What I Believe

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I know that I exist, but I do not know what I am. Or rather, I do not know what 'I' is. It could be just this physical object, my body, and its functions. If so, when the functions cease and the body dies—and is burnt to ashes which are then scattered—there will be no more me. Millions of my fellow human beings clearly believe that this is the way things are, some of them confidently and assertively. Millions of others do not. Among those there is a variety of differing views about what 'I' really is. Some believe that there is an essential me that is not my body, and that it survives my bodily death—that each one of us has (no, is) an immortal soul. Others believe that we survive but not as individuals—that we merge into some sort of sea of existence, like a raindrop falling into the ocean. Others believe different things again. In each case there are intelligent and reflective individuals who hold the belief in question with tenacity and passion. Many have suffered torture and death for refusing to renounce it. If the certainty and commitment-unto-death of honest, intelligent people were a guarantee of truth then all the religions of the world would be true. But they cannot be, because they contradict one another, so if one is true then there are others that have to be false. Only if we do not take them seriously can we assert that they are all true. At most one of them can be, and perhaps none is.

What this situation illustrates, as clearly as daylight, is that nobody knows. The plain fact is that I do not know whether I shall survive death or not; and nor, I think, does anyone else. I do not know whether I have a soul, and no one else knows either. To raise a possibly related question, I do not know whether God exists—and nor does anyone else.

At first it seems incredible that we human beings do not know what we are. It presents itself to our dawning realization as an unfathomable mystery about the nature of our being. But on more rigorous investigation the key appears to lie not in the nature of our being so much as in the nature of our knowing. From the earliest days of philosophy there have been philosophers who contended this. The pre-Socratic Xenophanes wrote:

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> The gods did not reveal, from the beginning,
> All things to us, but in the course of time
> Through seeking we may learn and know things better.
> But as for certain truth, no man has known it,
> Nor shall he know it, neither of the gods
> Nor yet of all the things of which I speak.
> For even if by chance he were to utter
> The final truth, he would himself not know it:
> For all is but a woven web of guesses.

The philosopher most widely regarded as the greatest since the ancient Greeks, Immanuel Kant, argued in some of his profoundest pages that it is not possible for any sentient being to know its own nature. And there is now a strong consensus among philosophers of many kinds, even religious ones, that the existence of a soul, and of God, cannot be proved. I find these arguments convincing. Even among people who are not in any sense intellectuals it has come to be widely held that what we are dealing with here are unanswerable questions, questions to which there must *be* answers, but answers which it is impossible for us to know. In the society in which I live I would say that if there is one view more than another that could be called the man-in-the-street's view it would be this. So what I would regard as the 'correct' attitude is familiarly held, and at almost every level of sophistication from the most simple to the most subtle.

But in whatever way one holds it, it is almost impossibly difficult to live in the light of it. Permanently facing the fact that we do not know what we are, or what future we have, if any, is something few of us seem able to do. Most, I believe, avoid thinking about it. As my father said when he knew he had the cancer that was soon to kill him: 'One tries not to dwell on such things.' Some, including many who cannot stop themselves from dwelling on such things, allow the natural strength of their desire for survival to push this desire from being a hope into becoming a tentatively held belief which then becomes a faith. They are correct in believing that it is true that they might survive, and it is natural for them to want it to be true with all the force of their will to live, so, psychologically, it is for many a short slide from these legitimate attitudes into believing that we survive. But the slide is illegitimate. As Freud once wrote: 'Ignorance is ignorance: no right to believe anything is derived from it.'

It used to be common, and was so for centuries, for people to be congratulated on the strength of their faith, but I can think of no

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other context in which people are commended for the firmness of beliefs for which there is little evidence. Truthfully, there is nothing for congratulation about it. But, of course, leaders of sects of all kinds, including political ones, want to have followers who are like that.

It may be asked: if people find the real yet uncertain prospect of obliteration too terrifying to confront, why should they confront it? Why should they not evade it by not thinking about it, or by seeking refuge in a consoling faith? This question becomes harder for me to answer as I get older. When I was young it seemed to me self-evident that we should try to live in the light of such truth as we can know, and I treated with contempt any suggestion that we might choose not to do so. Yet what about people who *cannot* face it? Should we insist on the destruction of their mental health? I do not think we should. I no longer believe in putting pressure on them to face more than they can bear. Eliot's words 'human kind cannot bear very much reality' are among the most often quoted in the English language, and rightly so. I leave undisturbed anyone who does not want to think about these things, and I do not join issue with anyone's religious beliefs. But I do regard such people as no longer committed to the pursuit of truth. Let them preserve their equilibrium by all means, but let them not expect others to feel obliged to pay serious attention to whatever views they have adopted for this purpose—consideration in the sense of tolerance and social respect, yes, but not consideration in the sense of investigative thought.

I am not writing these words from a position of imagined superiority. I used to regard commitment to this kind of truth as the overriding value—the need to discover, and live in the light of, whatever the truth is about what we are—and it is still how I wish to live as much as I can. But I have discovered that there are things that I too cannot bear. I have found in experience that whether I like it or not I set a higher value on survival, certainly for others and probably for myself. If there is something I cannot endure to contemplate I do not any longer try to force myself too relentlessly to contemplate it. However, in that moment I know that I have opted out of the pursuit of truth as my prime objective and made survival my prime objective. There may be something biological and inescapable about the primacy of such motivation, and in the last resort I do not wish to change it, if only because that would be fruitless: understanding remains unachieved if we destroy ourselves in the process of pursuing it. What is desirable is enough strength to face *sometimes*—not necessarily in all moods or circumstances—what has to be faced; and this is what I hope for. I have now become

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a part-time pursuer of this kind of truth, but alongside that a part-time evader of it.

The chief trouble with evading is that the way one thinks and lives then proceeds from the evasion, and is shallow—not necessarily false but probably so, and certainly without justification or integrity. One is living 'as if' and hoping for the best, and so there is something of pretence about one's doings, something acted, and something rhetorical even about one's thinkings. One is playing a game, though like many games it can be played with great seriousness and intensity; but if one lives like that all the time one goes to one's grave without ever having lived seriously and intensely. One has only played, to get through the time while avoiding facing the reality of the situation. (This, of course, is the theme of what has become the emblematic play of the twentieth century, *Waiting for Godot*.)

We had no say about coming into existence: we just woke up and found ourselves in a world. This world seems to consist, in its apparently irreducible features, of a 'container' in four dimensions, three of space and one of time, whose contents are an indefinitely large number of material objects. Curiosity about the fundamentals of our situation spontaneously takes the form of interrogating these aspects of it: what, we ask, is the nature of time, the nature of space, the nature of material objects; and what is the nature of us who find ourselves in this world, and the nature of our relationships to it, and to one another? Pursuit of these questions constitutes the mainstream of the on-going history of philosophy, and it is out of this that the sciences have, one by one, emerged.

The sciences have been revelatory beyond anyone's expectations, and go on being so: in each generation they reveal things no one would have (or, often, could have) imagined previously. Within the last hundred years they have transformed yet again our understanding of time, of space, of material objects, and of ourselves. But not all the knowledge that is available to us is available through science. Although it makes an indispensable contribution to our understanding of reality we are mistaken if we build, or try to build, our whole understanding of reality on it, or if we imagine such a thing to be possible.

If anyone makes a statement, it can claim to be scientific only if other people can check it. For a long time all science was believed to be concerned with the observable motions of matter in space—even the so-called social sciences, being about human behaviour, were about observable motions of matter in space—so scientific testing was seen as a disciplined and measured observation of things and

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their movements, and of changes in those things. In principle, such observations could be carried out by anyone. Although no individual's observations could be relied on to be a hundred per cent accurate they could be repeated and checked by others. So although scientific testing was never wholly objective it was never wholly subjective either: it was inter-subjective, proceeding by never-ending mutual criticism and correction. It was essentially a joint enterprise, a non-stop journey directed at getting always closer to the truth. Modern science has become a good deal more theoretical, more abstract than the science of the past, less exclusively concerned with direct observation of material objects; but the principle that our results must be repeatable by others still holds, and remains fundamental to valid claims to be scientific. Now the knowledge that we as individuals have of ourselves is not available to others. Yet we are material objects. We may not be only material objects, but we are at least that—if the real us is non-material it is at least embodied—and that body is open to the investigations of science in all the ways that any other physical object is. But that does not account for all the knowledge of ourselves that we have. Each one of us is a material object that knows itself from inside. And this inner knowledge is unique to the individual. All sorts of things are going on inside me to which no one else has access—thoughts, feelings, reactions, memories, plans, hopes, fears, daydreams, a host of experiences of many differing kinds, all the time. My knowledge of these is direct, unmediated through the senses, and is as reliable as any knowledge I have. That is not to say it is infallible. I can misremember, or be wrong about where the pain is, or mistake the nature of my own feelings. But in being fallible, this kind of knowledge is no different from any other—all knowledge is fallible—and in truth it is more reliable than most. Nor can it seriously be maintained that it is unimportant. Our inner experiences include some of the most important we have: for instance being in love; responding to Nature or great works of art; or our deepest convictions about morality and values. And we can know as certainly as we know anything that we have them. Other people, however, have only our word for it. And I may lie about being in love, or dissemble my moral convictions, or my responses to works of art. Statements about such things are not scientific, and I know of no one who imagines that they are; but they can be true, they can be exceedingly important, and they can be knowledge.

I am sometimes asked why, if I concede cognitive validity to our responses to art, I do not extend it to religious claims. The answer, broadly, is that in the former case the existence of what my experi-

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ences are a response to is not in doubt. If I react in a particular way to a play or symphony it is open to anyone to deny the appropriateness of my response but not to deny the existence of the play or symphony. If someone tells me that he knows that God exists because he has direct experience of God I do not (usually) question his sincerity, or question that he is having powerful experiences; what I question is the interpretation he is putting on those experiences. He is claiming that because he has them he knows for certain that a particular being other than himself exists; and this does not follow. He may be putting a mistaken interpretation on his experiences, which is something all of us do sometimes, in fact often. I doubt whether he himself, if he is not a Roman Catholic, would believe that people who sincerely claim to have been advised by the Virgin Mary have actually been so, while most of the people who are willing to accept those claims would not credit the truth of an equally sincere claim that someone had been in personal contact with a Hindu deity. There is always, in every such case, a predisposition to believe.

However, if, contrary to my disposition to believe, it is the case that some of the claims of this kind are true, then it strengthens, not weakens, my point, which is that it is a mistake to confine our attempts to understand the world to investigations of a scientific character. Even a world conceived of reductively as the sum total of material objects includes all the human beings there are. And although scientific investigation of material objects can use only data that are available to all observers—what one might call 'knowledge from without'—there is also a knowledge from within. It is indefensible to make no allowance for it in our attempts to understand the world—an arbitrary and unnecessary limitation, and an especially absurd one if our aim is to understand the nature of either ourselves or material objects, since we ourselves are material objects. If there is, for each of us, already a material object that he or she has direct knowledge of from inside, this must surely suggest at least the possibility that the most promising path towards an understanding of the inner nature of things may as much lie within as be available from without. And this is what I believe. I see our attempts to increase our understanding of the nature of things as embracing not only the sciences, which they must, and to the full, but also the arts, and philosophy as well. These concern themselves with different aspects of reality, and of experience; not surprisingly they and the sciences have a great deal in common, for all are truth-seeking activities, open to everyone, trying to penetrate beneath the surface of appearances and accepted ideas to gain a better under-

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standing of how things are. All begin with speculative imagination, and rely fundamentally on intuition and insight, so that creative imagination plays a seminal role; but all also make indispensable use of criticism and self-criticism; and all are concerned to articulate and communicate their findings in coherent, publicly accessible forms. All carry their credentials with them, finding their justification, if they can ever have any, in outcomes: nothing can be said to be authentic or valid or true, and nothing beautiful, because an authority says so. Together they provide us with the deepest insights and the most fundamental understandings we have, and this is indispensably because, among all those other considerations, they remain permanently open to radical questioning and criticism.

Not only are both inner and outer knowledge inherently fallible, they are also inherently limited in scope. At the very beginning I stressed that we do not know our own natures. The knowledge that we have of ourselves from within tells us an enormous amount about ourselves but it does not reveal to us our innermost nature, does not tell us what we ultimately are. In this respect the two forms of knowledge, inner and outer, do not differ. Our knowledge of other physical objects is also unable to reveal to us what they intrinsically are. So in each case the ultimate subject or object of our hoped-for knowledge remains uncognizable.

In the case of our knowledge of other objects, one reason for this is that our apprehension of them is mediated by our senses as well as by our central nervous systems, including our brains, and that only forms of apprehension made possible by those media are available to us: perceptions, concepts and the rest. What things are as they exist in themselves, independently of our subject-dependent categories, is something of which we can, by definition, form no conception. And except for the fact that our knowledge of ourselves from inside is mostly non-sensory the situation there is a parallel one. What we can be directly aware of consists only of experiences. Therefore unless we *are* only our experiences—that is to say, unless there is no experiencing self that exists separately from experiences and *has* them—the self as it is in itself must remain forever unknowable. And that is precisely the situation I noted at the outset.

Some people have been of the opinion that if the so-called self can never be an object of direct knowledge then we do not have adequate grounds for believing it to exist. All we know ourselves to be is our experiences—in which case we are, as Hume put it, 'a bundle of sensations'. I think this is a mistake, because it assumes that we have adequate grounds for believing in the existence of something only if we have direct cognizance of it as an epistemological object,

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but this is not the case. We can know *that* something exists without knowing *it*. It may seem flippant to give as examples the fact that I do not know China but I know that China exists, or I do not know President George W. Bush but I know that he exists, yet the logical distinction being made here is crucially important. Logically, it is *possible* to know that the self exists without knowing the self; and actually I believe that this is our situation.

What I consider endows us with knowledge that the self exists is our experience of agency. For most of the time that I am awake I am active in the world, controlling the movements of my body and using it to move other things around. I am all the time initiating little courses of action, such as picking something up, walking a few paces with it and putting it down. I consider alternatives, make choices, take decisions, and then sometimes change my mind. And I feel morally responsible for the consequences of my actions—even when I wish I could avoid doing this I cannot help it. If this conviction of moral responsibility, unwilling as much as willing, is valid, it presupposes that the responsible 'I' is continuous over time and is the same 'I' as initiates action. So the experience I have of being myself does not consist only of perceiving and knowing, it consists also of acting, of my actions, and of how I feel about their consequences. With regard to these I know myself to be a persisting self who is a proactive agent as well as the recipient of experiences—and, what is more, a morally responsible agent. This means that any account of 'I' needs to be an account of it not just (and perhaps not even primarily) as a knowing subject but also as a moral agent. I directly experience the performance of my own acts of will, though what my will is and how it performs the acts remain mysterious to me, however carefully I introspect. The ultimate nature of the continuous self that performs these acts is unknown in the ways, and for the reasons, referred to earlier.

So my overall situation is that I know that I have a persisting self for as long as I am in this world, but I am unable to fathom its inner nature, and I have no idea what happens to it when I die.

Not surprisingly, many people react to being in this situation by saying that if reliable answers to these most fundamental questions are unattainable we ought not to waste our time pursuing them. It seems to them obvious that, however important the questions in themselves may be, if we know from the beginning that an enquiry into them is going to arrive at no satisfactory conclusion then from the beginning we know that the search is going to be futile, so why embark on it? There are times when I feel like this myself, but nevertheless I do not think it is an attitude that fits the reality of the

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situation. There is a tradition within Western philosophy that has irradiated these questions with light, even if it has not succeeded in providing final answers to them, a tradition that began with Locke, proceeded through Hume, and reached its highest development so far in the works of Kant and Schopenhauer. Interestingly, Schopenhauer saw this himself as a single discussion: 'It will be seen that Locke, Kant and I are closely connected, since over a period of almost two hundred years we carried forward the gradual development of a coherent, consistent and uniform train of thought. David Hume may also be considered as a connecting link in this chain.' Anyone who has immersed himself in the work of these philosophers is likely to have acquired a degree of illumination that he would not have achieved by himself unless he were possessed of their combined genius. What the study of this kind of philosophy confers is not so much knowledge as insight and enlightenment.

These philosophers perceived what the fundamental problems we face are, and understood them to exceptional depth. They were good at seeing which different ones are connected, and what the connections are, while at the same time seeing which apparent connections are illusory or misleading. They were able to envisage alternative solutions, and to see what objections can be brought against each, and work out which are in consequence unable to survive rigorous examination—and what the implications of that are for other apparent possibilities. Working their way methodically, by analysis and argument, over big and wide-open, utterly basic questions, they functioned as identifiers and excavators of what is possible by way of answers; and through that they became map-makers of what is intelligible, identifying the boundaries of genuine meaningfulness. This is the field of metaphysics. And because its questions are not questions to which we can expect straightforward answers, the study of them does not provide us with knowledge as normally thought of, namely answers to our questions in the form of justified true beliefs. It is this that causes many people to consider them not worth studying; but knowledge is not the only precious possession a mind can attain: there are also insight and enlightenment. Our understanding of the human situation, or what is sometimes called the human predicament, is transformed by such studies, and so, therefore, is our understanding of the lives that we ourselves are living, and hence our understanding of ourselves. There are some of us who feel compellingly that, as Socrates put it, 'the unexamined life is not worth living'. We find that the investigation itself has such value that it is indispensable to us, for our

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quality of life is entirely different with it from what it is without, and so is the degree of our self-understanding and self-orientation. We may none of us know where we are, but there is a world of difference between being lost in daylight and being lost in the dark.

In any case, we cannot cope with life even within this world if we throw up our hands in helpless bewilderment and passivity. We cannot avoid doing things, performing actions; and whatever actions we perform require us to make decisions, which often involve choices. Now a choice can be made only with reference to a criterion, even if this operates unconsciously. So we do in fact have, and have to have, standards and values, whether we are aware of them or not; and they are practically operative in our lives, however little we reflect on them. That being so, the more aware of them we can become, the more self-aware we can be in the use we make of our freedoms.

However, we find—just as we do when we attempt to justify the validity of our knowledge of ourselves, or our knowledge of external objects—that when we enquire into our values, including our morals, we are unable to establish them on secure foundations. We may confidently assert value judgments, and preach morality, but when challenged to provide justification for what we have said we cannot do it in a way that precludes dissent. And because this is so, different people have different views of what the basis of morality is. Some believe it to be the will of God: they think there is a creator God who has made us and requires us to behave in certain ways, and will punish us if we do not. There are others who believe that there is no God, and so our morality cannot have God as its source. But among those too there is disagreement. Some believe that morality consists of rules framed by human societies for their self-preservation, others that its origins go much further back into the biological processes of evolutionary animal development. And there are other views too. And it is not the case that these different groups are drumming up alternative sets of supporting arguments for the same moral beliefs: the moral beliefs themselves are radically different. Roman Catholics, for instance, regard abortion as murder, whereas there are quite a few people who see no moral objection to it. Many such basic differences over morality exist even within this comparatively homogeneous society of ours, without taking into account a comparison with other sorts of society.

When we turn to aesthetic values the absence of demonstrable foundations is if anything more self-evident. It may be as obvious as obvious can be that Schubert's most famous songs are better than songs composed by me, but it is not something that anyone can prove, and even its obviousness obtains only because I have rigged

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the example: it is not obvious that Beethoven's piano concertos are better than all of those by Mozart and Brahms, and music-lovers have conflicting opinions on the subject. It has been widely recognized for thousands of years now that there is no way of settling such disputes. A proverb to this effect was current even among the ancient Romans: *de gustibus non est disputandum*.

So in everything that is most important to us—the nature of our inner selves, and also of other people's inner selves, and whether these selves have any lasting future; the nature of the world outside ourselves, the nature of time, the nature of space, the nature of objects in the world; our moral convictions; our responses to great art—we do not know the answers to our most fundamental questions. Such knowledge is not attainable. We cannot put whatever ultimate beliefs we have on foundations secure enough to make them demonstrable. In such matters we never know. And because we do not know, conflicting beliefs are widespread.

It is easier to adopt a faith than it is to confront the full range and scale of our ignorance and live by the truth of that, yet this last is what more than anything else I would like to be able to do—that, and perhaps to press back the frontiers of this ignorance at a point or two, as the philosophers I have named did in so many ways. I am not in their class, and I have no secret, mad illusions that I am; but just as Locke has become known as *the* empiricist among philosophers, and Hume as *the* sceptic, and Schopenhauer as *the* pessimist, so I would choose, if I had been good enough to merit a tag, to be known as *the* agnostic. What I find myself most wanting to drive home is not merely that we do not *know* but that the only honest way to live and think is in the fullest possible acknowledgment of that fact and its consequences, without ducking out into a faith of some kind, and without evasion or self-indulgence of any other sort.

Since we cannot live without applying standards and values this means that the way we should hold them is not as faiths or ideologies but provisionally, as being permanently open to criticism from ourselves and others, and revision in the light of that criticism, as also in the light of experience. Locke put it succinctly: 'Where is the man that has incontestable evidence of the truth of all that he holds, or of the falsehood of all he condemns, or can say that he has examined to the bottom all his own, or other men's, opinions? The necessity of believing without knowledge, nay often upon very slight grounds, in this fleeting state of action and blindness we are in, should make us more busy and careful to inform ourselves than constrain others.'

From the fact that in the areas we have been considering there can

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be no such thing as conclusive justification of our beliefs it does not follow that any one belief is as good as any other, for they are all open to testing against reality, and to criticism, and they stand up very differently to such tests; in fact most of them, in the end, do not survive at all. So when I say that certainty is not available I am far from being a relativist: I advocate that our beliefs, values, standards, morals and tastes, should never-endingly be subjected to the most rigorous criticism, and should be abandoned or revised in the light of that criticism; and we should continue to entertain only those that stand up well to this process. This means that although we cannot achieve certainty we can, and do, make progress; and it is this that causes the quality of our lives to be changed by an involvement with the ultimate questions. It also means that, although I do not believe conclusive knowledge to be available, I am not at all what is normally meant by a sceptic, for I see us as all the time making improvements to our knowledge; and this process of improvement has prodigious practical consequences; and my attitude to the prospects of its continuing is an optimistic one.

For hundreds if not thousands of years people have been seeking secure foundations for their most important beliefs; and in Western thought the search has become highly intensified since Descartes—in science, in mathematics, in logic, in philosophy. It is now extraordinarily difficult to get people, including oneself, to give up this long-established pursuit of the unattainable. The aggregate of false assumptions on which it rests is something we might dub 'justificationism': it consists of assumptions i) that there must exist a positive justification for our beliefs, most obviously in science, if they are to be seriously held as being true; therefore ii) that until we can produce such justification for at least the most important of our beliefs we do not have defensible grounds for holding them (from this some also conclude that, until such time, we cannot justify ruling out any alternatives); and therefore iii) we need as a matter of urgency to set about finding such justification to establish our beliefs as true, and our holding of them as justified. All these propositions are false. The truths are that no justification of the kind we are talking about exists, that luckily for us we do not need it, and that for both of these reasons we ought not to waste time looking for it. Justification is something we have to learn to outgrow.

If we did not die, this unending inconclusiveness would not represent a problem for us: on the contrary, it would directly express our situation. Our special problem derives from the fact that we die—and that when we leave this world we shall be in the same state of ignorance and uncertainty as we have always been in. What will

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happen to us then? Even those of us who, when the time comes, know ourselves to be at the moment of death will not know the answer to this question. I only hope that, when it gets to be my turn, my curiosity will overcome my fear—though I may then be in the position of a man whose candle goes out and plunges him into pitch blackness at the very instant when he is about to find what he is looking for.

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