

Truth Matters

Aquinas Lecture 2023, Blackfriars Cambridge

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Thank you, All, for being here.

My lecture is divided into 4 parts:

1. I will start with a few observations on the contemporary climate in relation to truth;
2. I will make some references to scholarly works on truth
3. I will turn to Thomas Aquinas and briefly to Pope Francis
4. Final part will contain a visual example from Poland, mainly to amuse you but, hopefully, also to shed light on some truth matters and open a discussion

Before, we move on, may I suggest that we first pause and ponder in silence on the question posed by Pontius Pilot (note, that he never answers it): What is 'truth'? or 'What does truth mean to you? Don't worry if you don't find easy to answer this question. Truth is the hardest concept to define, harder than love, peace or justice.

Part I Today's climate around truth

- Bernard Williams in his 'Truth and Truthfulness' published in 2002 before the launch of social media noted two currents in our culture: 'on the one hand, there is a commitment to truthfulness – a wish not to be fooled, an eagerness to see through appearances to the real structures and motives that underlie them, to be authentic or true to oneself' ; 'on the other, there is an equally pervasive suspicion about truth itself: whether there is such a thing; if there is, whether it can be more than relative or subjective'¹ .
- Williams captures well this double reality: human beings on the whole care about truth; of course, we do; even those who claim that there is no such thing as universal truth and that truth is relative, are passionate these days in their fight against fake news and see that neither good of the society nor the good of personal integrity can be preserved if truth loses its value. Yet, human beings also manipulate truth, cover or dismiss or sometimes deny its existence by calling the current era post-truth era.

¹ Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003

- In 2015 the UK Parliament conducted an inquiry into fake news. At one point the Select Committee chaired an investigative meeting at George Washington University² during which big tech companies, media groups, businesses, universities, were questioned on how they address the challenges posed by the contemporary culture of misinformation and fake news. The recording of this meeting is available on the Parliament's website³. I browsed through 76 papers from journalists, media companies, academics (individual and groups), one religious organisation (British Council of Muslims), companies and charities and one question that kept coming back to me was, if the submissions are right, what would be the consequences of the fake news culture in 5, 10, 20 years?
- For example, the Royal Statistical Society argued that facts about medicine, science and technology will become a crisis that will undermines public health, environmental security and economic well-being unless there is strong determination to ensure that the public are protected.
- The British Medical Journal found that around 40% of press releases about health stories contain exaggerations, and that these are directly transmitted into media coverage.
- Dealing with fake news or post-truth is complex - it requires much deeper analysis than we can undertake here; proposing new sets of regulations might help with some issues but a much deeper reflection is required. My reading of the submissions made me think that recognizing the forces within us and within our society cannot simply be left to tech companies, politicians, scientists and economists. It is essential that we engage philosophers, psychologists, theologians, spiritual leaders in the discussions about truth, deceit and fakeness.
- There are two other phenomena that I see in our contemporary culture which I label as 'truth anxiety' and 'truth hyperbolisation'

A friend who is struggling in her workplace has recently commented to me that she is afraid to ask questions about a particular matter because her boss will not give her a true answer or will only give her half-truth. Have we got used to withholding information including information about ourselves and feel (as my friend does) that others withhold

² <http://parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/735d24ab-724a-480a-a2cc-5b3de6c4b863>

³ The individual submissions don't seem to be available on the website but there is report published in 2019 that summarises the findings

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomeds/1791/1791.pdf>

information from us? What we get are snippets of truth, not really lies but partial truths. There is something as truth anxiety, fear to speak truthfully, fear to face up to truth about oneself.

Yet, on the other hand, I have come across something like 'radical honesty' programmes that some companies introduce in their staff training. This is quite different from 'radical hope' that Fr Oliver Keenan presented to us in his inspiring Aquinas lecture last year⁴. 'Radical' in 'radical truth' refers to encouraging everyone in the workplace to tell the truth all the time - those who don't subscribe to 'radical truth' can be scapegoated.

The question here is how do we negotiate or bridge these two realities: **truth anxiety** and **truth hyperbolisation** and foster the culture in which truth is not feared but valued without being reduced to masochistic form of professional training.

- From our Catholic perspective, there is another issue called 'truth relativism' or what sometimes is posited as 'my truth' or 'your truth'. Truth relativism is a big area. While we may agree that there is a problem with the basic thinking - presumably a relativist believes that truth relativism is true. But, how is this belief possible if for a relativist nothing is true? Yet, we cannot completely dismiss the idea of the possibility of my and your truth - often a rejection of such a possibility meant the rejection or marginalisation of human experiences; after all our experiences can help us discover truth. Interestingly, the synodal process in the Catholic Church, while being committed to the idea of universal truth allows for a recognition of personal, local, regional truth. It allows contextualisation of truth.

Part II Scholars on truth

We have many theories of truth and multiple philosophical approaches to truth in relation to knowledge, including self-knowledge; there are studies of different types of truth: logical, moral, semantic, scientific truth or truth of being (ontological truth); there are studies dedicated to the virtue of truth or truthfulness. In all the different works, there are probably more disagreements than agreements on what exactly truth is. I certainly am not a scholar of truth and there are more knowledgeable colleagues even in this audience who have a much better understanding of the concept of truth or a theory of truth. My own primary interest is moral truth but I can't study moral truth without being aware of the vast body of truth studies. Therefore, let me share briefly what I find in that vast body of literature on truth.

⁴ See <https://www.blackfriarscambridge.org.uk/2022/01/30/aquinas-lecture-2022/>

- 1) There is a whole strand of theories which see truth in terms of propositions, assertions or correspondence. Plato's statement: 'To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true'⁵ has been reformulated over the centuries in what is sometimes labelled as 'correspondence' theories of truth⁶. Thomas Aquinas' approach to truth is often presented under this umbrella of such truth theories. Elizabeth Anscombe nearly 40 years ago delivered her Aquinas Lecture on precisely this theme while brilliantly comparing Anselm and Aquinas. The title of that lecture was 'Truth: Anselm or Aquinas'? and it is *New Blackfriars*⁷.
- 2) Apart from the correspondence theories of truth which belong to a larger group of 'inflationist' theories of truth, there is a whole range of 'deflationist theories'. My two favourite works that probably fall under this strand are Bernard Williams's *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* and Wolfgang Kühneand's *Conceptions of Truth*⁸. The two works offer different accounts of how our thinking about truth has evolved. They both acknowledge that it is hard to trace genealogy of truth. Neither Williams nor Kühneand offer a theory of truth but there are a couple of points I would like to highlight:
- Neither of the two writers answers the question 'what is truth?'
 - Kühneand tells how to (rather than what to) think about truth: it is to think simply (basic level of engagement) and holistically (resisting fragmentation of true propositions).
 - Williams focuses on two virtues of truthfulness: accuracy and sincerity. Accuracy has something to do with investigation and deliberation before assenting to a belief; sincerity is about being genuine in expressing to others what one in fact believes.⁹
 - For him, deception is a vice and an obstacle to living a truthful life. Deception is deeper than failure to tell the truth.
 - Valuing the truth requires 'training'. He doesn't tell us what this training involves but his description of the value of truth gives us some hints of what it might be. For him, 'the value of truth' is a shorthand for the value of the various activities we associate

⁵ See Plato's Dialogues such as *Cratylus* 385b2 or *Sophist* 263b. The same formulation also appears in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 1011b25.

⁶ See, for example, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-correspondence/>

⁷ See G.E.M Anscombe, 'Truth : Anselm or Thomas?' *New Blackfriars* Vol. 66, No. 776 (February 1985), pp. 82-98

⁸ Wolfgang Kühneand, *Conceptions of Truth* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

with truth. It embraces the need to find out about the truth, to hold on to it, and to tell it - particularly to oneself.

So, I now turn to Thomas Aquinas to see whether he can shed some light on Williams' truth related activities. I shall focus on two: finding out the truth, and telling it

PART III – Insights from Thomas Aquinas

- **Finding out the truth**

'All human beings by nature desire to know' - this statement from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*¹⁰ appears many times in Thomas's work¹¹. Thomas holds that knowledge of reality leads us to truth. Human beings are curious about things and desire to know the causes of what they see. Intellectual curiosity (*'intellective curiositas'*) is the quality that exercises this desire. Aquinas believes that there are good and bad ways of being curious. He offers some criteria on how to guard curiosity from becoming problematic or excessive. For example, (and this is useful for all of us in the business of academic studies):

(1) a speculative inquiry becomes excessive when it entails neglect of other studies which fall within personal and social duties. Aquinas cites the case of a judge who is obsessed about geometry and who arrives in court unprepared for judging about justice

(2) He also wants us to pay attention on whom we rely for instruction: 'virtuous knowing requires a vigilance in regard to the sources of instruction'

(3) 'The pursuit of knowledge becomes immoderate when a man desires to know the truth about creatures, without referring this knowledge to its due end, namely the knowledge of God'¹².

(4) Excessive speculation occurs when a human being 'studies to know the truth above the capacity of his own intelligence, since by doing so men fall easily into error'¹³. There is connection between intellectual curiosity and pride (*superbia*); the prideful person hopes to achieve some good beyond the measure of his or her inner strength¹⁴.

For Thomas, studiousness (*studiositas*) is an antidote to excessive curiosity. It has a role of curbing the desire for excessive knowledge while at the same time reinforcing intellectual

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics. Book Iota*, Book I, Part 1, translated by Laura M.Castelli, (Clarendon Aristotle Series). Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2018, p.24.

¹¹ See St Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, translated by Richard. J.Blackwell, Richard J.Spath, and W.Edmund Thirlkel. Notre Dame.IN: Dumb Ox Books, 1999.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

passion. It helps to overcome the body's resistance to the effort involved in the acquisition of knowledge and build resilience in the face of difficulties in pursuing knowledge. Resisting the pressure to conform to a particular ideology can be an example of building resilience.

So, for Aquinas, the commitment to truth and the desire to find out about the truth is natural but it has to be guarded. Curiosity is good but human beings can be swayed in the wrong direction hence it matters how we choose our sources, instructors or teachers, etc and how we use our capacities to search for truth. It is worth noting that Aquinas doesn't consider the question whether knowing the truth can ever have a harmful effect on the self, something that some 20th century philosophers explore¹⁵.

- **Telling the truth**

Aquinas places his discussion of truth telling in the context of communication, the purpose of which is to preserve human society. (it is important to be clear about the purpose of telling or the purpose of communication: '[s]ince man is a social animal, one man naturally owes another whatever is necessary for the preservation of human society'¹⁶). Aquinas goes on to note that life in society is impossible without trust, thus the need for the virtue of truth. This is exactly the same as what Williams says in his *Truth and Truthfulness*. Without the communication of truths there can be no society at all, no shared plans, no common way of acting, no mutual pursuit of goods. It is worth noting that Aquinas's virtue of truth is connected to the virtue of justice.

Aquinas also speaks about 'communication of oneself', 'that truth [pertains to this virtue] whereby a man, both in life and in speech, shows himself to be such as he is'¹⁷. 'Simplicity' is opposed to 'duplicity' - 'showing one thing outwardly while having another in the heart'¹⁸. Showing oneself as one is — communicating oneself — is thus an essential aspect of the order introduced into one's acts in the effort to communicate. Telling lies and living a lie (duplicity and the lack of sincerity) are neither good for the individual nor the society.

Truth and just lies

Some commentators on Aquinas try to apply his just war criteria to lying, especially in the context of politics. For example, Maureen Ramsay in her co-authored book, *The Politics of*

¹⁵ See, for example, Martin Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (trs.), Indiana University Press, 2010.

¹⁶ ST II^{ae}, q. 109, art 3, reply ad 1.

¹⁷ ST II^{ae}, q. 109, a. 3, ad. 3.

¹⁸ ST II^{ae}, q. 109, a. 2, ad. 4.

Lying: Implications for Democracy suggests that at times when national security is concerned lies and deceit are permissible . Harold Gortner in his book, Ethics for Public Managers presents cases in which the 'just lie' theory seems to be applicable . Lynn Pasquerella and Alfred Killilea in their paper 'The Ethics of Lying in the Public Interest: Reflections on the "Just Lie"' use cases to prove the usefulness of the theory.

How to foster Thomistic simplicity and studiousness, temper curiosity and live in the truth?

For Aquinas, it is through education – for him, Jesus is the best teacher and example.

Aquinas points out that Jesus' primary task was to serve truth¹⁹. This is how the disciples discover truth: 'they learn by spending time with him, not only listening to what he says but experiencing how he lives'²⁰. Vivian Bolland points out that, for Aquinas, teacher is both someone who has authority and someone who serves²¹. This is especially visible in the discourses at the last supper when he 'becomes a slave by removing his garments and washing his disciples' feet' and when he 'becomes a teacher by dressing appropriately and sitting like a master on his chair to explain the meaning of what he has done'²². Aquinas analyses this scene in detail in his commentary 'Super Ioannem, XIII' in which he asks why Jesus waited to sit down before teaching his disciples²³. His answer was: because 'teaching ought to be done in tranquillity'²⁴. Aquinas goes further to explain that by 'sitting and being quiet that the soul becomes wise and prudent'²⁵.

Today's culture of social media is wordy; Silence is not comfortable. Should 'education for truth' include teaching silence? Rather than engaging with 'alternative' facts, perhaps finding silence as an alternative space within the educational system should be considered. What would this mean in practice? For Pope Francis this involves 'teaching people how to discern, evaluate and understand our deepest desires and inclinations'²⁶. According to him, 'to discern the truth, we need to discern everything that encourages communion and promotes goodness from whatever instead tends to isolate, divide, and oppose'. He says that '[t]he

¹⁹ ST IIIa 40.1 in c

²⁰ ST IIaIIae 2.3 in c

²¹ See Vivian Boland OP, 'Truth, knowledge and communication: Thomas Aquinas on the mystery of teaching'. *Studies in Christian Ethics* 18.3 (2006), 287-304.

²² Bolland, 'Truth, knowledge and communication', 299.

²³ Super Ioannem, XIII, lectio 3, §1770 in Bolland, 'Truth, knowledge and communication', 299

²⁴ 'Doctrina debet esse in tranquillitate', translated by Bolland, Bolland, 'Truth, knowledge and communication', 299

²⁵ Ibid. Bolland points out that this approach echoes Aristotle for whom 'we are said to know and to understand when our intellect has reached a state of rest and come to a standstill' (Physics VII.3.247b10-12; see also Thomas, In de anima 1, lectio 8, §125). Ibid.

²⁶ Pope Francis's message on World Communication Day, 24 January 2018, "'The truth will set you free" (Jn 8:32): Fake news and journalism for peace', http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20180124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html

best antidotes to falsehoods are not strategies, but people: people who are not greedy but ready to listen, people who make the effort to engage in sincere dialogue so that the truth can emerge; people who are attracted by goodness and take responsibility for how they use language'. Francis connects two ideas of 'freedom from falsehood' and 'the search for relationship' as 'two ingredients [which] cannot be lacking if our words and gestures are to be true, authentic, and trustworthy'²⁷.

PART IV – Conclusion/Illustration - Discussion

I started my presentation by reflecting on contemporary climate in relation to truth. I referred to the culture of fake news, manipulation of truth, the desire not to be fooled but also the problem with hypebolisation of truth. I commented on things such as truth anxiety as well as growing interest in radical truth.

I then moved to the massive field of truth scholarship and showed my bias towards thinkers such as Bernard Williams and of course Thomas. If I had more time I would have liked to refer to Mary McCabe who makes a compelling case for the study of truth to start with the study of falsehood. Reading her work reminded me of what St John Henry Newman proposed:

'We advance to the truth by experience of error; we succeed through failures. We know not how to do right except by having done wrong. We call virtue a mean,—that is, as considering it to lie between things that are wrong. We know what is right, not positively, but negatively;—we do not see the truth at once and make towards it, but we fall upon and try error, and find it is not the truth. We grope about by touch, not by sight, and so by a miserable experience exhaust the possible modes of acting till nought is left, but truth, remaining. Such is the process by which we succeed; we walk to heaven backward'²⁸.

Newman and McCabe allow for our mistaking minds and searching hearts stumble upon truth not by being right but being wrong.

Let me finish with something that at one level might amuse you – it comes from my native Poland.

On the Feast of Corpus Christi – one year before the pandemic -- a photograph taken in Pszczyna in South West Poland triggered a number of interesting responses. The Corpus

²⁷ All the above quotes come from Ibid.

²⁸ John Henry Newman, Parochial and Plain Sermons, Sermon 8
<http://www.newmanreader.org/works/parochial/volume5/sermon8.html>

Christi procession was led by a priest sitting in an open roof red Mercedes and holding a large monstrance with the Blessed Sacrament. The congregation followed behind.

- 1) A photo from Corpus Christi procession in Pszczyna, South West Poland. There was/still is a short Youtube film from this procession which on the day it was uploaded was watched over 1 million times. Soon later a different photo appeared on social media.



<https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=boze+calce+zawony+kabriolet&tbm=isch&itbo-u&source=uriv&sa=X&ved=0ah1Kfw5rd-3bAhXnBcAKH:pyBxw07ZkieQ&biw=1657&bih=915&imgref=0x55wVNNRk44M.&pgf=1530437484433>

- 2) A photo of a priest taking the Holy Communion to a sick/dying person in a village in Slovakia in the 1960ies. A picture familiar to many of us from Central Easter Europe.



<https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/pozywka-dla-memow-153287>
Viaticum - Communion for the Sick/Dying
Wiatyk, Slowacja ok. 1960 r. / fot. Martin Martinek / Tradical / Twitter.com

The debate in the media, social as well as printed (including a well-established press such as *Wprost* or *Tygodnik Powszechny*²⁹) concerned several truth-related issues.

Here is a sample of them:

- The photos were real and people who took and uploaded them revealed their identities. The Corpus Christi procession became known as the red cabriolet procession.

²⁹ Andrzej Draguła, 'Pożywka dla memów', *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 02.06.2018.
<https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/pozywka-dla-memow-153287>, visited on 4 July 2018

- While the photos were real, the stories associated with them contained fake information; lies were told, truth got manipulated, later some corrections were made.
- For me, the images and responses to them contain some hidden truths. They reveal people's longings, frustrations, confusion, views on tradition, notion of change, the likes and dislikes.
- Through the various exchanges these photos became alive.
- Interestingly: very few people asked about the sources of the photos, their contexts, people were not that interested in facts, some launched into diatribes, comedies and preaching.
- Those who commented on the photos freely operated with truth-related phrases. For example, some people said: the black and white image represents true religion, religion that is in a danger of being lost in Poland and the rest of Europe. Others objected to this view and saw true religion in the red cabriolet photo: this photo represent religion that is adaptable to our times. So, it seems that both images reveal reverence of the Blessed Sacrament. Some attacked the priest and expressed their sentiments of anticlericalism, saying that a true Christianity doesn't go well with luxury cars and therefore the black and white image resonates more closely with true Christianity. For them, the red cabriolet image represents a fake Christianity.
- A couple of facts: the man who took the photo and recorded a short video which was later put on YouTube was not celebrating the feast and didn't take part in the Corpus Christi procession; he was coming out of the car wash when he spotted the procession and was amused by what he saw.
- Apparently, the priest holding the blessed sacrament in the red Mercedes, was ill and had a problem with his leg; the car wasn't his; it was a last minute offer from the parishioner in the driving seat.
- Do these pieces of information change our interpretation of the red cabriolet image? Has the photo deceived us? Where we are on this? Why so many who engaged with the images didn't want to know the context and facts?
- The two images became food for many narrators including those whose predominant nourishment is not truth but hatred. The red cabriolet on the photograph (and not the Blessed Sacrament in the Monstrance) became so seductive. Fakeness is seductive.

But, I don't want to finish my lecture on this statement even if it is true that there is no easy way of protecting ourselves from fakeness or false ideology and knowing that we are living in truth. Perhaps we don't need to inflate or deflate the meaning of truth. Perhaps what we need is to conflate it with some of the themes we considered here: tranquillity, discernment, sincerity or simplicity as opposed to duplicity, accuracy, studiousness as antidote to exaggerated curiosity. There are several other themes that we have not considered. Finding out about the truth, holding on it and telling it to others and especially to ourselves is a big triple task. Not to take this task seriously, according to Williams, will result in disaster - because the alternative to the loss of the value of truth is the loss of everything.

Thank you