

REPLY TO BACON

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“What is truth?” said jesting Pilate; and would not stay for an answer.”
—*Essay on Truth* by Francis Bacon.



“WHAT IS TRUTH?” And that, Horatio, is the question. We cannot think very long or very profoundly without asking that question. We cannot argue very long without coming back to that question. It is a question that has so agitated modern thought that there has been little or no progress beyond it to truth itself. It can be asked by a “jesting” Pilate or by a sneering skeptic, and then it cannot be answered because it is not really a question.

There are, it seems, two classes of people who can answer the question: the very simple and the very profound. The very simple can answer it because their contact with reality is so intimate, and their stock of the rare virtue of common sense in such good order; the very profound can answer it because their profundity is only exalted common sense and their language only technical common sense.

But let us not anticipate by putting the question. We have mentioned modern thought and its agitation of the question. Has modern thought an answer to its own question? Nothing but jargon and gibberish, one might say after an overhasty excursion into the paths of modern thought. But this is a trifle too facile to satisfy the discerning thinker. Even admitting that the “concept of truth” is a philologist’s happy hunting ground, we cannot honestly ignore the many worthwhile things that have been said about this very simple, but very intricate problem. One writer¹ finds that he can divide the whole history of thought on this one question. This is quite in keeping with the Hegelian notion that Philosophy is really nothing more than the History of Philosophy. More than that, it is quite in keeping with any investigate of a problem to find out what other men have thought about it. Doctor Burt finds two trends of thought about truth: one which regards truth as the end of life, the other which regards life as the end of truth. The first trend was that of the Greeks who reached their apex in Platonic and Aristotelian ontology. This view was super-

¹ Burt, Edwin A., in his Introduction to *The English Philosophers from Bacon to Mill*, New York, Random House, Inc., 1939.

seded by the practical genius of Rome which turned thought into the moral, legal and political theories of Stoicism. The same two trends appear in modern philosophy. French philosophy, by and large, has exhibited a metaphysical tendency, though of quite a different nature than that of the Greeks. German philosophy and English philosophy keep up the old duel between the practical and speculative. The Germans insist that man exists to know; the English that he exists to do.

All this, though very interesting, does not answer the question. This writer, who, it seems, is fairly representative has done very well in telling us what people have thought about truth, and not what truth is. What he has said will be a help to us, but it will not answer our question. It is like a great deal of modern philosophic thought in being more interested in thought than the things which are thought about. After this somewhat unfair and certainly ungrateful generalization, we come back to our starting point. We are asking the modern thinker about the nature of truth. He has explained to us the diversity; now let us look for the unity. Is there anything common in the various modern opinions of truth?

THE MODERN TRUTH

There certainly does seem to be some unanimity on the question of truth, although it may seem perhaps to be little more than a trend. This fundamental unity, if it exists at all, can be best understood by the history of Modern Thought. To say this seems to be going back to the Hegelian concept of Philosophy as History of Philosophy. Well, suppose we admit for the time being the validity of such a process, at least for purposes of investigation. We shall not with Hegel boldly assert that the times make the philosopher, for it is likewise true that the philosopher makes the times. But there is certainly a very definite sense in which the times influence the philosopher. This can be seen in no better instance than the one in which we are concerned. It is customary to begin any discussion of modern thought with Descartes. Of course it is quite arbitrary to begin any place at all, for thought, like life, is continuous and is grouped into periods only for didactic reasons. Still, there is a certain reality which these arbitrary groupings imitate. On this very question of truth, it is quite obvious that the Scholastic and Modern concepts of truth are poles apart. That is why it seems that we must begin farther back than Descartes, back at the time when the old notions were breaking down for intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. We must begin at the time of the Renaissance mind, for this mind was bitterly hostile to the Medieval Philosophy, and much of modern philosophy is still thoroughly rooted

in the Renaissance. Of all the thinkers of that hectic period, Lord Verulam, Francis Bacon is one of the best speakers, and one of the best spokesmen for the spirit of his times. In fact, he is so faithful a reproduction of the general spirit of the Renaissance that his own place as a thinker has been called into question, and he has been called not a philosopher but a popularizer. Bacon is certainly a good example of the Hegelian dictum we have mentioned, for if ever the times made the philosopher, and the philosopher was only the mouth-piece of the general thought, this was true in the case of Bacon and the Renaissance. Bacon is quite typical of the Renaissance thinker in being more than a little imbued with the Scholasticism at which he scoffed, and in pointing to many of the modern ideas we hold as commonplace.

BACON'S TRUTH

The famous Essay "Of Truth" from Bacon's 1625 edition of the *Essays or Counsels, Civil or Moral* seems a logical place to start the investigation. The opening sentence

"What is truth?" said jesting Pilate; and would not stay for answer.

is classic, and we must return to it later. But there is little of philosophic value in the essay. Bacon tries his hand at amateur exegesis, castigates the skeptics, discusses the difficulty of the attainment of truth, mentions the happiness of finding it, and then spends most of his time discussing lies. One's first reaction to it might be that of the man who called the essay a convenient vehicle for those who could not express their thoughts in orderly fashion. This reaction does not, of course, question the wisdom of the aphorisms, the beauty of the style, or even a certain literary unity, but it is frankly disappointed at not finding an answer to Bacon's own question. Moreover, Bacon's cool "To pass from theological and philosophical truth to the truth of civil business" half way along when he has said absolutely nothing about either, is a bit jarring for one looking for answers. But this reaction to the essay is, while understandable, not quite justified. After all, it is an essay, an informal essay at that. Bacon has not assumed the Philosopher's chair, and he made no promises in beginning his classic discourse on truth.

But we might expect something quite different in his philosophic work, the *Instauratio Magna*. But again we are doomed to disappointment. Bacon nowhere treats explicitly and philosophically of truth. As one commentator puts it:

What we should doubtless have liked to get from Bacon is a classification of the meaning of such words as "truth," "reality," . . . Yet it would be unreasonable to expect Bacon to have been fully alive to the linguistic aspects of the problem of "Truth." The remarkable thing, however, is that we get from him as much as we do, for he does provide some very significant hints in this direction.²

It is from these hints, from the general tenor of his philosophy, and even from the spirit of the times which he reflects, that we must find out what Bacon thought of truth. These hints abound in the *Instauratio Magna*. The entire work, his philosophical *chef d'oeuvre*, is composed "in obedience to the everlasting love of truth."³ His aim is "the expurgation of the intellect to qualify it for the dealing with truth."⁴ And then, quite casually, and as an aside, Bacon answers the question. And his answer is quite traditional and quite orthodox. But before we give his answer, before we even say what we mean by "traditional" and orthodox," we must retrace our steps and consider where we are. In the beginning we asked—what is truth? We said that the problem of truth was very important in modern thought. Then we said that the answer to the question could be given by the very simple or the very profound, but we did not answer it. Still, the implication was, "I think I know the answer, but do *you*?" The "you" was the modern philosopher, and up till now we have been discussing not so much his answer as the roots of his answer in Bacon. Now we must show our hand, admit that "the very simple," "the very profound," the "traditional," the "orthodox" are all masks, aliases for the Scholastic. Before we go on to talk about the differences of Bacon and his philosophic children with the Scholastics, we must say what the Scholastics said and say.

Oddly enough, an accurate statement of the scholastic definition of truth can be found in Bacon himself. Although he does not use the word "truth," Bacon speaks of "the true relation between the nature of things and the nature of the mind."⁵ He says that he values truth as "the commerce between the mind of man and the nature of things which is more precious than anything on earth."⁶ This is almost as clear and definite as the famous scholastic definition of truth: the adequation of the intellect with the thing. The very simplicity of the

² Willey, Basil, *Seventeenth Century Background*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1934, p. 27.

³ *The Great Instauration*, the text edited by Dr. Edwin Burtt *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 18.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

statement—Truth is the adequation of the intellect with the thing—makes us lose sight of its profundity. But its magnificent depth becomes evident when we begin to divide the various relations possible between intellects and things. Here we must confine ourselves to the three basic relations that are pertinent to our discussion of the Baconian concept of truth. First of all, there is the truth which is caused and measured by the object known: *logical truth*. Its notion is important to grasp, for it will color our whole attitude to reality. If once we see that things are the measure of the mind, we are on the high road to philosophy. The notion of logical truth forces us to what may seem a brutal conclusion, but nonetheless true and of primary importance: man is not the measure of things, but things are the measure of man.

But in our emphasis on logical truth, we must not lose sight of the fact that there are certain kinds of truth in which the mind is the measure of things. The mind of God, for one, measures all things; things are what they are—and are therefore true—because they conform to the idea of them in the Divine Mind. This truth of things is called *ontological truth*. There is another truth in which man is privileged to share that divine quality of being the measure of things, that is, when he makes something. That something, be it the *Moses* of a Michelangelo or the mud pie of a child, has truth because it conforms to the idea its maker had of it. For convenience, we shall call this the *truth of the artefact*.

There are other kinds of truth, such as that of the word, and this is what we usually mean when we speak of truth. But this can be reduced to one of the three types enumerated above, as can the types of truth which are differentiated according to their content: theological, philosophical, scientific truths.

BACON AND THE TRADITION

This little excursion into scholastic metaphysics seems to show that nothing Bacon has said of truth, at least in what we have seen, differs from the scholastic tradition against which Bacon, who has been called the Buccaneer of the New Times, so vigorously fulminated. If he has said little, he has said nothing contrary. And so have thought many of his commentators, friendly and hostile. His theory of knowledge has been called a naive dogmatism and his metaphysics an uncritical realism. He is accused of not being free of the very chains he mocked, of fighting an enemy he had not yet conquered in himself. Bacon was too close to the dark ages in his blissful ignorance of the criteriological problem. But the refined taste of the moderns does not give sufficient credit to Bacon for his departure from

the tradition. For he is the stepping-off place from the tradition. He mirrors much of the old teaching on truth, and indeed his whole purpose was to find a valid method to obtain logical truth. But he does begin the modern critical problem. His distrust of the intellect in its search for truth has become for many the hallmark of his teaching. Probably nothing in his philosophical works is better known than his teaching on the Idols. These idols were the various obstacles in the discovery of truth. The Idols of the tribe were those errors common to humanity; the Idols of the den those attributable to background and prejudice; the Idols of the marketplace those caused by the loose, untechnical use and words; and the Idols of the Theater the teaching of Professors. That there are obstacles in the acquisition of truth cannot be denied. But for the scholastic, error is a *per accidens* consideration. The intellect is made to know truth. Bacon's very emphasis on the probability of error is a tendency which begins to weaken the old teaching.

But this is only a trend, though a marked one, and with other elements of his teaching combined, a definite departure from the old way of thought about truth.

DOUBLE TRUTH

There is something more definite than a trend, indeed something very near a doctrine, in his discussion of the various orders of truth. He begins his work with the pious statement that he "most humbly and fervently pray (s) to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost . . . that They will vouchsafe through my hands to endow the human family with new mercies."⁷ But in the *Novum Organon*, he makes the somewhat suspicious statement that "it is therefore most wise soberly to render unto faith the things that are faith's."⁸ Our suspicions are confirmed when he tells us that "we are obliged to believe the word of God though our reason be shocked at it. . . . And therefore the more absurd and incredible a mystery is, the greater honor we do to God in believing it, and so much the more noble the victory of faith."⁹ This is to put faith and reason in separate compartments so that one cannot interfere with the other. To those with no axe to grind, the error is apparent. Truth is one; the truth in one order cannot contradict that in another. To say so is to make the truth in one order a hypothesis, and eventually a falsehood. In any separa-

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *The Works of Francis Bacon*, edited by Basil Montague, Philadelphia, A. Hart, 1851, vol. I, p. lxxv.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. xcvi.

tion of Theology and the other Sciences, the separation is for the benefit of one or the other. Bacon's zeal for the empirical sciences—the whole purpose of the *Instauratio* is the redivision of all the sciences to effect greater ease in the development of the sciences called experimental—can leave us little doubt. "Bacon's desire to separate religious truth and scientific truth," says a neutral commentator, "was in the interest of science."¹⁰ Theology was to be accorded all honor, even given unconditional authority but in its own sphere. What this honorable discharge really meant was the dethronement of Theology as Mistress of the Sciences.

REJECTION OF METAPHYSICS

If Theology was pushed into retirement with all due honor and respect, her handmaid Philosophy was given the door with much noisy vituperation. The attempt to substitute empirical for rational science is characteristic of the Humanism of the Renaissance, but it is Bacon who gives the most ringing expression to it. His scathing denunciation of Metaphysics has been so completely successful that even today many link Metaphysics with some kind of magic or witchcraft. The truth of the matter is that, although there was certainly room for criticism of some of the degenerate forms of Scholasticism, Bacon's refutation never touched his opponents, because he was speaking in an entirely different order. That which distinguishes Philosophy from the rest of science is that it is concerned with the essences of things, that which is fundamentally universal, and the objective causes of these essences. Empirical science, of which Bacon is the champion, seeks to discover new phenomena while philosophy limits itself to the penetration of the inner meaning of those notions which common experience gives us.¹¹ Bacon did not sufficiently understand the purpose of deduction, nor the fact that the induction which he stressed was fundamentally deductive.

BACON'S RAISON D'ETRE

The reason for Bacon's dislike of Metaphysics is not hard to find. It is the same reason for which he held the double truth theory. It is the *raison d'être* of his entire philosophy, and he is not shy in

¹⁰ Willey, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

¹¹ It is not, unfortunately, within the scope of this paper to discuss the differences of the rational and empirical sciences and the ill-starred divorce of the latter from the unifying wisdom of the natural order. A splendid treatment of this interesting and vital question is *Science and Philosophy* by A. J. McNicholl, O.P., in *The Thomist* (Vol. VIII, 1) of Jan., 1945.

revealing it. He was not interested in weakening the traditional teaching on the power of the intellect to know. He did not care much about the double truth theory. "His intention throughout," says one author, "was not so much to reject 'metaphysical truth' as to prescribe for his age a massive dose of 'truth' of another order."¹² The purpose of his whole work is "that the mind may exercise over the nature of things the authority which properly belongs to it."¹³ He rejects the rational sciences which he calls general positions because "they should produce fruits and works but do not."¹⁴ Knowledge, he says is for "the benefit and use of life."¹⁵ Power and utility are his ends. He does not so much reject the contemplation of being, the truth that is measured by things, as he substitutes for it the making of things, the truth that measures things.

None of his commentators misses this keystone of thought.

His appeal throughout was to lovers of action rather than of metaphysics. Of what use would a merely conventional discussion of the validity of learning be to the cause he had at heart? . . . He was primarily interested in the means of advancing man's control over the world of this present life.¹⁶

Bacon thought Knowledge to be Power and its aim the *regnum hominis*. . . . He was not as a mere onlooker who seeks truth for its own sake, but as a being possessed by a passionate impulse to action, who places his knowledge at the service of particular ends and assigns to it as its greatest task, the subjection of nature to the will of man.¹⁷

Man had begun to desire the kind (of truth) which would enable him to measure, to weigh, and to control the things around him; he desired, in Bacon's words "to extend more widely the power and greatness of man. . . . And thus, through Bacon, the sort of knowledge which dealt with the notions of bodies came to seem the most real, the most genuine knowledge; and scientific "truth," the only kind of truth."¹⁸

Bacon was successful in his aim. From his "philosophy" have sprung "helps to man, and a line and race of inventions that in some

¹² Willey, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

¹³ *The Great Instauration*, p. 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁶ Bullough, Geoffrey, "Bacon and the Defence of Learning" in *Seventeenth Century Studies Presented to Herbert Grierson*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp. 2 and 7.

¹⁷ Metz, Rudolf, "Bacon's Part in the Intellectual Movement of His Time," *Seventeenth Century Studies ut cit. supra*.

¹⁸ Willey, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

degree subdue and overcome the necessities and miseries of humanity."¹⁹ But what were the results of Bacon's rejections? Perhaps his suspicion of the intellect and its power to know truth contributed to the criteriological problem. But that took a long time to evolve to its present state, and probably would have done so without any contribution from Bacon. The authority of the Catholic Church had already been rejected. Now, bit by bit, the other parts of the medieval synthesis began to crumble. Those who rejected the authority of the Universal Church were forced, little by little, not by Catholic apologetes who were often notoriously ineffective, but by appreciating the intellectual content of their own position, to question knowledge itself. In these our days we have the spectacle of the agnostic and the solipsist who cry like a child pushed to the ultimate in an argument, "I don't know whether I know or not."

But if Bacon can hardly be held responsible for this, he can certainly be credited with that part of the spirit of Western man today which prefers the analysis of empiricism to the synthesis of rationalism, the *how* to the *why*. Dr. Burt would put Bacon with those who saw life as the end of truth, rather than truth as the end of life, with the English philosophers who think that man exists to do rather than to know. We would put him with his own Pilate who asks "What is truth" and stays not for answer. And this we would do not because we think Pilate shared the speculative skepticism of Rome, that uncertainty of mind which resulted from the current Stoicism and Epicureanism, but because Pilate was a practical man. The first is evidently Bacon's view of Pilate, but the current opinion is a little different.

Pilate was a man of somewhat limited mental capacity and . . . had seen no reason why he should give his name to some philosophical sect or other; he professed contempt for lofty speculations, a contempt shared by many practical men who none the less make excellent officials. "What is truth?" he asked. Whatever it might be, it was something which he thought did not concern him.²⁰

Bacon succeeded in making the mind of man the measure of things; he made Western man Godlike. The result is our modern world, in which there is the perfection of mechanics and the ruin of human life, the atomic bomb with no morality to control it. Lately philosophers and scientists together have been crying out that we need

¹⁹ *The Great Instauration*, p. 18.

²⁰ Lagrange, O.P., Père M. J., *The Gospel of Jesus Christ* (tr. Members of the English Dominican Province), Westminster, Md., Newman Bookshop, 1947.

to recognize metaphysical truth from the standpoint of human sanity as well as from that of science.

Mechanistic determinism, the essential assumption of science . . . has been shown to be a method and not a philosophy, a technique of investigation and not an account of Being. The statements of science, now seen to be abstractions, are generally recognized to be incapable of satisfying all the complex needs of the human spirit.²¹

The needs of the human spirit are truth and goodness and beauty; and goodness and beauty are found only through truth. Bacon had no time for that kind of truth, for the world was amaking, and there was no time or place for the truth that would not help to build. Now that the world, or a great part of it, has been built and is threatened with destruction, perhaps time will be found for a return to the contemplation of truth, which will lead us to the First Truth Who said, "I am the Truth."

²¹ Willey, *op. cit.* p. 21.