, anyone who didn't want to fly was showing evidence of sound mental health and was therefore obliged to fly. 'If he flew then he was crazy and

didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to.'

The decision to opt for beneficial illusions likewise comes up against a catch-22: you can know which illusions are useful only after you've investigated the pros and cons. But if you do that, you cannot any longer sincerely believe in them, so you're unable to experience the advantages. A person who sincerely cherishes an illusion has no reason to ask whether that particular belief is good for his or her health. We have beliefs simply because we honestly take them to be true, not because we think they are useful or comforting, or good for our blood pressure. An illusion will make you happy only if you're unaware of being caught up in it. But in that case you can't possibly know whether it's useful or dangerous. Once you find out, you'll no longer have the illusion.

Paternalism

There is another way out of this catch-22. We can't just talk ourselves into having useful illusions, but we can talk other people into having them. God is dead and the world is going to the dogs, but shouldn't we at least keep up appearances for the sake of those who have yet to receive the news? Must I, Maarten Boudry, insist on writing books about such illusions? What if we were to decide on behalf of other people which illusions are beneficial for them and which they'd do best to put out of their heads? Or what if another person – a psychotherapist for example – were to decide for our own good which 'little follies' are wholesome for our constitutions and then make us fall for them? One person can dwell in blissful ignorance while another keeps a watchful eye out. One person swallows a placebo, someone else prescribes it with fanciful blandishments. One person discovers that God is dead but decides to keep the news private for fear of what awaits us in a society without God. Think of the argument by Ivan in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: if God doesn't exist, then everything is permitted.[vi] Without God we can all give free rein to our passions and desires, with no fear of punishment. So keep quiet about the death of God if you stumble upon his corpse. Make sure word doesn't get out. If God didn't exist, wrote Voltaire, we would have to invent him.[vii]

Which of us has never told a white lie, with the best of intentions regarding the person deceived? Which of us has never concealed an uncomfortable truth, to avoid causing pain? If we want to keep illusions alive, I can see no reason to stop at God. There are other creatures to be saved from certain death. Take angels and saints. Perhaps they make us happy. Let's face it, with God on his own it would still be pretty lonely in the cosmos. Moreover, it's doubtful whether the God of the theologians can satisfy all our psychological needs. Just try entering into a personal relationship with an unfathomable and transcendent supreme being who exists somewhere or nowhere outside of space and time. Guardian angels and patron saints provide intimacy. We'd better reanimate those as well. And who's to say that spirits, demons and genies can't be of some use? Maybe they keep people in line? They can also be called upon as explanations when fate brings disaster. Superstitious people still prefer to believe in evil intent than in blind chance. Supernatural beings, alternative medicine, psychoanalysis, conspiracy theories, Bigfoot, the Loch Ness monster: it's possible to think of psychological or social benefits afforded by just about every one of the illusions that Johan Braeckman and I investigated in our book *De ongelovige Thomas heeft een punt* (Doubting Thomas Has a Point). Think of the blessings of the placebo effect (alternative medicine), the perception of order in chaos (superstition), the satisfaction of our longing for explanations (conspiracy theories), or simply the pleasure of chasing a three-metre-tall ape through the forests of California (Bigfoot). Why, then, should we take up arms against nonsense? Were Johan and I committing a reckless act by puncturing so many illusions, one after another, with complete disregard for their respective benefits? Are we recidivist party-poopers?

Epistemic innocence

In May last year, Australian psychologist Ryan McKay asked me whether I'd like to give a talk with him at a workshop in Birmingham about human irrationality.[viii] We had come up with the idea of establishing a tribunal for human Folly. Ryan took charge of the defence, attempting to prove the innocence of his client, *Homo sapiens*. Of course humans cherish illusions, he argued, but you can't blame them for that. Illusions are innocent and offer countless advantages. I took the role of public prosecutor. The defendant, I argued, is guilty of his own folly. Illusions are dangerous and need to be challenged. Moreover, my colleague's line of reasoning was incoherent, because of the paradox I outline above: the defendant couldn't even allow his counsel's argument about illusions to sink in without it shattering his own illusions. What sort of lawyer has to keep the argument used in court a secret from the client he or she is defending?

After that tribunal in Birmingham, various ideas began to ferment in my brain. Can the truth be so terribly painful that we'd prefer never to face it? Are some illusions wholesome, useful, or at least innocuous? In theory a public prosecutor could quickly wrap up the case by quoting George Bernard Shaw: 'The fact that a believer is happier than a sceptic is no more to the point than the fact that a drunken man is happier than a sober one.'[ix] I can muster some sympathy for that quip. All the same, I don't want to wave aside all the arguments in favour of illusions just like that. I shall try to articulate the defence of advanced-level illusions as competently as I can. The possibility that some truths do so much damage that they had better remain hidden needs to be taken seriously. This book is the outcome of that quest.

This is not a chronicle of human follies, nor is it a psychological study of irrationality. Pathological illusions, such as those associated with psychosis or schizophrenia, are dealt with only in passing. I want to focus mainly on illusions to which normal, mentally healthy people are susceptible. It goes without saying that the delusions of insanity are damaging.[x] But are there some more refined and sophisticated illusions – advanced-level illusions – that are worth recommending? Or are they just as harmful? I shall also pass over the question of whether the notions whose possible usefulness I discuss actually are illusions. Perhaps God really does exist, or perhaps Marx really did predict the inevitable course of history. Hefty tomes have already been written on those subjects. In the psychological literature belief in the divine is generally assumed to be an illusion, but of course some will dispute that. I'll nevertheless touch upon the question of truth indirectly, by showing how illusions can collide with reality and how their defenders have attempted to prevent such collisions.

Structure

Illusions are the product of our brains, which like all the other organs in our bodies are the result of evolution through natural selection. In the first chapter of this book I therefore need to look at issues concerning the biological function of our apparatus of understanding: does evolution lead us to truth, or has it saddled our brains with all kinds of useful illusions? Can we actually trust our own brains? In chapter two I examine beneficial illusions and other untruths that some researchers regard as biological adaptations, the product of evolution. The discussion of useful illusions – self-delusion and optimism – leads us to a catch-22 of the defence of illusions: we do not choose our own beliefs; they force themselves upon us. After a debate in chapter three about wishful thinking, I look at various strategies for escaping this catch-22. We cannot simply refuse to recognize the truth if we are exposed to it, but we can avoid acquiring particular kinds of knowledge (chapter four). We can shield ourselves against the truth and consciously opt for ignorance. Is this desirable and, if so, when? Another option, which comes up later, in chapter eight, is the paternalism to which I've already referred. We could decide on behalf of other people which illusions are salutary and which are damaging (or someone else could decide for us). And finally there is the supposed

wisdom of evolution. Some people believe we can rely on evolution through natural selection to give us precisely those illusions that are advantageous for us and to protect us against those that are dangerous. All these arguments in defence of illusions come up against practical, conceptual and moral objections. Time for the public prosecutor to present the most powerful argument of all: illusions are dangerous (chapter five). A belief is a catalyst for action, because we do things based on what we believe. So an erroneous belief can elicit damaging behaviour. Illusions have ramifications for our thinking and cause undesirable side-effects, even if they seem innocent and even if we have the best of intentions. Once we are sincerely convinced of the validity of an illusion, we are no longer open to practical considerations of its pros and cons. After all, in our view it is not an illusion. As I'll show in chapter six, beliefs concerning the supernatural are generally more passionately held than workaday illusions. Chapter seven is devoted to the hypothesis that religion, all abuses aside, fulfils a useful cultural or biological function. In the final chapter I take a 'meta' leap, as befits any good philosopher, by looking at illusions about illusions, which are dangerous in their turn. Some people these days find it extremely hard to comprehend why others are subject to bizarre illusions. They regard religion in particular as innocent and benign: no one truly believes all those crazy things (consider 72 virgins in an everlasting paradise). This view is in itself a dangerous illusion that leads to a completely mistaken assessment of the threats we face in today's world. At the end of the book I return to the themes of this introduction: our growing scientific knowledge is encroaching on more and more illusions. The meddlesome nature of science arouses resentment and indignation, or simply sadness at our loss of innocence. But we should not mourn the passing of our illusions; the truth will set us free.

First I need to return to the place where all our beliefs originate, whether true or false: can we trust our own brains? Has the brain developed sufficiently to arrive at the truth? Or is it riddled with all kinds of illusions?

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[i] Bible, New International Version.

[ii] '*Nous sommes tous obligés, pour rendre la réalité supportable, d'entretenir en nous quelques petites folies.*' The translation used here is by C. K. Scott Moncrieff, from Vol. 2 of the edition entitled *Remembrance of Things Past.* Like so many others who have the book on their shelves, I have not read all 3,031 pages with their 1,267,069 words. There is a limit to how much we need to know in life.

[iii] Carl Sagan (1994-2011). *Pale Blue Dot: A vision of the human future in space.* Random House Publishing Group. The title of the book has its origins in a famous photograph of the earth taken from the spaceship *Voyager I* in 1990, from a distance of 6 billion kilometres, at the request of Carl Sagan himself. Sagan's description of that pale blue dot in the photo is one of the highpoints of scientific poetry. On YouTube several film clips can be found in which he reads out passages about that pale blue dot.

[iv] The colonization of space is an idle fantasy. The cosmos is so immeasurably vast and inhospitable that we are utterly dependent on our pale blue dot. The closest star, Proxima Centauri, is 4.2 light years away. A spaceship like the *Voyager*, which travels at 60,000 km per hour, would take 80,000 years to reach it. Even if we could travel a hundred times faster, it would still take several generations. And no hospitable planet has been found anywhere near Proxima Centauri. In other words: forget it.

[v] Here too the Book of Ecclesiastes (3:19) has wisdom to offer: 'Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless.'

[vi] Nowhere in the novel does Ivan say those words, but it is an accurate summary of his view. See http://infidels.org/library/modern/andrei_volkov/dostoevsky.html

[vii] '*Épître à l'Auteur du Livre des Trois Imposteurs*' (letter dated 10 November 1770). Voltaire believed incidentally that there is an overwhelming prima facie case for the existence of God.

[viii] The workshop was organized by psychologist Lisa Bortolotti, who has for some time been carrying out research at the university into what she calls epistemic innocence. The core of her idea is that some illusions fulfil a useful function in our mental housekeeping. Bortolotti is mainly interested in *epistemic*

advantages: by adhering to one illusion you can for example gain knowledge that would otherwise be unavailable, so that the final outcome in epistemic terms is positive. Also, her research mainly concerns pathological illusions, which are less relevant to my argument, as I will explain. Lisa Bortolotti (2014). *Irrationality*. Wiley.

[ix] From the play *Androcles and the Lion*, 1912.

[x] Lisa Bortolotti is however of the opinion that some illusions can be useful in bringing order to the unbearable sensory chaos in which those who suffer psychosis find themselves. In which case the psychotic delusion would be a solution to the mental disorder rather than being the problem, as is generally assumed. See Bortolotti, *Irrationality*, ibid.