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Truth Is a Good

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Philosophers since the time of Plato have spoken about the “transcendental” properties of being – properties that all beings have, such as Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. Something we might learn from this list is that *truth* is a good.

No one wants to be lied to. We want bread; we want the truth. We may even want the truth more than we want bread. The truth is desirable, like beauty. The truth moves us the way beauty does. We are happy when we get the right answer in math or figure out how to solve a problem. But we are also drawn to things that *seem* true but aren’t. These are illusory goods. Pursuing them is like running after a mirage of water in the desert.

Christians believe that the ultimate source of truth is God, since He is the ultimate source of all being, goodness, and beauty. We might describe this as the vertical dimension of truth: truth as it exists in the mind of God. But since, **apart from the important bits we get from divine revelation, we cannot know the mind of God, we must have recourse to what I will call the “horizontal” source of truth.**

We gain knowledge through our senses and by reasoning about the created world. But contrary to the hyper-individualism of thinkers like Descartes, who imagined he could build up a store of knowledge by himself through his own deductive logic, we come to know things in communion with others. We learn by conversing with others and by having our thoughts, presuppositions, and conclusions challenged.

According to Thomas Aquinas – following an idea he found in the works of Cicero and Aristotle – human beings have an inclination proper to their nature to know the truth about the highest things and to live in society. They are related. We gain the truth by living with others.

And we can only live successfully with others if we have a common dedication to the truth. **But a *common* dedication to the truth means that I cannot merely rest in “my” truth. If I want *the* truth, I must be open to correction, and I must resist the temptation to rest in the comforts of an illusory “truth.”**

To fail to do justice to the truth would be an offense not only against my neighbor, but also against God, the source of all truth. We are commanded in the Decalogue not to lie, but we must

also be positively devoted to the fullness of truth. It would be foolish to imagine that this devotion to God and the truth would not require much from us – no patience, no sacrifice, no discipline. It almost certainly will.

In this spirit, let me recommend a book with some useful, practical advice: *May Contain Lies: How Stories, Statistics, and Studies Exploit Our Biases – And What We Can Do about It* ^[1] by Alex Edmans. Edmans reviews some of the biases that divert us from the truth.

One common one is called *confirmation bias*. This is when we accept a claim uncritically if it confirms what we'd like to be true, even if there might be alternative explanations. We also do the reverse: we reject claims we dislike and invent alternative explanations to justify our initial convictions and dismiss contrary evidence. It is common in contemporary disputes that someone who doesn't like information will find a reason to ignore it, while a supporter will view it as the gospel truth.

Not only is bias found in the interpretation of evidence, it is also found concerning what information we gather in the first place. We only look for evidence that confirms our initial hunch and don't dare poke around for something that might contradict it. Studies suggest that more knowledge rarely makes people more aware of the need to consider both sides; rather, it often gives people more reasons to praise opinions they share and deride those they don't.

Edmans perceptively analyzes the different problems that arise when we mistake statements for facts, facts for data, data for evidence, and evidence for proof. People accept statements as facts, even if the information behind them is unreliable or if the statement is broad and vague. (He "lied." They "attacked." They "cared nothing" for the people.)

So, too, people accept a fact as data even if it's not representative, merely a hand-picked example or the result of selective "data mining." (Repeating the details of one horrible crime by an immigrant does not support the claim that all or most immigrants are criminals. Surveys that say "Catholics think x" offer different results when only those who went to Mass the past week are questioned.) Edmans' book is especially strong on the ways people can use data to support nearly any conclusion they favor.

Though people know data can be manipulated, they will still often accept it as solid evidence supporting their preferred conclusion, even if other interpretations of the data exist. An overwhelming number of successful CEOs use deodorant. Does deodorant use account for their success? Many successful people spent 10,000 hours practicing their craft or sport. Does that account for their excellence? Or could it be something else?

So too, even if the evidence can substantiate a proof in one area, does that mean the same things will work in another area? Evidence shows that rigorous discipline works well in the military. Will it work as well in a family?

If we are devoted to the truth, as our devotion to God demands, then perhaps we should take more care not to settle on any of these false, illusory “half-truths” or pass them on to others in our conversations and social media posts.

Did we imagine truth would be easy? That it would always make us “feel good,” puff us up with pride, and feed our sense of self-righteousness? What in Christianity could possibly have led us to think that? **The truth in its fullness is more likely, like God, to humble us and cause us to realize how small our minds and hearts have been.**

Randall B. Smith is a Professor of Theology at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas. His latest book is [From Here to Eternity: Reflections on Death, Immortality, and the Resurrection of the Body](#).

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