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What Is ‘Truth’?

George Curry

Introduction

‘...it seems unlikely’, says Professor Lowe of Durham University, ‘that philosophers will ever entirely give up asking “What is truth?” and assuming that the answer is something of importance.’¹

Some, like Pontius Pilate, may ask the question in a ‘spirit of extreme skepticism and cynicism’.² Others may ask it simply because not asking it ‘would deprive them of the endless enjoyment to be derived from attempting to solve the various paradoxes, such as the liar paradox, which the notion of truth throws up’.³

Whilst yet others may ask the question ‘What is truth?’ because, as Aquinas says: ‘The first author and mover of the universe is an intellect... Consequently the last end of the universe must be the good of the intellect: and this is truth. Therefore truth must be the last end of the whole universe; and the consideration thereof must be the chief occupation of wisdom.’⁴

Whatever the motive, few would doubt that truth is a concept to which individuals appeal in both their private and public life. We demand that people tell the truth, and we want people to be true in their dealings with us and each other. The question, then, is not of mere abstract academic or philosophic interest. It is one of practical importance. And, if the claims of Jesus Christ are anything to go by – for he asserted ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me’⁵ – it is also a question of profound eternal significance.

It is essential, therefore, that the question be addressed. However, that is far easier said than done. For, as Williams reminds us: ‘What sort of thing is truth, and what sort of things are truths? Philosophers have found these questions very perplexing.’⁶

1 E J Lowe ‘Truth’ *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* T Honderich ed (Oxford: OUP 1995) p 882

2 W Hendriksen *John* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth 1973) p 410

3 E J Lowe ‘Truth’ *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* T Honderich ed (Oxford: OUP 1995) p 882

4 Aquinas *Summa Contra Gentiles* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne 1924) p 2

5 John 14:6 (*New International Version*)

6 C J F Williams *What is Truth?* (Cambridge: CUP 1976) p 1

Definitions

Probably the best known definition of truth is that given by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*: 'To say of what is that it is not, or what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, or what is not that it is not, is true.'⁷

O'Hear avers that 'this definition ... is correct and ... has dominated epistemological discussion ever since'.⁸ The reason this is so, he suggests, is because there is something 'desirable' about it. It 'implies that sayings and statements are what truth and falsity are primarily properties of'.⁹

However as a definition it is not problem free. Williams believes that: 'Aristotle tends to use the Greek equivalent of "is" as a dummy verb' and that: 'Aristotle's formula needs generalizing.'¹⁰ Whilst O'Hear, recognizing that: 'Truth, on this view, appears to be a relation obtaining between some statements (or writings) and some states of affairs in the world', says that: 'The problems with the Aristotelian account of truth begin when one attempts to say just what it is for a statement to say of what is that it is.'¹¹

Aquinas reminds us that Augustine says 'the truth is what is',¹² and that 'truth is that which shows forth what is'.¹³ Whilst not totally rejecting these definitions, he is unhappy with them because they appear to equate truth and existence. If, Aquinas argues:

What is is what exists. Being true then is just the same as existing...
So if being true and existing were the same, saying that what exists is true would be tautologically trivial, which it isn't. So they are not the same.¹⁴

Aquinas cites further definitions of truth. In the *Summa Theologiae*, for example, he mentions Hilary's definition that:

Truth is that which declares or manifests being;... Augustine's definition, Truth is complete likeness to the source without any unlikeness; also a definition of Anselm's, Truth is rightness perceptible by the mind alone,... and... a definition of Avicenna's,

7 Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1011b 25-8

8 A O'Hear *What Philosophy Is* (London: Penguin 1991) p 88

9 O'Hear p 88

10 O'Hear p 67

11 O'Hear p 88

12 Aquinas *Selected Philosophical Writings* (Oxford: OUP 1993) p 51

13 Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* vol 4 (1a 14-18) (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode 1963) p 77

14 Aquinas *Selected Philosophical Writings* (Oxford: OUP 1993) pp 51f

The truth of everything is the possession of the particular nature that has been established for it.¹⁵ (*translator's italics*)

From his *Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate* it is worth noting that he informs us that Ibn Sina defined 'the truth of a thing as the possession of the existence established for it', and that 'truth was defined by Isaac as the matching of thing and understanding.'¹⁶ (*translator's italics*)

We shall note shortly why Aquinas makes reference to these definitions. For the time being we simply record, first, that his knowledge of them illustrates the breadth and extent of his prodigious reading and scholarship; secondly, that the question 'What is truth?' has obviously taxed many great religious minds of the Christian, Jewish and Moslem traditions for many generations; and thirdly, that there is evidently amongst men a felt intellectual and pastoral imperative to provide a working definition of 'truth'.

It is also worth noting at this point that as we proceed with our exploration of this subject we shall have cause to see that there is ample evidence to support Williams' contention that: 'Truth has been called a transcendental attribute' and that:

Truths have been identified with the most various entities: with concrete physical entities such as particular inscriptions, with concrete mental entities such as particular thoughts or ideas; with abstract entities such as types or classes of mental or physical entities... and with... abstractions which have been called 'Propositions'.¹⁷

However, we now ask the question: 'Does "truth" exist?'

Does 'Truth' Exist?

Diogenes Allen, the Princeton theologian, says of our present age that: 'A massive intellectual revolution is taking place that is perhaps as great as that which marked off the modern world from the Middle Ages.'¹⁸ Post-modernism, with the attendant deconstructionism, is said by Veith to be an anti-foundational ideology that is 'being taught throughout contemporary universities'.¹⁹ Its origins, as a coherent intellectual discipline, apparently lie within the field of literary criticism. But of greater import is the claim

15 Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* vol 4 (1a 14-18) (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode 1963) pp 77 and 79

16 Aquinas *Selected Philosophical Writings* (Oxford: OUP 1993) p 54

17 C J F Williams *What is Truth?* (Cambridge: CUP 1976) p 1

18 D Allen *Christian Belief in a Post-Modern World* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press 1989) p 2

19 G E Veith *Guide to Contemporary Culture* (Leicester: Crossway 1994) pp 50f

that: 'Post-modernist theories begin with the assumption that language cannot render truths about the world in an objective way.'²⁰ In essence, it appears, post-modernists do not just question the rationalism of the Enlightenment; they also challenge the underlying assumption that there is such a thing as objective truth.²¹ As a result truth-claims may be defined as fictions. Indeed, Waugh argues that it is not possible to make any distinction between 'truth' and 'fiction'.²² In her view, in post-modernism 'not only is *truth* abandoned but also the desire to retain *truth-effect*'.²³ This position is very different from that of both Aristotle and Aquinas.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, Aristotle develops his theory of virtue. He speaks of both moral virtue and intellectual virtue. By virtue it seems he means excellence. Thus moral virtue to Aristotle is equivalent to excellence of character, whilst intellectual virtue roughly equates to excellence of intellect or intelligence.²⁴ We can do little better than summarize Aristotle's view of human life in the authoritative words of Ross. He says:

Aristotle regards human life as consisting of the pursuit of ends, and his main object is to discover the nature of the end or ends at which man ought to aim... He describes the end as being *eudaimonia*... 'happiness'. ... Aristotle is similarly bent on discovering what is the most enviable life. There are, he says, three popular views about the nature of this life. One is that it is the life of pleasure; but the life which aims at pleasure, regardless of the source from which it is derived, is worthy of beasts rather than of men. The political life aims at honour, but honour depends more on him who gives it than on him who gets it. The life of money-making cannot be regarded as an end in itself. There remains a fourth life, the contemplative life.²⁵

With regard to the latter, in Book VI.2 (on Intellectual Virtue), Aristotle argues that the proper object of contemplation is truth. He does so in the words:

The virtue of a thing is relative to its proper work. Now there are three things in the soul which control action and truth – sensation, reason and desire... What affirmation and negation are in thinking, pursuit and avoidance are in desire; so that since moral virtue is a

20 G E Veith *Guide to Contemporary Culture* (Leicester: Crossway 1994) p 51

21 C Norris 'Post-modernism' *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* T Honderich ed (Oxford: OUP 1995) p 708

22 P Waugh ed *Postmodernism: A Reader* (London: Edward Arnold 1992)

23 Waugh p 4

24 Aristotle *The Nicomachean Ethics* D Ross trans and ed; rev edn J L Ackrill and J O Urmsion (Oxford: OUP 1980) p xxvi

25 Ross 'Introduction' Aristotle *The Nicomachean Ethics* pp vif

state of character concerned with choice, and choice is deliberate desire, therefore both the reasoning must be true and the desire right, if the choice is to be good, and the latter must pursue just what the former asserts. Now this kind of intellect and of truth is practical; of the intellect which is contemplative, not practical nor productive, the good and the bad state are truth and falsity respectively (for this is the work of everything intellectual); while the good state is truth in agreement with right desire... The work of both the intellectual parts, then, is truth.

Aquinas is no less clear. In his treatise on virtue, found in the *Summa Theologiae*, he uses words reminiscent of those used by Aristotle:

A thing's good is its goal, so, since truth is the goal of intellect, knowing truth is good intellectual activity. So anything disposing the intellect to know truth, be it speculative or practical, is a virtue.²⁶

And in his *Quaestiones Disputatae de Malo* the point is further underlined. He argues that:

... if we take note of the objects of mind and will we will find that mind's object is what holds first place in the world of form – namely, being and truth – whilst will's object is what holds first place in the world of goals – namely, good; and that good applies to all goals just as truth applies to all forms mind takes in, so that good itself as taken in by mind is one truth among others, and truth itself as goal of mind's activity is one good among others.²⁷

Whilst in the *Summa Theologiae*, where he debates whether God exists, he trenchantly and famously states that:

... it is self-evident that truth exists, for even denying it admits it. For if it doesn't exist, then it's true it doesn't exist, and if something's true, truth exists.²⁸

In similar vein Veith, speaking of post-modernism, says: 'Those who argue that "there is no truth" are putting forward that statement as being true. Such lines of thought are intrinsically contradictory.'²⁹

He also informs us that: 'Post-modernist theorists admit this paradox.' He then goes on to remind us that in his book *Miracles*: 'C S Lewis has

26 Aquinas *Selected Philosophical Writings* (Oxford: OUP 1993) p 403

27 Aquinas p 177

28 Aquinas p 196

29 G E Veith *Guide to Contemporary Culture* (Leicester: Crossway 1994) p 59

pointed out the fallacy of any theory that rejects the connection between thought and truth. "All possible knowledge... depends on the validity of reasoning." For in Lewis' view:

No account of the universe can be true unless that account leaves it possible for our thinking to be a real insight. A theory which explained everything else in the whole universe but which made it impossible to believe that our thinking was valid would be utterly out of court. For that theory would itself have been reached by thinking, and if thinking is not valid that theory would, of course, itself be demolished. It would have destroyed its own credentials. It would be an argument which proved that no argument was sound – a proof that there are no such things as proofs – which is nonsense.³⁰

Christian theologians, of course, have sympathy with aspects of the post-modernist critique of Enlightenment values and truth-claims. For example, Newbigin believes that: 'The central conviction of the Enlightenment was that human reason, once liberated from the shackles of tradition, superstition, and religion, was capable of coming to the knowledge of the truth.'³¹ This rationalist conviction is one with which many theologians, especially those in the Augustinian and Calvinistic traditions, profoundly disagree. We must include Aquinas amongst such dissenters for this great medieval philosopher-theologian also stressed the limits of human reason and our dependence upon revelation. Writing in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* he asserts: 'That certain divine truths wholly surpass the capability of human reason, is most clearly evident.'³²

Moreover those theologians who take issue with the post-modernists who reject all truth claims are careful to maintain an important distinction. It is perhaps best expressed in these words of Newbigin: 'The (true) assertion that all truth claims are culturally and historically embodied does not entail the (false) assertion that none of them makes contact with a reality beyond the human mind.'³³ We shall return to the notion of 'a reality beyond the human mind' but before we do so we need to consider the question: 'What is true?'

What Is True?

'The term "truth"', says Lowe, 'seems to denote a property, one which is also expressed by the truth-predicate "is true".'³⁴ Few would take

30 G E Veith *Guide to Contemporary Culture* (Leicester: Crossway 1994) p 60 citing C S Lewis *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan 1947) pp 19-21

31 L Newbigin *Proper Confidence* (London: SPCK 1995) p 68

32 Aquinas *Summa Contra Gentiles* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne 1924) p 5

33 L Newbigin *Proper Confidence* (London: SPCK 1995) p 74

34 E J Lowe 'Truth' *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* T Honderich ed (Oxford: OUP 1995) p 881

issue with this claim for, in common usage, the terms are frequently interchangeable. The point may be stated thus: the truth is that which is true. That is what many invariably argue when challenged to define truth.

However, it also needs to be appreciated that there is a close relationship between truth and the mind. Historically this relationship has been expressed, as Gilson says, in 'the definition of truth as an adequation between the thing and the intellect'.³⁵ Of this definition he further says:

... *adaequatio rei et intellectus* is a simple expression of the fact that the problem of truth can have no meaning unless the intellect is regarded as distinct from its object. Thus... taken in itself, the notion of truth applies not directly to things, but to thought's knowledge of things. As we have said, neither truth nor error is possible except where there is judgment.³⁶

Both Aristotle and Aquinas stress the importance of the mind in apprehending truth. Indeed, they both speak of the mind as a locus in which truth may be sought. For example, Aristotle, as well as asserting that the proper object of contemplation is truth, also declares that: 'Truth and falsehood are in the mind, not in things.'³⁷ Whereas Aquinas, using the definitions of truth from other sources quoted above to support his argument (see pp 144–5 above), avers that we can:

... define truth or being true in three ways. Firstly, by referring to that which precedes the notion of truth but provides being true with its basis... In a second way we define it by referring to that in which the notion of the true is formally achieved... In yet a third way we define being true by referring to the effect that follows from it.³⁸

A little later, building on Aristotle's statement that 'connections and disconnections are in mind, not in things',³⁹ Aquinas concludes: 'So that is why truth is found first in understanding making connections and disconnections.'⁴⁰

However Aquinas is careful to ensure that he is not misunderstood. Yes, the mind matters and truth can be found there, but he does not see it as the source of truth. Thus he says:

35 E Gilson *The Christian Philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas* (London: Gollancz 1957) p 231

36 Gilson p 231

37 Quoted in Aquinas *Selected Philosophical Writings* (Oxford: OUP 1993) p 56

38 Aquinas p 54

39 Aquinas p 59

40 Aquinas p 59

... in minds articulating definitions of what things are we find truth in a secondary sense... Although mind starts by articulating what things are that doesn't give mind anything of its own to match against things; so truth in the strict sense isn't found there.⁴¹

So we arrive at an important Thomist distinction. Truth is to be sought either in the inquiring knowing mind or in the things that are known. Aquinas does not reject one in favour of the other. Rather he accepts that both are legitimate 'locations' for truth. But he also insists that distinctions, like the one just noted, must be respected and maintained.

We shall return to this theme but in the meantime we note that in his debate about connections and disconnections Aquinas raises the question of falsehood. This a concept which, because it is the antithesis of truth, must inevitably be considered in any debate on that which is true.

Aquinas is of the opinion that:

... definitions are called true or false because of some true or false connection [they imply]... Definitions can only be called true or false by reference to some connection, just as things can only be called true by reference to the mind.⁴²

His thesis clearly resonates with what today is called the correspondence theory of truth.

Lowe reminds us that Aristotle's famous definition of truth is also sometimes cited as an example of this theory.⁴³ Simply stated, according to this theory, statements (not false ones) are said to be true if they 'correspond to or picture reality (or bits of it, called facts or states of affairs)'.⁴⁴

Although this is the best known, and probably the most favoured, theory of truth it is not problem free. For example, some objectors to it complain that the notion of a fact can be explained only in terms of truth and so the theory is built upon a circular argument. It is 'vitiating by circularity'.⁴⁵ Others, such as O'Hear, ask how a statement which is something linguistic can be said to correspond to a fact or an actual state of affairs. The question is an important one for, as he goes on to point out, a true statement certainly cannot be said to be 'a replica of a state of affairs', nor

41 Aquinas *Selected Philosophical Writings* (Oxford: OUP 1993) pp 59f

42 Aquinas p 59

43 E J Lowe 'Truth' *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* T Honderich ed (Oxford: OUP 1995) p 881

44 A O'Hear *What Philosophy Is* (London: Penguin 1991) p 88

45 Lowe p 881

can it be said to 'fit with it in the way a nut might be said to correspond with a bolt'.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, the difficulties encountered do not and, as far as one can tell, will not render the theory of correspondence redundant. It is a useful tool used by philosophers and theologians alike to help one appreciate more fully what we mean when we use the word 'truth' and describe something as being 'true'. Certainly the concept of correspondence is undoubtedly implicit, if not actually explicit, in both Aristotle's and Aquinas' definitions of truth. Moreover, many years after these two philosophers walked the globe, we find people penning definitions of truth that bear a family likeness to those given not just by Aristotle and Aquinas but also by great theologians like Augustine. For example, the nineteenth century American theologian Dabney, having asserted that there is something so simple about the word truth that makes it almost undefinable, then says: 'It may be said to be that which is agreeable to the reality of things.'⁴⁷

Another well known theory of truth is that of coherence. It is apparently popular with those who encounter, to use Lowe's words, 'the perceived difficulties of the correspondence theory'.⁴⁸ Some of those difficulties may well be the product of what Holmes calls 'the quasi-scientific expectations for precision and proof to all questions of knowledge and truth'⁴⁹ that the Enlightenment produced. As a result, Holmes informs us: 'Hegelian idealists broke with this tradition, defining truth instead as the coherence of a concept within the over-all concept of Being.'⁵⁰

Traditionally this theory is associated with what philosophers call 'system-building metaphysicians', that is, with those who build a system or framework for understanding the world and existence. Such systems have also been called world-views. For such system-builders truth is defined as that which fits into the system, squaring with its presuppositions and dynamics. However the coherence theory of truth, like the correspondence theory, is also not without problems. The most serious of these is spelled out by O'Hear when he says that: 'Such coherentist systems are often criticized on the grounds that the relation of coherence involved is never clarified, but appears to depend on the feelings and hunches of the the system's builder.'⁵¹

46 A O'Hear *What Philosophy Is* (London: Penguin 1991) pp 88f

47 R L Dabney *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth 1985) p 171

48 E J Lowe 'Truth' *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* T Honderich ed (Oxford: OUP 1995) p 881

49 A F Holmes 'Truth' *New Dictionary of Theology* S B Ferguson and D F Wright edd (Leicester: IVP 1988) p 695

50 Holmes p 695

51 A O'Hear *What Philosophy Is* (London: Penguin 1991) p 92

Be that as it may, it appears difficult to avoid the conclusion that Aquinas builds into his definition of truth some acknowledgement of coherence. To illustrate the point we may note the way he summarizes part of a debate on truth. Being true, he says:

... applies first to the connections and disconnections in understanding, secondarily to definitions of things that imply true or false connections, thirdly to things as matching God's understanding or able to match human understanding, and fourthly to human beings choosing truth, or giving a true or false impression of themselves or others by what they say or do. And words can be called true in just the same senses as the understandings they express.⁵²

Surely his argument implies, not just the idea of correspondence, but also that of coherence. However saying that Aquinas' understanding of truth may well embrace the idea of coherence to some extent is not to suggest that Aquinas was a relativist.

The charge of relativism is frequently levelled by objectors to the coherence theory of truth. Lowe summarizes the problem in this way:

Opponents object that this leads to an unacceptable relativism about truth, since many different and mutually incompatible systems of belief could be internally consistent and self-supporting. They also complain that advocates of the theory are guilty of a confusion between stating a *criterion* of truth – that is, a rule for the evaluation of a belief as being true – and stating what truth *consists* in.⁵³

This quotation is useful in another respect. It serves to remind us that, as well as speaking of sentences, statements and propositions being true or false, we also speak in the same way of beliefs. Sooner or later, of course, the beliefs entertained by individuals demand the use of sentences, statements and propositions as truth-bearers if those beliefs are to be made known to others. But this does not render the consideration of the truthfulness or falsity of beliefs redundant. Indeed, as we shall see, the notion of the truthfulness or otherwise of beliefs is something with which Christian theologians are profoundly concerned. It is for that reason that Aquinas says (and his use of the definite article is surely significant): 'Hence the divine truth is the first, supreme and most perfect truth.'⁵⁴ However before we consider the notion of divine truth it is necessary to enquire briefly into the concept of truthfulness.

52 Aquinas *Selected Philosophical Writings* (Oxford: OUP 1993) p 59

53 E J Lowe 'Truth' *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* T Honderich ed (Oxford: OUP 1995) p 881

54 Aquinas *Summa Contra Gentiles* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne 1924) p 132

Truthfulness

What does the Bible say about truth? Professor Packer is of the opinion that:

Truth in the Bible is a quality of persons primarily, and of propositions only secondarily: it means stability, reliability, firmness, trustworthiness, the quality of a person who is entirely self-consistent, sincere, realistic and undeceived.⁵⁵

On what grounds does he make this claim? First and foremost for linguistic reasons, although theological considerations should not be excluded.

Holmes informs us:

In the O[ld] T[estament], 'emet signifies faithfulness, reliability, a moral attribute ascribed both to God... and to humans... This primary usage underlies the ascription of truth to sayings or teachings... The N[ew] T[estament] *pistos* continues the idea of faithfulness... more explicitly than does *alētheia*; the latter term and its cognates are more frequently applied to reliable sayings and true teachings.⁵⁶

Whilst Hodge says:

Truth is a word of frequent occurrence and of wide signification in the Bible. The primary meaning of the Greek word ἀλήθεια (from ἀ and λήθω) is openness; what is not concealed. But in the Hebrew, and therefore in the Bible, the primary idea of truth is that which sustains, which does not fail, or disappoint our expectations.⁵⁷

As we have seen, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle advocates the development of both intellectual and moral virtue. In Book IV he describes the moral virtues of 'the Good Man'. One such virtue is 'truthfulness'. Thus in section seven he sets out to 'describe those who pursue truth or falsehood alike in words and deeds and in the claims they put forward'.⁵⁸ He asserts that truth is in itself 'noble and worthy of praise' and that 'the truthful man is another case of a man who, being in the mean, is worthy of

55 J I Packer *Knowing God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1975) p 124

56 A F Holmes 'Truth' *New Dictionary of Theology* S B Ferguson and D F Wright edd (Leicester: IVP 1988) p 695

57 C Hodge *Systematic Theology* (London: James Clarke 1960) vol 1 p 436

58 Aristotle *The Nicomachean Ethics* D Ross trans and ed; rev edn J L Ackrill and J O Urnson (Oxford: OUP 1980) p 100

praise'.⁵⁹ But he is yet more specific. For he defines quite closely the sort of person the truthful man is. He is not just or even primarily:

... the man who keeps faith in his agreements, ie the things that pertain to justice or injustice... but the man who in the matters in which nothing of this sort is at stake is true both in word and in life because his character is such.⁶⁰

Furthermore, Aristotle says of him:

... the man who loves the truth, and is truthful where nothing is at stake, will still more be truthful where something is at stake; he will avoid falsehood as something base... He inclines rather to understate the truth; for this seems in better taste because exaggerations are wearisome.⁶¹

It should be remembered that in this context the word 'truth' has to do with what may be called the right rule. Ross reminds us that in both the *Eudemian* and *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle defines the virtuous man as the one who acts in accordance with the right rule, and that the formulation of that rule is in itself an intellectual operation. In other words it is something that he works out for himself in his mind. At this point we need to remind ourselves of some of the details of the Aristotelian system. We shall call on Ross again to help us do that. According to Aristotle, he says:

There are... five states of mind by which we reach the truth, and whose names imply they are infallible. These are science, art, practical wisdom, intuitive reason, theoretical reason; of these the first, fourth, and fifth are concerned with knowledge alone, the second and third with practice also. By science Aristotle means the act of drawing correct inferences from premisses known to be true. By art he means the kind of knowledge which enables us to make useful or beautiful things... By practical wisdom he means the power of deliberating how a state of being which will satisfy us is to be brought into existence...

Intuitive reason is the complement to the excellence called science... *That* was the power of drawing correct conclusions; *this* is the power by which we know the premisses from which the conclusions are drawn. Finally, theoretical wisdom is the union of these two things,

59 Aristotle *The Nicomachean Ethics* D Ross trans and ed; rev edn J L Ackrill and J O Urmson (Oxford: OUP 1980) p 101

60 Aristotle p 101

61 Aristotle p 101

science and intuitive reason... Theoretical wisdom must be understood as including all the divisions of 'wisdom' recognized in the *Metaphysics* – metaphysics, mathematics, and natural science.⁶²

These extracts, from both the one whom Aquinas calls 'the Philosopher'⁶³ and Ross, illustrate that Aristotle's concept of truth is in some respects similar to the biblical notion of the concept as defined by Packer, Holmes and Hodge. The primary concern *vis à vis* truth in the Bible is that individuals be reliable, trustworthy and true. Aristotle argues for something very similar in the 'good man'. What is more, Aquinas reminds us that in his *Metaphysics* Aristotle:

... defines the First Philosophy as being *the knowledge of truth*, not any truth, but of that truth which is the source of all truth, of that, namely, which relates to the first principle of being of all things; wherefore its truth is the principle of all truth, since the disposition of things is the same in truth as in being.⁶⁴

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* the Philosopher appears to point us in the same direction when he says of 'God and the good' that 'by reference to these all other things are judged'.⁶⁵ However it should be remembered that Aristotle's god is not the God of the Bible. Rather 'he' is a somewhat abstract, remote principle, the 'prime mover', who, along with other gods, 'played a far less central role in the universe than the God of the Christians and Jews'.⁶⁶

Thus we come to a consideration of 'The Truth'.

The Truth

In his debate *On Truth* in the *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas under article 5 makes this statement: 'Hence it follows not only that truth is in God but also that he is the supreme and original truth.'⁶⁷ And in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (chapter LX) he concludes that: '... the divine substance is truth itself... God is His own truth... Now God is His own essence. Therefore, whether we speak of the truth of the mind, or of the truth of the things,

62 D Ross 'Introduction' Aristotle *The Nicomachean Ethics* D Ross trans and ed; rev edn J L Ackrill and J O Urmson (Oxford: OUP 1980) pp xv f

63 See eg two such references in *Summa Contra Gentiles* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne 1924) p 129.

64 Aquinas *Summa Contra Gentiles* p 2

65 Aristotle *The Nicomachean Ethics* D Ross trans and ed; rev edn J L Ackrill and J O Urmson (Oxford: OUP 1980) p 24

66 P Edwards 'God and the philosophers' *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* T Honderich ed (Oxford: OUP 1995) p 316

67 Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* vol 4 (1a 14-18) (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode 1963) p 89 cf *Summa Contra Gentiles* pp 131 f.

God is His own truth.’⁶⁸ However it should be appreciated that these conclusions are backed up by and, to a certain extent, are the product of careful reasoning. We emphasize this because the Aquinas who wants us ‘to meditate and publish the divine truth, which antonomastically is *the truth*’,⁶⁹ also reminds us that: ‘It is self-evident that truth exists in general, but not self-evident to us that there exists a first Truth.’⁷⁰ Indeed, on the latter point, he also states that: ‘Certain truths... are self-evident and compel the assent of the mind; but certain truths are not self-evident but evident for other reasons.’⁷¹ Three such truths are, one, that God exists; two, that God is the truth; and, three, that God is true to himself at all times. In the last analysis, although reasonable propositions in themselves, these truths are not the product of the human mind. Instead, they are known by revelation.

Aquinas, as we have seen, taught the limitations of human reason. This point is often overlooked partly because so much emphasis has been put by some on Aquinas’ so-called ‘proofs’ for the existence of God. However it is more correct to say that for Aquinas the value of these ‘proofs’ lies in the fact that they point us to the necessary existence of (a) God and establish him, as Edwards says, ‘as the *sustaining* cause of the universe.’⁷² But if we are to know (more) precisely who he is and what he is like then we must turn to revelation. Aquinas believed that God had revealed himself and that in the Bible we had the divine record of that self-revelation. Moreover, as his *Summa Contra Gentiles* shows, Aquinas was convinced that God had primarily made himself known in and through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Hence at the end of the short chapter in which he argues that God is his own truth, he says: ‘This is confirmed by the authority of our Lord, Who says of Himself (Jo. XIV.6): *I am the way, the truth, and the life.*’⁷³ In the next two chapters he then goes on to establish that: ‘God is not merely true, but is truth itself. Therefore there can be no falsehood in Him’;⁷⁴ and that: ‘... the divine truth is the first and supreme truth.’⁷⁵ This is so, Aquinas continues, because: ‘God’s being is first and most perfect. Therefore His truth is also first and supreme.’⁷⁶ It seems, then, for Aquinas that, as Gilson says: ‘God is truth... because His truth is one with His very being.’⁷⁷

68 Aquinas *Summa Contra Gentiles* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne 1924) p 129

69 Aquinas p 2

70 Aquinas *Selected Philosophical Writings* (Oxford: OUP 1993) p 197

71 Aquinas p 283

72 P Edwards ‘God and the philosophers’ *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* T Honderich ed (Oxford: OUP 1995) p 318

73 Aquinas *Summa Contra Gentiles* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne 1924) p 129

74 Aquinas p 130

75 Aquinas p 131

76 Aquinas p 132

77 E Gilson *The Christian Philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas* (London: Gollancz 1957) p 232

Aquinas' argument is at this point essentially metaphysical in character. But it is one which nonetheless, as we have seen, is supported by Scripture. Moreover it gives us grounds to conclude, with Gilson, that: 'Taken in what we may call its static or essential form, ontological truth merely means that truth is transcendental: being and truth are convertible.'⁷⁸ It is evident, therefore, that Aquinas builds on an Aristotelian philosophical framework and system. He expands it and endeavours to use it in the propagation of the Christian faith. In this task he is assessed by some to have been hugely successful. Certainly no-one else has yet equalled his achievement. But the essential point is that in his writings Aquinas, notwithstanding his acute philosophical mind and understanding of Aristotelian thought, 'draws a sharp distinction between two routes to knowledge of God. One is revelation and the other is human reason'.⁷⁹

That is why Pilate's question is so important. And that is why any attempt to answer it must surely take cognizance of Murray's pertinent comments in response to it:

If the question is to be oriented properly it must, first of all, take the form, 'What is the truth?' Our Lord's answer to Thomas, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life' (John 14:6) points the direction in which we are to find the answer. We should bear in mind that 'the true' in the usage of John is not so much the true in contrast with the false, or the real in contrast with the fictitious. It is the absolute as contrasted with the relative, the ultimate as contrasted with the derived, the eternal as contrasted with the temporal, the permanent as contrasted with the temporary, the complete in contrast with the partial, the substantial in contrast with the shadowy. Early in the Gospel John advises us of this. 'The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1:17). It is to miss the thought entirely to suppose that truth is here contrasted with the false or the untrue. The law was not false or untrue. What John is contrasting here is the partial, incomplete character of the Mosaic dispensation with the completeness and fulness of the revelation of grace and truth in Jesus Christ...

It is in this sense that we are to understand our Lord... He is enunciating the astounding fact that he belongs to the ultimate, the eternal, the absolute, the underived, the complete.⁸⁰

78 E Gilson *The Christian Philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas* (London: Gollancz 1957) p 232

79 A Broadie 'Aquinas, St Thomas' *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* T Honderich ed (Oxford: OUP 1995) p 44

80 J Murray *Principles of Conduct* (London: Tyndale Press 1971) pp 123-4

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In other words Pilate's error was that he did not realise that 'the truth' stood before him. That Pilate should have recognized, for immediately before he asked his famous question of Jesus that same Jesus implicitly, if not explicitly, informed him that he (Jesus) was the truth.⁸¹

Aristotle, living some 325 years or so before Christ, did not have the benefit of Christ's teaching. But Aquinas, 'the greatest of the medieval philosopher-theologians',⁸² did. Thus it was that in comparison to 'the Philosopher' he had a fuller understanding of truth.

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81 John 18:37

82 A Broadie 'Aquinas, St Thomas' *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* T Honderich ed (Oxford: OUP 1995) p 43