

"WHAT IS TRUTH?": THE QUESTION THAT STIRS IN THE HEARTS OF ALL MEN

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"What is truth?" (Jn. 18:38) The question pronounced by Pontius Pilate during Jesus' Passion is a perennial one that has been at the center of philosophy since its inception. Yet, the question does not remain merely philosophical, but reaches into the heart of theology when Jesus reveals Himself as "the way and the truth and the life" (Jn. 14:6). St. Thomas Aquinas, already recognized as a master at weaving the two disciplines together for a fuller understanding of man, God, and reality, delves into this question that stirred in Pilate's heart and in the hearts of all men: What is truth? In question 16 of the first part of the *Summa Theologica*, he seeks a deeper understanding of truth—what it is and its relationship to God and man.



St. Thomas begins his investigation of truth by looking at where truth is properly located. He first brings to the fore the classic definition of truth as being the "equation of thought and thing."¹ Moving from this starting point, he establishes that truth can be located in different ways in three 'places' - the human intellect, the thing itself, and the divine intellect.² If the divine knowledge is the cause of all things (as established in Question 14 article 8), then the truth of the divine intellect would be the model or prototype, against which everything is measured. A thing is true to the extent that it conforms to what is in the divine mind. In the third place, truth resides in the human intellect as what is in the human intellect conforms to things (as they conform to the divine intellect.) However, in looking at the truth of things, St. Thomas specifies that its relationship with the divine intellect takes priority over its relationship with the human intellect, since a thing can be said to be true in relationship to both. He explains this primacy of truth's relationship with the divine intellect by saying that, "Even if there were no human intellects, things could be said to be true because of their relation to the divine intellect. But if, by an impossible supposition, intellect did not exist and things did continue to exist, then the essentials of truth would in no way remain."³ This, then, underscores his conclusion that truth resides in the intellect, and perfectly so in the divine intellect.

How does truth reside in the intellect? St. Thomas concludes that it is through the formation of propositions - by adding or removing something from the predicate or subject. He explains that truth is not merely knowing what something is (quiddity, as they say), but rather in a kind of judgment. "When the intellect begins to judge about the thing it has apprehended, then its judgment is something proper to itself—not something found outside in the thing. And the judgment is said to be true when it conforms to the external reality."⁴

Having established that truth is located primarily in the intellect and is located here through judgments, he moves on to look at the relationship between truth and being. He concludes that because everything that has being is knowable and truth has the nature of what is knowable, that being and truth are what he calls "convertible," or perhaps more easily understood "interchangeable." Yet, they are not identical because truth adds a dimension to being, as does the "good". (This relationship is more fully described in Article 1 of *De Veritate*). In this sense, having compared the relationship of good and truth with being, St. Thomas goes on to look at the relationship between goodness and truth so as to better understand the precise relationship between truth and being. His conclusion is fairly simple, that truth is closer to being than is good since truth is related to being directly whereas good is related to being as far as being has some perfection.⁵

In the context of the discussion of truth and being, St. Thomas goes on to establish that God is truth. He already established in Question 14 Article 8, that the act of God's intellect is the cause of all that is—being—and as such God is His own act of understanding (since He is His own existence. Truth is found in the highest degree in God since as the divine intellect, it contains within it the model of all things as they are. Thus it is that not only is their truth in God, but given all that St. Thomas has shown so far, it can be concluded that God is truth.⁶

St. Thomas moves on to discuss the question of the unity of truth. He ends up qualifying his position based on

the sense of "truth" the question is based upon. If we are considering this question based on the truth of things in relation to the divine intellect, then there is one truth - the truth in the divine intellect. "The unity of truth is a fundamental premise of human reasoning, as the principle of non-contradiction makes clear."⁷ Even in considering truth as found in the human intellect, about which St. Thomas concludes that "there are many truths about many true things, and even many truths in different minds about one true thing,"⁸ there has to be something against which to make the judgment about the thing "true". This something is the Truth of the divine intellect which makes all things true. For this reason, St. Thomas says that "Truth, therefore, is properly and primarily in the divine intellect."⁹ What if judging a proposition to be true "only initiates an infinite regress, since it is itself just another of our propositions? What if each of our propositions relates only to other of our propositions? ... The essential identity-in-difference between true propositions and true realities, Thomas argues, 'is principally found only in God.'¹⁰

Another author, in considering St. Thomas' position also explains that "many truths can be in the same mind, and their number can increase as the mind makes more and more true judgments."¹¹ In this distinction, we see the difference between Truth and truth. It is also apparent that the quantity of truths can increase in human minds based on true judgments but this cannot be so in the divine mind because as St. Thomas will show, truth is immutable in the divine intellect (Art. 8).

Before reaching the conclusion that truth is immutable in the divine intellect, he first sets out to show that only truth in the divine intellect is eternal and that created truth is not. This is so because the truth of a thing resides primarily in the intellect (as was shown in Article 1). Thus, truth that resides in a created intellect cannot be eternal since the created intellect is not eternal. However, as St. Thomas points out, if no intellect were eternal, neither would there be eternal truth. He thus concludes that the only eternal truth is the truth that resides in God's intellect. Similarly, St. Thomas argues that the mutability of truth also depends on the intellect in which it resides. He uses the very practical example of people changing their minds which illustrates the mutability of truth in the sense of the changing of opinion while the object of the opinion did not itself change. The reverse can also be the case. In each of these cases, the human intellect changes between truth and falsity, depending on which (the former or the latter) is in conformity with the divine intellect. This however, shows that the truth of the divine intellect is immutable since God cannot change opinions or acquire new knowledge that would bring about a change of opinion.

In looking at the move of the human intellect from truth to falsity or vice versa, an interesting question arises. It is intriguing to note that St. Thomas, neither in the *Summa* nor in *De Veritate* looks into whether man can know truth. It seems this was a fact that was pretty much taken for granted at his time and is more of an issue for today's thinker. I think the difference can be seen quite starkly when we look at St. Thomas' perspective on falsity and whether it can exist in the mind and Descartes' methodological doubt that called into question man's capacity to know many things that had been taken for granted up until that point. St. Thomas writes, that "Sense, then, has no false knowledge about its proper objects, *except accidentally and rarely*."¹² Descartes, on the other hand, began his doubting because of the supposed unreliability of the senses, using the example of optical illusions and the like.

While Descartes himself may not have reached to such radical conclusions, those who followed took what he began to more extreme consequences. Much of modern thought has focused on man's capacity to know truth rather than the nature of truth itself. This goes to show that many of our contemporaries doubt even the existence of truth, or at least absolute truth, and thus pay little attention to investigating what it might be if it were. The recent Popes affirm that "there are signs of a widespread distrust of universal and absolute statements, especially among those who think that truth is born of consensus and not of a consonance between intellect and objective reality."¹³ We see this trend away from the recognition of truth, and moreover God as Truth, having an impact on so many dimensions of society because "Once the idea of a universal truth about the good, knowable by human reason, is lost...there is a tendency to grant to the individual conscience the prerogative of independently determining the criteria of good and evil and then acting accordingly."¹⁴ This tendency in itself is the fruit of the Kantian "turn toward the subject" which in many ways yielded the fruit of turning away from God.

This tendency can be corrected in coming again to recognize the existence of truth, of absolute truth. In doing so, modern man may come to recognize what St. Thomas shows us through his Scholastic process, that God is Truth. This logical conclusion is a deepening of the understanding that was given when Jesus himself identified Himself as "the way, and the *truth*, and the life." (Jn.14:6; emphasis added). There is an invitation from the Lord to come to know Truth, and in doing so, to follow Him.

¹ ST I, Q. 16, Art. 1

² Cf. *Ibid.*; Kreeft, *Summa of the Summa*, p. 145

³ *Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate*, Art. 2

⁴ *Ibid.* Art. 3

⁵ Cf. ST I, Q. 16, Art. III and IV

⁶ Cf. ST I Q. 16. Art. V

⁷ H.H. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 34

⁸ *Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate*, Art. IV

⁹ *Ibid.*, Art. IV

¹⁰ Jenson, *On Truth and God: Ipsa Veritas and Late Modernity*, p. 387

¹¹ Glenn, *A Tour of the Summa*, p. 20

¹² ST I, Q. 17. Art. 2; Italics added

¹³ H.H. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 56

¹⁴ H.H. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 32

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