# Of Truth

Francis Bacon, translated by Will Fitzgerald

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“What is truth?” asked jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer. Certainly there have been those who delight in giddiness, and count it bondage to settle on a belief, who affect free will in thinking as well as in acting. And though the schools of philosophers of that kind are gone, there remain certain chattering wits of the same vein—though not with as much blood in them as there was in the ancients.

It is not just that finding out the truth is difficult and labourious, nor it is the way the truth has a way of imposing itself on our thoughts, that bring lies to be in favour, but a natural (though corrupt) love of the lie itself. One of the later schools of the Greeks examined the matter and was confused that people love lies, even when they are not made for pleasure (as with poets) or to a gain an advantage (as in business) but solely for the lie’s sake. But I cannot tell. Truth is naked and open daylight that does not show the masks and acts and triumphs of the world half so stately and elegantly as candlelight does. Truth might eventually be as prized as pearls, which is best viewed in the day. But it will not rise to the price of a diamond or garnet that are best viewed in varied lights. Lies even adds some pleasure to the mix. Does anyone doubt that, if we removed silly opinions, flattering hopes, false values, and willful imaginations, it would leave the lives of any number of people poor shunken things, full of melancholy and indisposition, unpleasing to themselves? St. Augustine called poetry the “wine of devils” because it fills the imagination, and yet it is but the shadow of a lie. It is not the lie that passes through the mind, but that sinks into and settles in the mind that does the most hurt, as we have spoken of before.

However these things are in people’s depraved judgements and feelings, truth, which judges only itself, teaches that the supreme good of human nature is the search for truth (courting and wooing it), the knowledge of truth (the presence of it), and the belief of truth (the enjoying of it).

God’s first creature, in the work of the seven days of creation, was the light of the sense. The last was the light of reason, and God’s Sabbath work, ever since, is the illuminiation of the Spirit. First, God breathed light up the face of the matter or chaos, then God breathed light into the face of humanity, and God still breathes and inspires light into the face of God’s chosen. The poet Titus Lucretius (who was the beauty of the otherwise inferior Epicureans) said it so well; to paraphase: “It is a pleasure to stand on the shore, and see ships tossed upon the sea; a pleasure to stand in the windows of a castle, and see a battle and all of its adventures below. But no pleasure is comparable to standing on the vantage ground of Truth (the highest hill of all, and where the air is always clear and serene) and see the errors, wanderings, mists, and tempests in the valley below.” We take this view pity, and not with swelling or pride. Certainly, it is heaven on earth, to have one’s mind move in love, rest in providence, and turn upon the poles of truth.

Passing from theological and philosophical truth to the truth of civil business, it must be acknowledged that clear and honest dealing is the honour of human nature, and that mixing in falsehood is like alloys in gold or silver coin; they may make the metal easier to work with, but they debase its value. For these winding and crooker courses are the goings of the serpent, which goes basely upon its belly and not upon its feet. There is no vice that so covers a person in shame as to be found false and deceitful. Therefore as Montaigne said so well, when he asked why being called a liar should be such a disgraceful and odious charge, “If you weigh it out, to say that someone is a liar is the same as saying that they are brave towards God and a coward toward others.” For a lie faces God, and shrinks from humanity. Surely the wickedness of falsehood and breach of faith cannot be as well express as this: when the last peal to call the judgements of God upon the generations of humanity, it is foretold, that when Christ comes, “he shall not find faith upon the earth.”