

## The Noble Lie

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How might we contrive one of those useful fictions we were just speaking of, so as by one noble lie to persuade if possible the rulers themselves, but failing that the rest of the city?

Plato, *Republic*, 414c

Neither Manu nor Plato, neither Confucius nor the Jewish and Christian teachers, ever doubted their right to tell lies.

Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

Even false words are true if they lead to enlightenment; even true words are false if they breed attachment.

Zen Saying

The Professor was more than a little put out. Traffic had been heavier than usual coming into the city, and an unaccustomed stop to get something for breakfast had left him caught in a drive-through, further delaying his arrival on campus. A student had emailed him late the previous day requesting an early appointment, and he had been at pains throughout the morning to abbreviate his normal routine to accommodate the young man.

But it was now ten minutes past the agreed upon time, and it appeared the student was not going to show up after all. Either his alleged crisis had miraculously passed in the night, or he had slept through his alarm. A few lines from Shakespeare suddenly came to mind: “‘Tis not the . . . intertissued robe of gold and pearl / The farced title running fore the king / The throne he sits on”—here the Professor allowed himself to interpose his own words: “The Ph.D, the tenure, the full professorship, the publications”—“No, not all of these, laid in bed majestical / Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave”—“or

undergraduate!” he added grimly—“Who, with body fill’d and vacant mind / Gets him to rest.”<sup>1</sup>

Chuckling aloud at himself, the Professor abruptly stood up from his desk in an effort to shake himself free of these cynical and self-indulgent cerebrations, a trifle embarrassed even by so private a display of resentment. “Oh well,” he thought, “maybe he has a good excuse after all. And besides I can always use the extra minutes.” Briskly crossing his office, he made a small *metania* and the sign of the cross as he passed in front of a Byzantine image of Christ and then began rummaging in his satchel for his Palm Pilot, which he finally found buried beneath a pile of exams. Sure enough, fifty minutes of uncommitted time were available before his first class.

His first thought was to tackle the bluebooks, but then it occurred to him he might put the time to better use by devoting further reflection to the lecture he had to prepare for that conference. It was by no means the first time he had turned his mind in this direction, but he remained undecided as to what should be said—and, even more perhaps, *how* to say it. The presentation was to be on the general theme of “Tradition in the Modern World”, and the Professor knew very well that many of those in attendance would be, like him, already convinced of the merits of the traditionalist point of view and, like him, needing no persuasion as to the faults of modernity. There was no point in preaching to the choir. And besides, that little preposition “in” in the conference title implied that one should do more than just harp on the opposition between the two standpoints. It was an invitation to focus instead on a point, or points, of intersection. For no X utterly out of relation to Y could be said to be “in” Y.

Try as he might, however, every time the Professor sat down to begin writing the lecture, he had come up short, and it was starting to worry him. Indeed the feeling of irritation he had managed to suppress just a moment before was fast returning, directed this time toward himself and not his tardy pupil.

He had considered speaking about the practical difficulties of living a traditional life—in his case an Orthodox Christian life—in a modern university context, focusing on the many ways an academic environment seeks to seduce and distract the less than wary believer. But this would mean offering spiritual advice to his listeners, and thus posing as a kind of *starets* or elder, a role he found much too pretentious for a public forum. Or he

might jump to the other end of the spectrum and adopt a sociological and political standpoint, advancing some thoughts as to how traditional religious communities, in his case the Eastern Church, might best escape the corrosive forces of modernity, whether within or around them. But this would mean playing the prophet and pretending to a knowledge of various social or institutional forces that were in fact entirely beyond his scope. What to do?

The Professor started. His cell phone had begun to ring, shattering these ruminations and immediately rekindling and redirecting his irritation. “What *now?*” he wondered, pawing through the papers on his desk and pulling open its drawers one by one as he tracked the sound of the ringing. “Yes, yes, *hello!*” he rather barked the words—and was instantly ashamed of himself as he heard in reply the now familiar voice on the other end of the line. It was not the first time he had encountered this caller, or—more precisely—it was not the first time he had been encountered *by* the caller. For it was always the latter who seemed to take the initiative, and always just when the Professor seemed to be most in a dither.

“Oh, I’m very sorry! Please forgive me, Socrates. I didn’t know it was you!”

“Calm down, Professor,” came the soothing reply. “I knew I would startle you, but I also knew you could use some help. Shall I come over for a chat?”

“Well, of course, by all means—I mean if you can spare the time.”

No sooner had the word “time” escaped his lips than the Professor was dumbstruck to see his own shadow suddenly rising against the wall in front of him, its outline crisp and black, eclipsing the computer, printer, scanner, and an assortment of other gadgets that crowded his desk. Whirling around, he could not believe what he saw, or rather his eyes balked at seeing what he could not help but believe. It was as if the empty air of his office had begun to shimmer with its own internal light. As he stared in astonishment, the brilliance began taking shape, the shape of a Greek *himation* from the shoulders down and of a beaming, bearded face above. Out of the radiance stepped the Master.

“Perhaps you could tell me, Professor”—Socrates was wasting no time coming straight to the point—“what exactly is bothering you. I agree you’d be well advised to steer clear of the two approaches you were pondering just now, but unless I’m

mistaken—and of course I realize I well may be at my age!—there was a third possibility you had also considered.”

Although they had met before in equally unusual circumstances, the Professor was slow in recovering from this gloriously unexpected intrusion into his morning schedule. All he could think of for several seconds was Motovilov’s description of Saint Seraphim of Sarov: “Imagine in the center of the sun, in the dazzling light of its midday rays, the face of a man talking to you.”<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, the light had been quickly growing softer and less demanding, and after another few seconds of bedazzlement the Professor found himself able to speak.

“I’m delighted you’re here, Socrates, but I’m also terribly confused,” he confessed. “First you call me on my cellular telephone, and then an instant later you turn up in person, pulsating into my presence along a beam of light. If you’re going to use the phone anyway, why not take the bus and the elevator? Or conversely, if you’re planning to irradiate your way into my office in so theatrical a fashion, why not call me first telepathically?”

Now it was Socrates’ turn to look confused, though it was easy to see that the look was assumed and ironical. “Weren’t you just answering that question for yourself, my good friend—something about how no X utterly out of relation to Y can be said to be ‘in’ Y? If we expect to have a salutary impact upon the consciousness of modern man, must we not begin by accommodating ourselves in some way to the forms and expectations of that consciousness? Unless I’m mistaken your Christian saint Athanasius formulated the principle very nicely indeed: ‘The minds of men having fallen to the level of sensible things’”—Socrates recited the words with evident affection—“‘the *Logos* submitted to appear in a body that He might center their senses on Himself.’”<sup>3</sup> But then, of course”, the Master added by way of commentary, “this necessary accommodation accomplished, these same centered senses were shown His glory on Tabor. But you’re avoiding my first question. On your drive to campus this morning, before you got sidetracked by your passion for donuts, I heard you thinking about what seemed a much more dialectically provocative strategy.”

History’s most renowned midwife had by now assumed the *padmasana* posture on a small futon in the corner of the room, and the Professor, after a moment’s respectful

hesitation and then with a slight bow, seated himself cautiously in his chair. “I’m gratified, Socrates, you above all people think this third approach to the subject might have some merit, but I remain myself flummoxed as to how it might best be expressed and developed—and more than a little doubtful as to how my audience might react.”

An encouraging smile had been on Socrates’ face ever since he arrived, but it suddenly seemed to embrace his whole body as he laughed out loud. “Whether your observations are well received by your listeners, Professor, I don’t wish to predict. Besides, being well received by people—as you may remember—was not something I myself was especially good at. I’ll give you a tip, though. If they offer you a congratulatory libation when you’ve finished your talk, keep in mind that hemlock has roughly the same odor as parsnips!”

“But enough of this banter. My eavesdropping on your mind has provided me a few basic clues, but I haven’t yet brushed my way past the cobwebs. I therefore suggest you try expressing this allegedly controversial notion of yours as specifically and succinctly as you possibly can. What is it exactly you wish to propose to your audience?”

“Part of my problem,” the Professor replied, “is that I don’t know *exactly*. It’s as if I had a number of beads to be strung on a thread, and each time I pick one of them up the others scatter. As for the thread itself, about all I could say at this point is that it corresponds in some way to the curious connection one sometimes notices between the highest and most esoteric of traditional insights and the severest and most reductive of modern critiques.

“I realize you’ve never heard of postmodernism, Socrates, and I doubt you ancient Greeks were familiar with Buddhism, but to take just one example: when it comes to their analysis of metaphysical assertions, it’s truly remarkable—and more than a little unsettling—how great the similarities are between the criticisms of a present-day deconstructionist and the positionless position of a Madhyamaka sage. In any case, one of the questions I’d like to raise for myself and my listeners is whether there’s anything constructive, or perhaps better transformative, that a traditionalist can do to take advantage of these similarities.”

The gently mocking expression that had been on Socrates’ face a moment earlier was now replaced by a look of eager anticipation, the look of a hungry man about to

begin the first course of a sumptuous feast. “You may be interested to know, Professor, that Nagarjuna and I have often talked about these matters, and we’ve been thinking of offering some weekend workshops in tetralemmic calisthenics. As for the postmodernists you mentioned, I’ve actually had a look or two at their writings—Derrida in particular—and I’d dearly love to be able speak to them too. But apparently Virgil was the last of us virtuous pagans to be allowed to go *there*.

“But dropping some names and tossing out a few ‘isms’ and scholarly references does nothing to advance dialectic, Professor. You need to give your audience something specific to chew on.”

“You’re absolutely right,” the Professor agreed, “and with that in mind I thought I might begin my lecture by quoting a pair of short texts to illustrate one of the resemblances or connections I’m talking about.” Getting up from his chair, he pulled down two books—one old and one new—from two rather widely separated shelves of his library. “I see you’ve been keeping up to date with your reading, Socrates, and that the breadth of your postmortem, if not postmodern, friendships is perhaps even greater than you yourself had once hoped for. Therefore, I’ve little doubt you will recognize the following passages at once, but I’ll be surprised if most of my audience can do the same. Don’t peek though,” the Professor added, concealing the covers as he flipped to the pages he wanted.

“Here’s the first passage,” the Professor said, and began to quote: “‘The Divine Being is nothing other than the being of man himself, or rather human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man and objectified, that is, contemplated and worshiped as another being, a distinct being.’”<sup>4</sup>

Putting the first book face down on his desk, the Professor picked up the second and again read aloud: “‘The Divinity in whom one believes is fashioned by him who conceives it, and it is therefore in this respect his work. The praise addressed to what he believes is praise addressed to himself.’”<sup>5</sup>

“Now it interests me, Socrates, that these observations—dispossessed of their original contexts—could very easily be attributed to a single author . . .”

“. . . even though,” the Master broke in with an appreciative and encouraging twinkle in his eye, “the first comes from the nineteenth century atheistic philosopher

Ludwig Feuerbach and the second from that ‘greatest of shaykhs’—and another very good friend, I might add—Ibn al-Arabi.

“Yes indeed, Professor, I’m quite familiar with these sources you cite, and I can see why you find the similarities these quotations highlight so provocative. But I also see why you’re worried.” Socrates’ look was distinctly playful. “Given the other participants you expect at this conference, a charge of corrupting the youth and rejecting the gods is almost sure to be brought against you if you dare suggest, as it appears you intend, that atheism and Sufism are interchangeable terms!”

“But Socrates, that’s *not at all* what I’m saying! The correspondence I’ve pointed to is in no way to the discredit of Islamic mysticism. Quite the contrary, parallels to the second passage could be easily quoted from any number of spiritual giants, including my own tradition’s greatest *meister*, Eckhart.”

“Relax, Professor, you’ve been on edge the whole morning. I’m only teasing you! I certainly see what you’re driving at, and I’m sure your listeners will too. Indeed no one should find anything controversial in your calling attention to such terminological overlaps. Anyone familiar with the notes that young fellow Plato took during my conversation with Parmenides knows how entirely willing *this* traditionalist was—I’m speaking of myself, of course—to accede to the language of deconstruction in dismantling even my precious Forms. Don’t you remember how that dialogue ended? ‘Whether there is or is not a One, both that One and the others alike are and are not, and appear and do not appear, to be all manner of things in all manner of ways with respect to themselves and one another’. Surely no postmodernist ever said anything more self-reflexively cannibalistic than that!”

“But it’s more than an overlap in terms I wish to point to, Socrates. It’s what stands behind such curious similarities of diction. Maybe I’m going too far, but it seems to me they betoken—at least in some cases—something akin to an esoteric vocation on the part of the truly serious modern skeptic, and as a college professor I’d like to explore the dialectical implications this may have for the bright agnostics that occasionally show up in my classes. But I can tell you disagree with me.”

“Disagree?” Socrates seemed surprised. “What leads you to think that? I can’t disagree until I know what you’re saying, and I won’t know what you’re saying until we investigate together this rather grand-sounding ‘esoteric vocation’ you speak of.”

“Well surely, Socrates, if you believe the recently departed French philosopher you referred to is in Hell, you mustn’t have a very high opinion of his deconstructivist insights!”

“In the first place, Professor, I try to harbor *no* opinions, whether high or low, on *any* subject. In the second place, where in the world—or out of it—did you get the idea that Monsieur Derrida has been damned? I never said such a thing.”

“But you told me Virgil was the last of you pagans to go where he is.”

“Indeed I did, but have you forgotten your *Commedia*? The great Roman poet was the guide of his Italian successor, not only in *descending* the circles of the infernal Pit, but also in *ascending* the cornices of the purgatorial Mount. To suggest that a postmodernist can never reach the *Paradiso*—or *Sukhavati* or the *Brahma Loka*, for that matter—was not at all my intention, though I grant you it might take a few *kalpas*! But we’re fast losing our way in the dark wood of all these scholarly references. Let’s circle back, Professor—in an upward direction, if possible!—to the last point you were making, something about serious skeptics and their esoteric insights. Did you mean for us to take Feuerbach as an example?”

“Oh not necessarily, Socrates. I just wanted to call attention to the fact that the atheist is paradoxically right when he claims that in some fashion, or on some level, God is a construction and projection of the man who believes in Him. And the pedagogical question I’m asking is whether this fact can be exploited by the traditionalist professor in addressing the concerns of the modern student.”

“It occurs to me”—Socrates had suddenly gotten up from the futon and was gazing over the Professor’s head as he spoke—“that we might find an answer, or the beginnings of an answer, to your question if we consulted *these*.”

The morning had already been such an unnerving affair that the poor Professor was spooked, and as he spun his chair round to see what his visitor was looking at, all he could think was that “these” must refer to other—perhaps even stranger—visitants newly arrived in their own bodies of light from yet other dimensions. Socrates had by now



crossed the room and moved past the Professor, who was relieved to see, however, that he was simply scanning the titles of several books neatly arranged on a shelf by themselves.

“Hmmm, let’s see . . . *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* . . . *To Have a Center* . . . *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*. These are all wonderful books, Professor. I’d forgotten about your interest in this author. Ah, yes, here’s the one I was looking for.” Socrates had taken a copy of *In the Face of the Absolute* from the shelf and, having resumed his seat, was cradling it respectfully in his lap, a look of satisfaction on his face.

“Supposing, Professor, we string one or two of Frithjof Schuon’s observations along your lecture’s thread? Maybe he can help provide you a clearer sense of direction.”

As the Professor watched in amazement, it was as if the pages of the book began turning of their own accord until they reached the spot his guest was obviously looking for. “If I remember correctly,” the Master mused, quickly running his finger to the appropriate paragraph, “this passage may be of some use to you and your audience.”

“It must be admitted,” Socrates began reading, with evident interest and seriousness,

‘that the progressivists are not entirely wrong in thinking that there is something in religion that no longer works. . . . The reason for this is not merely that modern man is irreligious but that the usual religious arguments, through not probing sufficiently to the depths of things and not having had previously any need to do so, are psychologically somewhat outworn and fail to satisfy certain needs of causality. . . . This . . . is something any pastoral teaching bent on efficacy should take into account, not by drawing new directives from the general error, but on the contrary by using arguments of a higher order, intellectual rather than sentimental; as a result at least some people would be saved.’<sup>6</sup>

“Is this the sort of thing you were hoping to speak about, Professor?”

“Precisely, Socrates,” the Professor assented happily. “Though the author you’ve quoted had many severely critical things to say about the modern world, he was nonetheless subtle enough to acknowledge that the errors of that world are in certain cases mitigated, if not justified, by extenuating circumstances, one of which is the fact

that the truths religious dogmas are designed to convey are often concealed by pious inconsistencies and contradictions. Discerning minds capable of taking note of these problems deserve an intellectually satisfying response to their objections.”

“I think you’re right,” Socrates replied, though his words seemed to come rather cautiously. “It reminds me of what this same writer seems to have had in mind when he wrote—in one of those other books I can see over there on your shelf—that ‘only esoteric theses can satisfy the imperious logical needs created by the philosophic and scientific positions of the modern world’.<sup>7</sup> But I suggest we proceed slowly here so as to make sure we understand what exactly is involved and what exactly is at stake. Let’s go back to the passage I was reading before, specifically the line about there being ‘something in religion that no longer works’. What’s your interpretation of that sentence?”

The Professor, who was unaccustomed to being on the receiving end of the sort of questioning he so often aimed at his students, was caught off guard. He had been wondering to himself whether Socrates could actually read a closed book from across the room or was simply quoting *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* from memory, and he had not been listening carefully. “I’m sorry, Socrates. What did you ask?”

“I asked what it means to say there is ‘something in religion that no longer works’.”

“Well, I suppose it means the great spiritual traditions no longer function as effectively as they used to.”

“That’s obvious, Professor,” Socrates chuckled wryly. “But it doesn’t get us very far, does it? All you’ve done is restated the formulation in different words, and whatever you academics may like to think, a restatement—however grand its diction—isn’t the same thing as an explanation. We need to dig deeper, and a good place to do so, I suggest, is with Schuon’s word ‘works’—or, if you insist, we can use your fancy paraphrasis about ‘effective functioning’. Do you agree, or have you another proposal?”

“No, I agree,” the Professor meekly replied. He claimed to like dialectic, but he was feeling as nervous as a college freshman.

“What, then, does it mean for a thing to ‘work’? Do we rightly say of your son’s iPod that it ‘works’ when it stores and then plays back the music he wishes to hear?”

“Yes, Socrates.”

“And of your cable modem that it ‘works’ when it provides you with access to the Internet.”

“Most certainly.”

“And of your car that it ‘works’ when it gets you to work, donuts and all?”

“I can think of nothing else, Socrates, this term might imply.”

“And may we then say of anything that it ‘works’ when it serves as a means to the end for which it was designed?”

“It seems to me you have put the matter in the only way possible.”

“In that case, Professor, would it be correct for us to say that religion ‘works’ when it serves as a means to the end for which *it* was designed?”

“I can see no alternative.”

“And what *is* the end for which religion was designed?”

The Professor took a deep breath. “Well, if we return to the passage you were quoting from Schuon, it appears the aim of religion is *salvation*, whether we understand this to mean a state of individual blessedness in the Divine Proximity or of supra-individual participation in the Divine Nature.”

The Professor was worried he had once again spoken in too grandiloquent a way, and was therefore relieved when Socrates replied, “An excellent answer. And doesn’t it follow that a religion can be said to have failed in its ‘work’ to the extent it fails to save.”

“Of course, Socrates.”

“I’m happy you agree, my friend, but I myself am beginning to have second thoughts, and I wonder whether we may have strayed from the path.”

“But how could that be?”

“Think back, Professor, to the specific words Schuon used. He didn’t speak of the failure of religion as such. What he said was that there is ‘something *in* religion that no longer works’. If the aim of religion is to save, and if religion is no longer able to save in the way or to the extent it once did, then the blame it seems must be placed, not on religion as a whole or as such, but on a particular *something* it contains, or should contain. Now what do you suppose this something could be?”

“I’m afraid, Socrates, it’s rather like Saint Augustine on time. I thought I knew until you asked me, but now I’m not sure.”

“Don’t be discouraged, my learned friend. It’s always better to know we don’t know than to think we know when we don’t. But let me ask a different question. Would you agree there are two distinct ways in which something can be said not to ‘work’?”

“I *may* agree, Socrates, but I can’t tell for sure until you give me examples.”

“Well, it’s one thing for your bicycle not to work on an uphill ride when the chain has slipped off, and it’s another thing for Newton’s Laws not to work when your bicycle is approaching 186,000 miles a second.”

Distinctions always made the Professor happy, and he felt suddenly emboldened to introduce a *distinguo* of his own. “If it’s a question of effective functioning, Socrates, I hardly think my legs or the pedals will work, even on a downhill ride, if the speed of light is my goal!”

“Good for you, Professor. But now, in which of these *three* senses is it true to say that there’s ‘something in religion that no longer works’? Is the failure of religion to save as many men as once it did the result of its *missing* some essential part, or is it because there’s something in religion that’s being applied *in a context or under a set of conditions* for which it was not originally intended, or is the problem that religion has been deprived of *an adequate motive power*?”

The Professor was again nonplussed. “I’m afraid, Socrates, your careful analysis hasn’t helped me much, and I’m still not sure what to say. Do I have to pick just one of these alternatives?”

“By no means,” the Master was quick to respond. “The distinctions in question may mark disjunctive possibilities, but they may instead be different though complementary aspects of a single problem. I see you’re confused, however, so perhaps you won’t mind if I venture a tentative answer myself. Besides, that way you won’t be left taking all the heat at the conference. You can always blame me.”

“You must be kidding, Socrates. If I admit to my audience I’ve been talking with the most famous philosopher in history, what I tell them he said will be the least of my worries!”

“Well, then don’t mention me by name. Just use the pedantic passive. You’re a scholar—you know how Sophists talk! Straighten your tie, peer over the top of your glasses, clear your throat once or twice, and preface your remarks by saying something

like, ‘It could perhaps be argued’ or ‘It has sometimes been thought by influential experts in the field.’”

“Alright, Socrates, I’ll try. But what precisely is it that’s *been thought*? Or rather”—the Professor blushed—“what are *you yourself thinking* when you say that the various meanings of ‘work’ might be complementary? You quoted Schuon where he talks about the ‘imperious logical needs’ created by certain modern philosophies and the importance of our responding to those needs with ‘arguments of a higher order’. I take it you’re suggesting now that each of the three senses of ‘work’ can tell us something about the nature of those arguments and about the way, or ways, in which the traditionalist can help the modernist.”

“Just so, Professor. Since you’re not planning to cite me as your authority anyway, why not go ahead and try working the answers out for yourself? Can you see how your bicycle might shed some light on these questions? Think specifically about your own tradition and your efforts to *peddle* traditional Christianity among your most dubious students. I’m just an old pagan, after all, and really know nothing about such a modern religion!”

The Professor tried to read Socrates’ expression, but without success. As their conversation had progressed, he had begun feeling more and more at ease with his playfully punning guest, but he was suddenly reminded—as much by the unwavering radiance of the Master’s smile as by his Buddha-like posture—how very weird this all was. He remembered Alcibiades’ account of how Socrates had once stood stock still in the snow for an entire day and all the following night, thinking intently about a problem. It seemed altogether absurd that he, a mere academic, should have to expose the meager contents of his mind to such scrutiny, but it also seemed there was no way he could avoid so direct an invitation to do some thinking for himself.

“I’ll do my best, Socrates, but I can’t promise not to lose my balance, so please catch me if I start to fall.”

The Professor paused a moment, and then shyly continued. “We said there’s a first sense in which a thing may be said not to work because of its *missing* something. You illustrated this meaning of ‘effective functioning’ by pointing out that when I’m headed uphill my bicycle won’t work if the chain has fallen off or become in some other

way disconnected from the pedals and gears. So I suppose we could deduce, by analogy, that when Christianity is headed uphill—when it’s attempting, in other words, to work against the gravitational force of its own dogmatic platitudes so as to satisfy the modernist’s ‘needs of causality’—it also won’t work if it’s lacking some equally crucial element or if that element has become disconnected as it were from the rest of the theological framework. I’m just not sure what to call it.”

“Well, if you ask me, Professor, I think we’d once again benefit from the insights of Schuon. Doesn’t he say somewhere that Western esoterists, including Christians of course, would be well advised to make use of a certain Vedantic idea that’s lacking in their own exoterisms—the equivalent perhaps of the missing chain on your bike?”

“Oh, yes he does!” the Professor instantly brightened. “I wonder how I forgot? I think you must be talking about the doctrine of *Mâyâ in divinis*.”

Socrates did not answer immediately. He had been almost completely motionless for the last several minutes, a picture of inviolable strength and dignity. But all at once he stood up, casually stretched himself, and again crossed the room, the fluidity and childlike simplicity of his movements testifying to an underlying tenderness and unrelenting good will. Thinking later about this moment, the Professor could only describe it by saying that it was as if his guest had swiftly passed between the opposites so beautifully combined in the icon of the Holy Virgin that hung across the room from where he had been sitting.

The Master was once again browsing among the Professor’s traditionalist titles, and he had taken another volume in his hands.

“Consider this passage, my friend: ‘The truths of the *philosophia perennis*,’” he was quoting now from *To Have a Center*, “‘largely disregarded by average theologians, require something in the human spirit to take their place; this explains, not the whole phenomenon of modern thought, of course, but its most respectable and excusable aspects.’”<sup>8</sup> Unless I’m mistaken, Professor, one of the most important of these disregarded truths is that relativity, and thus a certain degree of illusion, can be found even within the Divine Order itself, beginning at the level of the personal God. From the account you’ve given me of your university classes, it sounds as though the most respectable and

excusable of your modern pupils are those precisely whose human spirits may have sensed this fact.”

The Professor nodded. “I don’t wish to paint too rosy a picture of my youthful charges! Many of the skeptics I’ve had in class are clearly just resentful of religion and have no other motive for their cavils than a lazy wish to avoid obligation or a spiteful urge to upset their more pious but less intelligent peers. There are always a few, however, whose suspicions of the traditional sources, including the sacred Scriptures themselves, seem to be rooted in a genuine intuition—to quote once again from the *Shaykh al-Akbar*—that ‘the Divinity in whom one believes is fashioned by him who conceives it’, hence that the personal God is somehow less than fully real. So what do you recommend the esoterist do in such cases?” the Professor asked.

“The very same thing,” Socrates replied at once, “that I myself would have done if any of the Guardians in my Republic had become suspicious of the story they were told as young children about having literally sprung from the soil of Greece.”

“Do you mean,” the Professor looked worried, “I should tell them it’s a lie?”

“Of course. But not just any lie: a *noble* lie, a magnificent myth, a glorious fabrication, an *upâya* or saving mirage, whose falsehood nonetheless contains an element of Truth. But be careful, Professor. Only those with the intellectual capacity to discern not just the error but the truth—not just the lie but its nobility—have a right to be offered something more. The traditionalist teacher must beware of hiding his light under a bushel, but he must also beware of casting his pearls before swine.”

“But how am I supposed to know the difference, Socrates?” The Professor had gotten up and was himself taking a book down from the shelf. “The Cabalists tell me it’s better for the truth to be divulged than forgotten, but then the Taoists come along and insist that only mistakes are transmitted. Christ proclaims in one place that he who is not against Him is for Him, but in another passage that he who is not for Him is against Him. And then to top it all off Schuon writes”—the Professor had been fumbling for the passage he wanted in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* and seemed now to have found it—“let’s see . . . yes, here it is—“Every doctrine is only error when confronted with the Divine Reality itself.”<sup>9</sup> Only *error*, Socrates! So what’s a poor college teacher to

*do?*” The full weight of his responsibilities seemed heavier than ever, and the Professor was feeling considerably less sure of himself than he was used to.

“What you’re to do, Professor, is to *think . . . reflect . . . distinguish . . . and stop whining!*” The force of these chastening words was proof that Socrates’ good will remained rooted in strength. “Why don’t we turn to the second meaning of ‘work’? I believe the answer—or at least part of the answer—should be evident there if you look closely enough. Have you any thoughts about how our vehicular illustration can be applied in this case?”

The Master’s teasing rebuke had cracked like a whip, and the Professor knew he had been justly scolded, though his emotions stung. “Well, Socrates, we saw that something can be said not to work in yet another sense when—like the laws of classical physics—it’s *brought to bear on an object or in a situation for which it wasn’t intended*, such as predicting the behavior of a photonic bicycle. Perhaps we could say by analogy that the dogmatic propositions of what Christians are pleased to call ‘salvation history’ fail to work when one attempts to use them outside the context of a pre-existing exoteric piety.”

The Professor appeared to be warming to this line of thought. “Most of the Christian faithful in my classes,” he continued, “are perfectly content with believing that God is a being among other beings, that He fashioned the universe at a particular moment of time out of a sort of pre-existing vacuum, and that He occasionally intervenes in history to make adjustments in His original plan for mankind.

“By contrast, those who have the necessary intuition to see that such a limited entity couldn’t really be the Absolute, and whose religious doubts have been fueled in part by a pious insistence it is, are invariably put off by these formulations of the Christian *credo*. If and when my religion ‘works’ for such students, it’s because it’s explained to them in a kind of quantum language: God is simultaneously transcendent and immanent in a way which defies our usual understanding of space; He made, makes, and will continue to make all things from the standpoint of a Now which defies our usual understanding of time; and in fashioning these things, He draws them forth from nothing but Himself—indeed from the ‘Nothing’ that *is* Himself—in a way which defies our usual understanding of what it means to exist.”



Socrates seemed pleased enough at this speech. “Fine, Professor, but it seems to me you should now be able to answer the question you just posed for yourself.”

“What question is that?”

“I was saying,” Socrates reminded him, “that only those students with the capacity to understand the truth of the *relative* Absolute are fit to hear about the truth of the *absolute* Absolute. You then asked me how one might go about figuring out who these young people are.”

“Maybe I *should* be able to answer this question, Socrates, but I’m afraid I still can’t. As I told you before, it’s easy enough to pick out the modernists who merely have a chip on their shoulders and whose unbelief is laced with cynicism. But when it comes to those rarer few whose unwillingness to commit themselves fully to the God of the Bible is free from passion, being rooted instead in an authentically metaphysical intuition, it’s not clear to me how I’m to apply the test you indicate. How can they be expected to acknowledge the *nobility* of the tradition’s formulations when it’s precisely its *lies* that presently stand in their way?”

Though he had not intended it, the Professor had again forgotten himself, and these last words came out more forcefully than expected. He immediately regretted the petulant tone he had used, but he could see no way out of this dilemma and was feeling more than a little miffed at the man who had placed him in such a mental predicament.

“Can’t you just *tell* me, Socrates?” he asked.

“Perhaps,” the Master said gently, “we should take a look at the third meaning of ‘work’ as it applies to religion. Forgive me my ancient memory, but unless I’m mistaken you yourself observed—very rightly—that there’s one final way in which a bicycle might not get where it’s going.”

“Bicycles!” the Professor said, and he really did sound disgusted now. “So you *won’t* tell me, will you?”

Socrates for his part seemed entirely unruffled. “I may be wrong, Professor, but if there’s indeed a further sense in which something may be said not to work, and if a religion may fail to work in this sense, then by figuring out precisely what this sense *is* we may well discover not only an answer to the question you’re asking right now—how to recognize a true esoterist—but an answer as well to the more basic question you’re

proposing to raise at the conference—namely, what a traditionalist teacher may do to help ensure his religion operates salvifically for the intelligent modern skeptic. So remind me, please: what was the third meaning you added when I at first distinguished only two senses of ‘work’?”

“What I said,” the Professor sighed, but he seemed again calmer now, “was that no matter how hard my legs might work, I would never be able to ride my bicycle at the speed of light. We then generalized from this illustration to say that things don’t function effectively when they’re deprived of *an adequate motive power*.”

“Excellent,” Socrates agreed. “So all we need to do is apply this general principle to the way religion is made to work in your classroom. But I can see, Professor, you’ve grown weary from all this dialectical pedaling, so how about if I offer a few suggestions of my own as we try to bring our dialogue to a close? I need for you to confirm what I’m saying as I go along, however, lest I lead us astray.

“You pointed out near the start of our conversation that you’ve occasionally noted something akin to an esoteric vocation in a few bright agnostics, and your driving question has been how best to get through to such students, how to frame the traditionalist perspective in a way that accommodates but also transforms and deepens their intuitions. Am I right so far?”

“Perfectly so, Socrates.”

“Well, we’ve seen with Monsieur Schuon’s help—have we not?—that a first important part of the traditionalist’s strategy is to make a certain tactical use of the missing doctrine of *Mâyâ in divinis*.”

“Yes, we have.”

“A second and closely related key to your work—or so at least I gathered from your reflections just now—consists in transposing the Biblical descriptions of God into metaphysical terms so as to meet ‘certain needs of causality’, the needs of people who aren’t yet believers and who may lack an affinity for a purely sentimental or obediential faith. Or did I misunderstand you?”

“No, Master, this is what I said, and it’s also what I believe.”

“I believe it too, my friend. But now, do you believe this as well, that while these first two elements are doubtless necessary, they’re insufficient and inoperative if not empowered by some third.”

“I’ll certainly *try* to believe it, Socrates, if you’d be so kind as to tell me what this third thing is.”

“Again I may be mistaken, Professor, but it appears to me traditionalist teachers like you need to do more for the skeptics in your midst than merely offering them a foreign doctrine—even one so exotic as to require two different languages! And I think you must do something more than just transposing or translating the doctrine of God from classical into quantum terms. If the students you’re talking about are really esoterists, they’ll already know in their very bones that no doctrine (no matter how esoteric) and no set of terms (no matter how subtle) can ever capture the supremely Real. And isn’t this precisely how a teacher can decide which of these young people are intellectually fit to be told the truth about the noble lie?”

“I confess I’m still puzzled, Master.”

“Hmmm, and *I’m* puzzled *you’re* puzzled. I thought this was what you yourself were maintaining earlier when you alluded to the positionless deconstructivism of my friend Nagarjuna.”

“Perhaps it is, but *if* it is I can’t see what it has to do with my bicycle.”

“Motive force, Professor, motive force! If you wish to serve effectively in the transmission of Truth, you must find a truly adequate means. But if ‘every doctrine is only error when confronted with the Divine Reality itself’, it’s very clear that these means can’t be merely doctrinal. No doubt it’s quite a noble thing to tell those few who are qualified that the Absolute is something more than the personal God, but it’s nonetheless still a lie. And no doubt it’s quite a magnificent thing to speak of the Supreme Reality as a transcendent and yet immanent ‘Nothing’ from which all things are always flowing, but it’s nonetheless still a myth.”

“I understand what you’re saying, Socrates, and I can see that Parmenides was clearly right. The Absolute at once is and is not, and it appears and yet doesn’t. Hence it can’t really be ‘something’, but neither is it merely ‘nothing’. It’s also perfectly obvious why a Madhyamika Buddhist sage would feel obliged to double the difficulty of this

divine dilemma. For neither can we truly say of the Absolute that it's *both* something *and* nothing, nor again that it's *neither* nothing *nor* something. But what I'm not getting is what I'm supposed to do about it. Even esoterists need *some* doctrine, don't they?"

"Of course, Professor. Everybody requires a finger to point him toward the moon. But if the young skeptics in your classes are more than just cynics—if their modern doubts and dissatisfactions really betoken the esoteric vocation you suspect and their minds are such as to profit from traditional 'arguments of a higher order'—they should feel no need to *cling* to that finger. They won't mind leaving the dry land of form and formulation and trusting themselves to be buoyed up by a Truth they can't grasp with concepts. And your job, it seems to me, is to plunge in and swim with them, charitably undercutting their conventional supports, gently demolishing their hypotheses—and yours—with a view to becoming as fluid as the dialectical medium in which you thus find yourselves."

"So what you're telling me," the Professor replied, mixing the metaphors yet again, "is that we traditionalists should concentrate on kindling the light of that spark your disciple Plato wrote about, whose speed is such as to warp the space between words and things, leaping as it does directly from soul to soul."

History's most famous philosopher only smiled.

"By the grace of God, Socrates, I see this all very clearly—and yes I also *believe* it! But I don't feel an inch closer to knowing what I'm supposed to do in that lecture of mine!"

"So why lecture, Professor?" the Master replied, and it was as if his whole body had begun to sparkle with the dancing light in his eye. "Why not do what we've been doing here? Have a dialogue!"

As Socrates pronounced the word "dialogue", several things happened in rapid succession. The Professor could not explain why, but it suddenly occurred to him how much time must have passed, and he abruptly swung about in his chair to look at the clock on the wall behind his desk. Just as he did so, however, there came a sharp knocking on his office door, and at once the clock, the desk, and everything on it were engulfed as before by his shadow. Spinning back round, the Professor blinked his eyes in renewed disbelief. The Master had vanished.

The knocking came again, more persistently. Stumbling almost as if he were sleepwalking, the Professor clumsily made his way to the door and gingerly opened it. It was his tardy pupil, a copy of Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols* tucked under his arm.

"Sorry I'm a little late, Professor. Can we still talk?"

This sudden descent back into the reality of university life was discombobulating in the extreme, and the Professor was having a hard time regaining his bearings.

"Well . . . I'm not sure," he replied. He was struggling mightily to shake himself free from his reverie. "I mean . . . No . . . No, there's no time! I have to get to class right away!" The poor man really had no idea what time it was. For all he knew it was afternoon, and he had missed his lecture altogether.

"But Professor," the student spoke cautiously, puzzled but also clearly bemused by his teacher's befuddlement. "It's only 10:10. Class isn't till 11:00."

"What?!" The Professor whirled about yet again to look at the clock, now plainly visible. The student was right. Fifty minutes of uncommitted time were available before his first class.

"Very well," he sighed, "have a seat." Lord, have mercy! What a morning it had been!

"Thanks, Professor. And again I'm sorry I'm late. I ran into this old guy coming off the elevator, dressed like he was going to a costume party or something and talking ninety miles an hour on his cell phone."

The Professor's eyes opened wide, and his heart began beating hard. "Really? What was he saying?"

"Haven't the slightest. It was Greek to me. But he stopped long enough to ask me how to get to the bus stop, so I went back outside to show him the way."

There was simply no stopping it. All the surprise, confusion, tension, exasperation, exhilaration, and now sheer delight of the morning came rushing up to the surface, and the Professor could not help but laugh—a deep and hearty laugh that brought tears to his eyes and left his student looking as puzzled as the Professor had been moments before.

"No X utterly out of relation to Y can be said to be 'in' Y," the Professor muttered half-aloud to himself, and then he laughed again. "Athanasian accommodation, indeed!"

There was a gleam in his teacher's face the student had never seen before.  
“What'd you say, Professor?”

“Oh, nothing,” the Professor smiled. Pulling his chair closer, he sat down once again and passed the young man a small bag. “Here, center your senses on one of these. Have a donut.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Henry V*, 4.1.255-66.

<sup>2</sup> *Little Russian Philokalia: Vol. I: St Seraphim of Sarov* (New Valaam Monastery, Alaska: St Herman Press, 1991), 111.

<sup>3</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* [16], trans. A Religious of C.S.M.V. (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1989), 44.

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 14

<sup>5</sup> Ibn al-Arabi, *Fusûs al-Hikam [Bezels of Wisdom]*, cited in Frithjof Schuon, *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2007), 40-41.

<sup>6</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1989), 89-90.

<sup>7</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, trans. William Stoddart (Pates Manor, Bedford, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1981), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *To Have a Center* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1990), 22.

<sup>9</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (Pates Manor, Bedford, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1987), 169.