



Truth Matters: Living in Dangerous Times - Aquinas on the Virtue of Truth-Telling

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Abstract

Current political and social climate seems to have as a presupposition the view that truth-telling has a merely instrumental value. This paper will explore Thomas Aquinas' writing on truth and truth-telling, arguing that truth-telling is an intrinsic good, a human virtue and a component of human flourishing. In Aquinas' view the virtue of truth-telling is a satellite virtue within the cardinal virtue of justice, and as such imperative for the flourishing of human society.

EJSTA 37 (2019)

DOI:

10.2478/ejsta-2019-0003

Article history:

Received: 18.12.2018

Accepted: 14.3.2019

Available online:

01.07.2019

Keywords

truth • fake news • lying • virtue ethics • human flourishing



The activity of truth-telling doesn't seem to matter all that much today. Media, politicians, and scholars inform us that we live in a post-truth era. The implicit message of our times suggests that truth-telling is merely an instrumental tool for getting one's own way, a means to an end. It is not in itself a human good. In itself, whether one tells the truth, or works with "alternative facts", is irrelevant. The activity of truth-telling in itself is of little or no intrinsic value in this post-truth culture. This article will argue, *au contraire*, for the foundational importance of the virtue of truth-telling, not only for individual human flourishing but also for human society.

1. Dangerous Times

In the introduction to her work entitled *The Death of Truth* Michiko Kakutani notes "Two of the most monstrous regimes in human history came to power in the 20th century, and both were predicated on the violation and despoiling of truth, upon the knowledge that cynicism and weariness and fear can make people susceptible to the lies and false promises of leaders bent on unconditional power. As Hannah Arendt wrote in her 1951 book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 'The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced

communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e. the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e. the standards of thought) no longer exist".¹

Two years prior, in 1949, George Orwell published a novel, which was to become a classic. The novel, entitled *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, introduces the reader to an imaginary country, to an imaginary future in which the world is dominated by totalitarian police states. In these states there is a Ministry of Truth. The concern of the Ministry of Truth is the manufacture of lies, not only lies which are to be told in the present, but older sources of information were also to be altered. These were to be rectified so they would align themselves with current governmental accounts of 'reality', of 'truth'. The work of the Ministry of Truth was facilitated by party ownership of the print media. This was used to manipulate public opinion. Film and radio media carried the process further. The Ministry of Truth decided what from the past was to be preserved, what was to be falsified, or blotted out of existence. This was the country of 1984, as envisaged by George Orwell in 1949.

Today we are impelled to ask if the world of the 21st century is continuing on the pathway imagined by Orwell? Are we now in a world in which truth doesn't matter all that much, actually? In our western world fundamental rights, civic virtue, facts and reason are under continual assault. The consequences are severe.² While we may smile, or grimace, at the U.S. President Trump's claim that his was the "biggest ever" presidential inauguration numbers, the fact that Trump requested that official pictures be edited to make the crowd appear bigger demonstrates not only a clear disregard for facts but a deliberately falsified self-presentation.

The selection of the term "post-truth" as Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year in 2016 is indicative of the social phenomenon. In 2017 a Post Truth Research Excellence Initiative was established by the University of Sydney. Its aim: "To advise on how the truth might survive in this climate".³ This is all very chilling.

As well as the term "post-truth" the English language has now expanded to include terms such as "truth decay", "fake news", "alternative facts" and "bullshit". This latter term was given currency by the philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt in a widely read essay *On Bullshit* published in 2005.⁴ In this essay, Frankfurt construes the term bullshit as speech intended to persuade without regard for truth. According to Frankfurt what makes "bullshit" distinctive from just plain lying is that the liar cares about the truth but attempts to hide it; the bullshitter doesn't care if what they say is

¹ Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth* (William Collins, 2018), 11.

² "We are living through an era when fundamental rights, civic virtue, even facts and reason are under assault like never before. And as we have been painfully reminded the consequences can be severe." Thus said Hilary Clinton, former US Secretary of State, in a public lecture given during a visit at Trinity College Dublin to receive a honorary degree (Fri June 22nd, 2018). Retrieved 17 December 2018 from <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/news/the-fight-is-far-from-over-hillary-clinton-gives-impassioned-speech-in-dublin-37038785.html>

³ Retrieved 22 June 2018 from <https://posttruthinitiative.org/>

⁴ Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*. (Princeton University Press, 2005).

true or false. The only concern is that the listener be persuaded. If there is truth-telling, it is only as a means to an end, never a good in itself.

One may well ask, is this new? Is contemporary mendacity distinctive? Sophists, propagandists and bullshitters have been around forever. Have not the issues of truth and mendacity been long debated by philosophers and theologians? Indeed they have.⁵

At the same time there are distinctive features today. Social media, the internet, is shaping reality in important ways. Today's scant regard for truth is more pandemic, and insidious, than in previous eras due to the explosion of communication networks. There is also the intensity of the marketing culture, marketing competition in our society. People need to sell, and thus to present their products as better than their rivals, and as indispensable to our lives. Truth in describing the product is not so important. Alongside fake news in the practice of politics there is fake news in the practice of commercial advertising.

Today, helped by the impact of social media and mass communication, care for the activity of truth-telling, in the words of Michiko Kakutani, is an 'endangered species'.⁶ We can, with credibility, term this era, a post-truth era, a dangerous time.

2. A Response from Theology: Thomas Aquinas

The aim of this article is to make an argument precisely for the *intrinsic* value of the activity of truth-telling within the human good and for human flourishing and the corrosive effect of mendacity in all its forms. This argument is based on Thomas Aquinas' treatment of truth-telling, particularly in the *Secunda Secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae*. For Aquinas truth-telling is an intrinsic good, a component in human flourishing, a human virtue.

This discussion of Aquinas' work begins with a brief overview of the places where Aquinas has addressed the concept of truth. Aquinas' theory of truth is metaphysical before being epistemological or psychological. His foundational assertion is *God is Truth*. This is the teaching he expounds in the *Summa Theologiae* in the *Prima Pars* question 16 and what is said there undergirds the teaching in the discussion of truth-telling in question 109 of the *Secunda Secundae*.⁷

This brief overview is followed by a discussion of the concept of virtue in Aquinas' work. This is the context within which Aquinas' understanding of truth-telling must be understood. A consideration of the specific virtue of truth-telling in

⁵ Frankfurt himself notes that it is impossible to be sure that there is relatively more bullshit today than in times past. He writes his work because bullshit is 'currently so great', Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 63.

⁶ Kakutani, *The Death of Truth*, 15.

⁷ As the focus of this article is the activity of truth-telling the sequence in the *Summa* is reversed, that is to say the *Secunda Pars* q.109 is expounded before the treatment on the metaphysics of truth in the *Prima Pars* q.16. The article proceeds in this way because the chief concern is to keep the focus on the activity of truth-telling in the context of the post-truth culture, 'living in dangerous times'.

the *Secunda Secundae* follows. The next major section of the article discusses the relationship of the virtue of truth-telling to the virtue of justice. This, the article will suggest, is where Aquinas' most mature teaching on the matter is to be found. The article then returns to the earlier questions in the *Prima Pars* on what could be called the metaphysics of truth (*STh* I, q.17 and *STh* II-II, qq. 110-113). The final part will look to the vice of lying, and to mendacity in its different guises (*STh* I, q.17). While many contemporary philosophers, and indeed theologians, may argue for and against Aquinas' teaching on the concept of truth, the argument of this article is that his teaching on truth-telling as a virtue is one which society today ignores at its peril.

3. Truth in Aquinas

Aquinas addresses the concept of truth in many places. John F. Wippel provides a clear and insightful guide through the four most important texts.⁸ Wippel identifies these as, firstly, the *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* (*In I Sent.*, d. 19, q.5). Next the well-known and much studied treatise *Quaestio disputata de veritate*, particularly question one.⁹ The third text selected is from the *Summa contra Gentiles* (*ScG* I, c.60). Wippel's fourth choice is the texts which engage with the discussion of truth in the *Summa Theologiae*.

In the *Summa* Aquinas discusses truth primarily in two locations. Firstly in the *Prima Pars* question 16 where Aquinas' interest is on what truth is, how we truly know, and how our knowledge of truth differs from God's truth. The second location is in the *Secunda Secundae*. Here, in q. 109, Aquinas is concerned with the *virtue* of truth-telling.

Question 109 of the *Secunda Secundae* begins - *we must now consider truth and vices opposed thereto*. As always the context of a question in the *Summa* is insightful. Question 109 is embedded within the very large section of the *Secunda Pars* (*STh* II-II, qq. 57-122) where discussion is focused on the virtue of justice. This is important. Moving out in a wider concentric circle, equally important is the fact that this question on truth-telling is embedded within the overarching discussion of the seven virtues that make for human flourishing. These are the three theological virtues, faith, hope, love (*caritas*), and the four cardinal virtues - prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude (*STh* II-II, qq.1-170).

To posit truth-telling as a virtue has significant consequences. For Aquinas virtue is "that which makes its possessor good, and renders their action good" (*STh* I-

⁸ John F. Wippell, 'Truth in Thomas Aquinas', in: *The Review of Metaphysics* 43 (1989) 395-326 and Vol. 43 no 3 (1990) 543-567.

⁹ *Quaestio Disputata de Veritate*, dates from his first period teaching as a Master in Paris (1256-1259). G. Emery advises that this work gives us good access to the young Aquinas' thinking, and to the evolution of his thought and genius. See G. Emery, 'Brief Catalogue of the Works of Saint Thomas Aquinas' in J.-P. Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas. The Person and His Work*. Vol. 1. Trans. R. Royal (Washington: CUA Press, 1996), 330-361: 334.

II, q. 56 a.3 c).¹⁰ This point is of supreme importance.¹¹ Herbert McCabe expresses it thus, “Virtue is directed toward the excellence of the producer”.¹² In the case of truth-telling the person telling the truth is the producer. Aquinas repeats this crucial insight in question 109 of the *Secunda Secundae*. Here it is clearly stated that a person is perfected by the virtue of truth-telling – “*hoc perficitur homo per virtutem veritatis*” (STh II-II, q.109 a. 2 c).

The virtuous person develops a facility, a freedom, a capacity for doing this good thing. They grow into that particular perfection. It becomes part of their character. Virtue is constitutive of who they are. One might say they become people who tell the truth naturally.

It is worth remarking that this activity of truth-telling for someone who does have the virtue is not necessarily an easy activity. In fact it can be a considerably more difficult activity than the engagement in post-truth discourse. To quote McCabe again:

“We ought, of course, to be clear that acting from the inclination arising from virtue does not mean taking the easiest or least painful path; it means taking the one that conforms to and springs from who you are and what you treat as ultimately satisfactory ... [For example] The one with the virtue of justice acts not because he finds it easier to be just, but because his will, his love, is set on justice. The one who lacks the virtue of justice may, indeed, do what is just, but he will do so, not from the love of justice, but from, for example, fear of retribution, human or divine. He is, to this extent, less free. ... To act from the personality you have built for yourself, or which has been given to you by God’s grace or both, is to act in total freedom, to act from yourself”.¹³

It must be remembered again that for Aquinas virtuous living is related to divinisation. For Aquinas the form of all the virtues is love (*caritas*). Terry Eagleton notes, “For Aquinas, all virtues have their source in love. Love is the ultimate form of soberly disenchanted realism, which is why it is the twin of truth”.¹⁴

The argument of this article thus far is that if one wishes to understand Aquinas on truth-telling it is imperative to first understand his concept of virtue and of virtuous human living. Aquinas’ positing of the activity of truth-telling in the context of the virtue of justice as well as that of prudence and then that of love (*caritas*), is pivotal.

¹⁰ “Virtus autem est quae bonum facit habentem, et opus eius bonum reddit”.

¹¹ In his earlier discussion of virtue in the *Prima Secundae* Aquinas emphasises that virtue must be understood in reference to good. Therefore human virtue must refer to a good habit, productive of good works. To live righteously is to live by virtue, “inasmuch as by virtue we perform righteous actions” (*Sic virtute recte vivitur, in quantum per eam aliquis recte operator*) (STh I-II, q. 56 a.1 ad 1).

¹² Herbert McCabe, ‘Teaching Morals’ in *God Still Matters*, (London: Continuum, 2002), 187-198: 193.

¹³ Herbert McCabe, ‘Virtue and Truth’, in: *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 62 (1996), 161-169: 167.

¹⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 122.

4. The Virtue of Truth-telling

All this serves to remind us that for Aquinas to identify truth-telling as a virtue is an affirmation of great weight. This he does in the first article of Question 109 (*STh* II-II). The focus is not, what is truth? The question is whether or not truth is a virtue. The second article considers if truth is a *special* virtue. The third article is concerned with the relation between the virtue of truth and the virtue of justice. The fourth and final article asks if there is a need to consider the concepts of more, or less, when it comes to truth-telling. All four articles are engaged with spelling out the full significance of understanding truth-telling as a virtue.

In the first article of *STh* II-II, q.109 Aquinas is clear: when it comes to a consideration of truth as truth-telling the concept of virtue is key. The activity of truth-telling is an activity of virtue. He writes: "truth may stand for that by which a person says what is true, in which sense one is said to be truthful (*verax*). This truth or truthfulness must needs be a virtue, because to say what is true is a good act: and virtue is 'that which makes its possessor good, and renders his action good'" (*STh* II-II, q.109, a. 1 c).¹⁵

In the same article, Aquinas states explicitly that this virtue is one of the moral virtues: Wherefore truth is neither a theological, nor an intellectual, but a moral virtue.¹⁶ (*STh* II-II, q.109 a.1 ad 3) To have this virtue is to desire to tell the truth, to have a stable disposition to tell the truth, what one might call a settled orientation towards truth-telling. This action of truth-telling is an expression of what this person wants, and who this person is. It is in them to do this. They desire to tell the truth. This is why truth-telling is described as a moral virtue. That is to say it is a virtue of the will, an appetitive virtue.

Immediately the question will arise, does this thus exclude an intellectual dimension in this virtue? Not at all - to exclude an intellectual dimension simply because this is formally a moral virtue is a mistake. Hebert McCabe writes:

"by the time Aquinas came to write this part of the *Summa* he had just written his commentary on Aristotle's *De Anima* and come to see the whole matter much more clearly than he had done when, for example, writing his early *Commentary on the Sentences*. And what he had come to see was that when we come to the field of human action there is no operation of the reason which is not also an operation of the will, and vice versa. There is an interweaving of understanding and being attracted that cannot be unravelled in practice. We think of what we are *attracted* to thinking of, and we are attracted to what we *think* of. ... Frequently he [Aquinas] asks: is 'intending' or 'deciding' or

¹⁵ "Alio modo potest dici veritas qua aliquis verum dicit, secundum quod per eam aliquis dicitur verax. Et talis veritas, sive veracitas, necesse est quod sit virtus, quia hoc ipsum quod est dicere verum est bonus actus".

¹⁶ "Unde veritas non est veritas theologica, neque intellectualis, sed moralis".

whatever an act of intellect or will?, and he usually answers: ‘Both but one predominantly’¹⁷.

Truth-telling, as an interweaving of understanding (intellect) and being attracted (will) works its way into the discussion in this question. In *Summa Theologiae* II-II q.109 a.2 ad 1 we read:

“Wherefore the ‘true’ considered in its proper aspect as a perfection of the intellect is a particular good, since it is something appetible (desirable): and in like manner the ‘good’ considered in its proper aspect as the end of the appetite is something true, since it is something intelligible” (*STh* II-II, q. 109 a.2 ad 1).¹⁸

It is helpful to take an example to illustrate Aquinas’ point. A person engages in the study of theology, for example, because they desire to know something about God. One might say they desire to know something of the truth about God, of what God is, or what God is not. It is the desire for truth which leads one to explore, to ask questions, to seek to understand, to seek towards deeper understanding. Because they have come to know in some preliminary way the deep mystery God is they desire to engage in theological questioning. For Aquinas, human beings desire things under the aspect of their intelligibility. There is an interweaving of desire (moral) and understanding (intellect).

5. The Special Character of this Virtue

Having established that truth-telling is an activity of virtue, primarily moral virtue, but with intellectual dimensions, in article two Aquinas considers the special characteristics of this virtue. He comments that “When we find a special aspect of goodness in human acts, it is necessary that a person be disposed thereto by a special virtue, and thereto, in truth-telling persons will be perfected by the virtue of truth” (*STh* II-II, q. 109 a. 2 c). Again the emphasis is on the internal human perfection, the excellence that comes to be within the person who has developed the virtue of truth-telling. In truth-telling, they are maintaining an order, a harmony, between what they are saying is true, and the fact of the matter.

In the response to objection 3 of the second article Aquinas makes another important point.

“The truth of life is the truth whereby a thing is true, not whereby a person says what is true. Life like anything else is said to be true, from the fact that it attains (*atingit*) its rule and measure, namely, the divine law; since rectitude of life

¹⁷ Herbert McCabe, *On Aquinas*, (London: Continuum, 2008), 79.

¹⁸ “Unde verum, secundum rationem propriam qua est perfectio intellectus, est quoddam particulare bonum, in quantum est appetibile. Et similiter bonum, secundum propriam rationem, potest esse finis appetitus, est quoddam verum in quantum est quoddam intelligibile”.

depends on conformity to that law. This truth or rectitude is common to every virtue".¹⁹

Rectitude of life depends on conformity to the divine law. This is the truth that is in things – as created by God. This truth is the foundation of all discussion on the virtue of truth-telling. As stated above Aquinas's theory of truth is metaphysical. Here in *STh* II-II, q.109 a. 2 ad 3 Aquinas is building on what he has expounded in the *Prima Pars* q.16, which shall be returned to below. The key teaching here, in question 109 of the *Secunda Secundae*, is that a failure in truth-telling is a breach of our relationship with God.

6. Truth-telling and the Virtue of Justice

At this stage it is of relevance to remember Aquinas' earlier argument in *STh* II-II, q. 80 a. 1 c, where he observes that the virtue of truth can be seen as annexed (*annectitur*) to justice as a kind of satellite virtue, perhaps, that is a kind of necessary supplementary virtue within the broad realm of acting justly. It is to the virtue of justice as secondary to a principal virtue. It has something in common with justice and yet it falls short of the complete definition of the virtue of justice. In article three of *STh* II-II, q.109 Aquinas develops this understanding.

This positing of truth-telling as an activity of justice identifies its importance in human living, in proper societal flourishing. The treatise 'On Justice' is one of the longest treatises in the *Summa Theologiae* occupying questions 57 to 122 of the *Secunda Secundae*. For Aquinas the human concept of justice must be spoken of in the context of human experience and human living. Justice is essentially relational, *ad alterum*, and brings about a certain equality between person and person. Victor White has done some interesting work in this area. Justice, he notes, "is concerned with the rightness and straightness of relations between human and human. It is not itself that rightness (*rectitudo*); but the practical establishment of that rightness ... Its specific function is the giving to another of his *ius*: *Iustitia est constans et perpetua voluntas ius suum unicuique tribuens* ('Justice is a stable and unfaltering willingness to render to each its due')".²⁰

Interestingly Victor White notes that Aquinas follows St Ambrose in his definition of justice:

"*Iustitia est quae suum cuique tribuit*' - 'Justice is that which renders to each what is its'

¹⁹ "Veritas vitae est veritas secundum quam aliquid est verum, non veritas secundum quam aliquis dicit verum. Dicitur autem vita vera, sicut etiam quaelibet alia res, ex hoc quod attingit suam regulam et mensuram, scilicet divinam legem, per cuius conformitatem rectitudinem habet. Et talis veritas, sive rectitudo, communis est ad quamlibet virtutem" (*STh* II-II, q.109 a. 2 ad 3).

²⁰ Victor White, 'The Concept of Justice in St Thomas Aquinas' in his *God the Unknown* (London: The Harvill Press, 1956), 116-144: 138

'Its.' 'Suum'. 'What belongs to it.' Here we have, it seems to me [White], the essential idea of *ius* – possession, what is had. Or, more precisely, what *ought* to be possessed or had. Behind this ethical conception lies the whole metaphysics of finite or created being. The verb 'to be', predicated of all that is not God, postulates the verb 'to have'. By reason of the very fact that a finite being *is* such and such a finite being, it needs to *have* more than it *is*. It has of its very nature, which nature it receives from the Creator, certain needs which must be realised if it is to fulfil its purpose – indeed, if it to fulfil any purpose at all. Certain goods belong to it by right; and that right derives ultimately from the divine plan and purpose for it, they are inherent in its created existence; they are owing to it (*debitum*) and there is obligation (*debitum*) on the part of others to render it in the give-and-take which constitutes human society. 'Unicuique debetor quod suum est (I. xxi, I ad 3). Here we have the basic principle underlying the concept of *ius* and *iustitia* – *iustitia* being that which is effective of *ius*."²¹

Justice is the rendering of *ius*; just as we might say truth-telling is the rendering of truth.

At this point it can be stated that, for Aquinas, the virtue of truth-telling has two things in common with justice. Firstly the act of truth-telling, truthfulness must needs be directed to another person. It is a social virtue in this way. Secondly it sets up a certain equality between people, again essential to the formation of society.

On the other hand the virtue of truth-telling differs from the virtue of justice. It dispatches not a legal debt, but a debt of what Aquinas terms *honestas*. *Honestas* demands one reveal the truth about oneself, that one be truth-telling. The concept of *honestas* is complex, and the term doesn't easily render itself in a single English word. Perhaps a good translation might be "proper respect", where "proper" refers to honesty, and "respect" to honour. *Honestas*, one might say, is about being honourable in relationship, it is a matter of acting towards others with proper integrity. For Aquinas truthfulness differs from justice as it dispatches not a legal debt but a debt of proper respect, of integrity. It is *ex honestate*, out of integrity that one should be truth-telling. For this reason truth-telling is to be understood as a part of justice, being annexed thereto as a secondary virtue to its principal.²²

The understanding of the term *honestas* is crucial. *Honestas* denotes "good in itself", "integrity", honourableness of character, as in *bonum honestas*, morally good and excellent (as distinct from what is merely useful or pleasureable).

Following the teaching of Aquinas, it is the contention of this article, that we owe it to one another, that it is a matter of justice, that we be truth-telling, so that we can trust one another. This is essential for the preservation of human society:

²¹ White, 'The Concept of Justice in St Thomas Aquinas', 138-139.

²² "Non enim haec virtus attendit debitum legale, quod attendit iustitia, sed potius debitum morale, in quantum scilicet ex honestate unus homo alteri debet veritatis manifestationem. Unde veritas est pars iustitiae, in quantum annectitur ei sicut virtus secundaria principali" (*STh* II-II, q.109 a.3 c).

“Since the human is a social animal, one human naturally owes another whatever is necessary for the preservation of human society. Now it would be impossible for people to live together, unless they believed one another, as declaring the truth one to another. Hence the virtue of truth does, in a manner, regard something as being due”.²³

The central activity of the virtue of truth-telling is the truthful manifestation of oneself in society.

Aquinas makes clear that truthfulness, truth-telling, is effected both by words and by deeds. Truth-telling is a virtue. Truthful acts and deeds perfect us. Aquinas posits the virtue of truthfulness, in word and in deed, as a core virtue for human society.

“it belongs to the virtue of truth to show oneself outwardly by outward signs to be such as one is. Now outward signs are not only words, but also deeds. Accordingly just as it is contrary to truth to signify by words something different from that which is in one’s mind, so also is it contrary to truth to employ signs of deeds or things to signify the contrary of what is in oneself”.²⁴

This is to say, as John O’Callaghan puts it, “He is truthful insofar as what he says of himself is true, not only by his words, but also by his deeds, that is, in so far as both his words and his exterior acts are in agreement with his character.”²⁵

7. Aquinas on the Metaphysics of Truth

As stated earlier what Aquinas articulates in the *Secunda Secundae* with regard to the virtue of truth-telling has important connections with his metaphysics of truth. This metaphysics he has expounded in question 16 of the *Prima Pars*. Much work has been done on this question and on the wider question of truth in Aquinas.²⁶ While the focus of this paper is the activity of truth-telling in the thought of Aquinas, it is important here to recapitulate some key points of his teaching on truth from the *Prima Pars*. Aquinas is well known for a view, originally asserted in the first article of his early work *Quaestio disputata de Veritate*, that truth consists of an adequation, or conformity,

²³ “Ad primum ergo dicendum quod quia homo est animal sociale, naturaliter unus homo debet alteri id sine quo societas humana conservari non posset. Non autem possent homines ad invicem convivere nisi sibi invicem crederent, tanquam sibi invicem veritatem manifestantibus. Et ideo virtus veritatis aliquo modo attendit rationem debiti” (*STh* II-II, q.109 a.3 ad 1).

²⁴ “Ad virtutem veritatis pertinet ut aliquis talem se exhibeat exterius per signa exteriora qualis est. Signa autem exteriora non solum sunt verba, sed etiam facta. Sicut ergo veritati opponitur quod aliquis per verba exteriora aliud significet quam quod habet apud se, quod ad mendacium pertinet; ita etiam veritati opponitur quod aliquis per aliqua signa factorum vel rerum aliquid de se significet contrarium eius quod in eo est” (*STh* II-II, q. 111 a.1 c).

²⁵ John O’Callaghan, *Thomist Realism and the Linguistic Turn: Toward a More Perfect Form of Existence*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 275.

²⁶ See for example William Woods, ‘Thomas Aquinas on the Claim that God is Truth’ in: *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 51 (2013): 21-47; John F. Wippell, ‘Truth in Thomas Aquinas’ in: *The Review of Metaphysics* 43 (1989) 295-326 and 43 no 3 (1990) 543-567.

between the intellect and a thing.²⁷ For Aquinas while truth is found both ‘in the intellect’, and ‘in things’, it is found primarily (*per prius*) in the intellect.²⁸

This is the guiding principle for Aquinas’ discussion of truth: truth is a relationship of the mind to the thing and “the true is in the intellect in so far as it is conformed to the object understood”.²⁹ Timothy McDermott expresses this teaching thus:

“Truth then is primarily defined as a quality of mind: *truth reveals and makes clear what is*; but secondarily as a quality of things relating to the mind that originates them: *each thing’s truth is its possession of the being established for it*. The usual definition: *truth is a correspondence of thing and mind*, can be interpreted in either way”.³⁰

Truth then resides primarily in the intellect. The terminus of knowledge is in the intellect. ‘The notion (*ratio*) of truth is transferred from the intellect so as to be applied to the thing understood. Because of this, the thing is said to be true.’³¹

In short, Aquinas teaches that truth resides in intellect in primary fashion (*per prius; proprie*) and in things in secondary fashion (*per posterius; improprie*) by reason of their relationship to an intellect as to their principle. Human-made things are said to be true when they express the designer’s mind and intention. The first example Aquinas gives is that of a house. It is true in so far as it conforms to the architect’s idea of the house. The second example Aquinas offers is a speech, (*oratio*) or a piece of writing. A speech, narration, is said to be true in so far as it succeeds in displaying the truth in the intellect of the speaker (*STh I, q.16 a.1 c.*)³² In each case the truth of the thing bears within its reality its relation to the mind that conceived it. Natural things, things which are not human-made, things such as animals, plants and human beings, by contrast, are called true in relation to God’s idea of them. The example Aquinas gives is that of a stone – “For a stone is called true, which possesses the nature proper to a stone, according to the preconception in the divine intellect” (*STh I, q.16 a.1 c.*)³³

Subsequent articles in Question 16 continue to explore and to reinforce the objectivity of truth. When we seek truth we are exploring the reality under our

²⁷ Thomas ends the first article of his *De Veritate* with this assertion that ‘Veritas est adequatio rei et intellectus’. In *The Natural and the Supernatural in St. Thomas’s Early Doctrine of Truth*, Michael M. Waddell makes interesting comment on this teaching: ‘I take it to be an open question whether the need for a young theologian, like Thomas, to present a doctrine that was consistent with authoritative statements might have influenced his judgment that the formal notion of truth consists in the conformity of intellect and thing’ (note 9). Retrieved 17 December 2018 from <https://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/ti01/waddell.htm>

²⁸ “Truth resides primarily in the intellect, and secondarily in things according as they are related to the intellect as their principle” (*STh I, q. 16 a.1 c.*). See also *De Ver.* q.1 a.2.

²⁹ “Verum sit in intellectu secundum quod conformatur rei intellectae” (*STh I, q.16 c.*).

³⁰ Timothy McDermott, ed. *Summa Theologiae. A Concise Translation*, (Christian Classics, Allen Texas, 1989), 45.

³¹ Wippel, ‘Truth in Thomas Aquinas’, (1989), 321.

³² “Dicitur oratio vera, in quantum est signum intellectus veri”.

³³ “Dicitur enim verus lapis, qui assequitur propriam lapidis naturam, secundum praeconceptionem intellectus divini”.

investigation. We are coming to dwell in its realm, we are coming to understand it and this is so because, as is said in Article 3, “to be is to be knowable”.³⁴

The exploration of truth as an exploration of reality is reinforced when we turn to the next question, Question 17, on the possibility of falsehood. Aquinas puts it, “for as truth implies an adequate apprehension of a thing, so falsity implies the contrary” (*STh* I, q.17 a.4 c).³⁵ To speak truly is to speak of what is there. To speak falsely is to miss out on what is there, to speak of what is not there at all. However, just as evil is not contrary to good, but is a privation within the good, so falsity is not contrary to truth, but is a privation, an absence in truth – “because true and good are universals, and convertible with being. Hence, as every privation is founded in a subject, that is a being, so every evil is founded in some good, and every falsity in some truth” (*STh* I, q. 17 a. 4 ad 2).³⁶ For Aquinas, deviating from truth is deviating from reality. The result, one is dwelling in an impaired reality ... the consequences can be dire.

Perhaps most controversial in today’s post-truth world is Aquinas’ argument that God is truth. This claim, for Aquinas, means that not only does God exemplify truth, and not only is God the cause of all truth, but that God is truth. He addresses this claim in the fifth article of *STh* I, q. 16.³⁷

“Aquinas would not agree that ‘God is truth’ simply *means* that God is the cause of creaturely truth. Rather, ‘God is truth’ means that creaturely truth pre-exists in God in a more excellent way. It is only because of that fact about the divine nature that we can say that God is the cause of truth”.³⁸

To deviate from truth is thus to deviate from God. Any consideration of the vice of mendacity (and a society addicted to it) must take account of this perspective.

8. Aquinas on the Vice of Mendacity (Lying)

In Aquinas consideration of truth-telling is a consideration of virtuous living, and of human flourishing. The virtue of truth-telling, *virtus veritatis*, which he also calls *veracitas*, truthfulness, is allied, annexed, supplementary to the virtue of justice. To tell the truth is to participate in the sphere or zone of justice, indeed to be lead into deeper understanding of the justice that it is to tell the truth, for it pertains not to legal obligation, but to personal integrity, authenticity, honourableness (*honestas*) (*STh* II-II, q.109 a. 3).³⁹

³⁴ “Unumquodque autem in quantum habet de esse, in tantum est cognoscibile” (*STh* I, a. 3 c).

³⁵ “Sicut enim verum point acceptionem adequatam rei, ita falsum acceptionem rei non adaequatam rei”.

³⁶ “Et hoc ideo in utroque accidit, quia verum et bonum communia sunt, et convertuntur cum ente, unde, sicut omnis privatio fundatur in subiecto quod est ens, ita omne malum fundatur in aliquo bono, et omne falsum in aliquo vero”.

³⁷ See also *ScG* I cc. 60-62; *De Ver.* 1.7.

³⁸ William Woods, ‘Thomas Aquinas on the Claim that God is Truth’ in: *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 51 (2013): 21-47: 23.

³⁹ In these questions Aquinas’ work is clearly influenced by Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.7. Truth, for Aristotle, is noble and praiseworthy in itself. It is the core virtue of EN 4.7 and is understood as habitually

If, as Aquinas has shown, truth-telling is 'a matter of personal authenticity', then mendacity must be its opposite.⁴⁰ This is expounded in the four questions on the vice of mendacity with which Aquinas completes his discussion of this topic, *STh* II-II, q. 110-113.

As John Finnis states: "The moral significance of the lie consists in its character precisely as false self-expression: what is signified, assertively and communicatively, as being in one's mind is in fact not in one's mind."⁴¹ To lie is to fracture a relationship. In place of a relationship whereby self discloses to self, there is an act of duplicity, the presentation to another person of a pretended mind and heart, one "shows one thing outwardly while having another in his heart ... [the duplicitous person] pretends one thing and intends another" (*STh* II-II, q. 109 a.2 ad 4).⁴² In *STh* II-II, q.111 hypocrites are identified as living duplicitously. In *STh* II-II, q.112 Aquinas discusses the mendacity of the braggart, the person who boasts, and in *STh* II-II, q.113 he considers the person who "belittles himself by forsaking the truth ... by denying something great of himself" (*STh* II-II, q.113 a. 1 c).⁴³

For Aquinas a person lies when they decide not to reveal what is in their mind. Here he will differ from Augustine, and much of theological tradition. To lie is not primarily to deceive, but simply to have the intention to assert the false (*STh* II-II, q. 110 a.1c). In the act of lying one is dividing oneself, falsely asserting while keeping one's true self hidden. The intention to deceive is a kind of completion of the lie: "the intention of a bad will may bear on two things: one of which is that a falsehood may be told; while the other is the proper effect of a false statement, namely, that someone may be deceived" (*STh* II-II, q.110 a.1c).

Just as one may acquire the virtue of truth-telling, so too the vice of lying can be acquired: "the liar, when he lies from habit, delights in lying" (*STh* II-II, q.110 a.2 c). Aquinas notes repeatedly, it is one's character as a human being that is being built up, or destroyed, emptied out (*prevatio*). It is in this aspect that truth-telling, and its absence, lying, most deeply affects our society, it corrodes human relationships. In the final perspective there is a dimension in these activities which takes us toward God, in the case of the virtue of truth-telling, and away from God, in the case of mendacity.

Conclusion

matching one's words and actions to one's beliefs. It is about not pretending to be something other than what one is. In discussing communication (*manifestatio*), veracity's generic subject matter. See Kevin Flannery, *Aquinas and the Nicomachean Ethics*, (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁴⁰ John Finnis, *Aquinas*, (Oxford University Press, 1998), 156, 157

⁴¹ Finnis, *Aquinas*, 158

⁴² "Simplicitas dicitur per oppositum duplicitati, qua scilicet aliquis aliud habet in corde, aliud ostendit exterius. Et sic simplicitas ad hanc virtutem pertinet. Facit autem intentionem rectam, non quidem directe, quia hoc pertinet ad omnem virtutem, sed excludendo duplicitatem, qua homo unum praetendit et aliud intendit".

⁴³ "Alio modo aliquis dicit minora a veritate declinans, puta cum asserit de se aliquid vile quod in se non recognoscit; aut cum negat de se aliquid magnum quod tamen percipit in seipso esse".

In the opening considerations of this article it was claimed that in a post-truth culture ‘the activity of truth-telling in itself is of little or no intrinsic value.’ Truth-telling is no more than an instrumental tool for getting one’s own way, a means to an end, and not really a human good in itself. The whole aim of the article has been to repudiate such views by a consideration of the virtue of truth-telling in Aquinas. Aquinas teaches that virtue is that which makes its possessor good (*STh* I-II, q.56 a.3 c). Applied to the virtue of truth-telling, to tell the truth perfects the person exercising this virtue (*STh* II-II, q.109 a. 2 c). Conversely, not to tell the truth intrinsically damages the person, corrupting their very character, and thereby their human interactions in society.

The intrinsic perfection of one’s character by truth-telling is one of the moral virtues constitutive of human flourishing. Truth-telling is an internal perfection for the truth-teller. Deliberate mendacity is an internal corruption. As a satellite virtue of justice, its concern is the good of *societas*, the authenticity that makes possible interpersonal communication. The virtue of truth-telling is a requirement of love of neighbour as of self. Truth-telling is central to human relationship. It is a social virtue, one might say. Truthfulness is “necessary for the preservation of human society. Now it would be impossible for people to live together, unless they believed one another, as declaring the truth one to another” (*STh* II-II, q. 109 a.3 ad 1).⁴⁴

Thus we can say that for Aquinas the virtue of truth-telling is foundational for the flourishing of human society precisely because it is foundational *for one’s own flourishing as an individual*. This is a perspective that needs to be brought to the analysis of a post-truth culture. It is an important insight into the truth of truth-telling. The suggestion of this article is that a proper understanding of the virtue of truth-telling is an essential resource for navigating these dangerous times. The perspective it provides allows a critique of the post-truth culture, and enables a more incisive perception of its dangers, and potential for social disaster. It follows that the pandemic of post-truth, from an Aquinas perspective, is utterly subversive of human flourishing. Those who indulge in the phenomenon of post-truth corrupt their character, diminishing their very humanity, and that of society.

⁴⁴ “Ad primum ergo dicendum quod quia homo est animal sociale, naturaliter unus homo debet alteri id sine quo societas humana conservari non posset. Non autem possent homines ad invicem convivere nisi sibi invicem crederent, tanquam sibi invicem veritatem manifestantibus”.