Globethics Repository



Nihilism, ethics and the challenge of truth

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Ike, Obiora
Publisher	Globethics.net
Rights	Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International
Download date	2026-11-16 03:41:51
Item License	http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/4011253

15

NIHIIISM, ETHICS AND THE CHALLENGE OF TRUTH

Obiora Ike[226]

"Eziokwu bu ndu" – "Truth is Life"
African - Igbo cultural wisdom

"In a time of universal deceit,
telling the truth is a revolutionary act" *George Orwell.*

"You shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make you free"
Jesus Christ

"In fidelity to truth lies human dignity." – *Michael Novak*

Is Truth Dead?

In the post-truth era, there are schools of thought, lifestyles, opinions, philosophical systems and teachers who tell their young the following:

"There is no such thing as truth or Ethics". "Truth is bondage". "Live as you like". "Believe what seems right to you". "Follow

[226] Obiora Ike, Executive Director, Globethics.net.

your feelings". "Do as you please". "Get in touch with yourself". "Do what is comfortable".

Truth is considered relative. Integrity and credibility are foreign vocabulary.

Are these not the language of the age? And are those who teach the young to live thus not preparing them for jails ahead within the various countries and nations? And are we not near to the conclusion that such teachers who undermine the truth perform the work of tyrants? Fallacious reasoning, when it reaches a critical mass, becomes a mass delusion, for "*those whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad"* as the every logic of destruction is preceded by delusion. It does seem that the age-long understanding of right and wrong, of duty and neglect, of shame and pride and of many certainties are now challenged by nihilism and extreme forms of relativism.

The famous American *Time Magazine* on 3 April, 2017 took to the stage to describe the state of truthfulness in America. It gave a caption for its cover edition titled: "Is Truth Dead?" focusing on the serial lies of its incumbent President Donald J Trump as an example (article by Michael Scherer, pp. 20ff). The newspaper settled on the conclusion *that deliberate and strategic lies to control the national debate undermined the roots and foundations of society* – helping it to a faster precipice. Aware that most societies placed a high value on truth and honesty, in modern societies, people cannot seem to resist falsehoods, from little white lies to vast conspiracy theories.

There were times, when people were sure of their beliefs and the customs of their heritage. They depended on traditional sources of ethical illumination that assured their actions were based on certainties concerning what was good or bad. Today, we live in very confusing times. Our age is confronted by decisions, which previous generations did not have to face. The new socio-technological and pluralistic environments make many look at the old certainties as not really

applicable to modern situations. It is fashionable to question everything under heaven, including oneself.

Traditional answers to thorny questions seem redundant and to make matters worse, widespread misinformation and bias in the fake news era and complete disregard for metaphysical reality makes it even more difficult to distinguish between a lie and a truth, or even between virtues and vices. Such situation is a reflection of something gravely wrong in society – a crisis of values and moral uprightness perpetuated by untruths. It is indeed clear that people wrong about metaphysical and transcendental realities concerning their origin whom we call God, must surely be wrong about physics, the immanent and the ecological domains where humans inhabit.

In the light of the moral diversity and proliferation of ethical dilemmas confronted in every sector and nation, people are not forced to ask the question about what must remain central to humanity. Nothing? Something? What? Could legislations cover these ambiguities of life? Are any ethical principles universally applicable? Which are these? And how do we cope with the contending characteristics of our age, evident in cultural pluralism, rapid social changes, linguistic distrust of authoritarian and centralistic claims?

Each day, media reports inundate readers across the globe with bad news that describe crisis after crisis found in each country, region and sector. These crises are financial, ecological, climatic and technological. They are also rooted in cultural and spiritual, mental and social, political and economic disruptions. It is becoming clear to many that the planet has entered a state of emergency, with an unprecedented risk of damage to humanity and the environment. Global warming and the collapse of biodiversity are having consequences on an exponential scale. These crises are also present in the global governance structures and more substantially, in the family and spiritual domains including fields of

religion and education. Whole regions and groups of the population feel left behind.

Of course, these dilemmas and uncertainties concern people and many are asking:

> "…what can be done? What solutions are available to us that will solve these crises? How can we bring about the practice of virtue, ethics, common sense and adherence to common human values, already inherent in various cultures and traditions that can help people in modern life create the better society of our dreams?"

Focus of Philosophical Reflection

This paper addresses issues concerning the absurdity of the philosophy of nihilism. It explores the essence and central need for ethics and considers the challenges of seeking and standing to the truth, even in a post-truth era. The contribution explores the original essence of philosophy, borrowed from the Greek meaning: "*Philos*" (Love) and "*Sophia*" (wisdom) that has remained a science to provide the intellectual and rational grounding upon which life, thinking and human are grounded. This love of wisdom and search for meaning helps people reflect.

Our conclusion is that even for those unsure whether there is a God, a truth is different from a lie. Vulgar relativism and its subjective culture undermine even the culture of liberty and knowledge which they seek to protect. It is preferable to take a position on an issue than to remain neutral. Indeed, as history records show, neutrality is a betrayal for it allowed slavery, fascism, poverty and various forms of socio-political and cultural stagnations to continue. Therefore, even under conditions of nihilism, fidelity to truth is better than cowardice.

The reflection posits that inner liberty is obtained by remaining faithful to the truth. It underscores the thesis that dictatorship is empty.

That torturers can twist your mind, even reduce you to a vegetable, but as long as retain the ability to say yes or no as truth alone commands, they cannot own you. By accepting torture in the face of its alternative, we have such great names in history, such as Nelson Mandela, Maximilian Kolbe, Patrice Lumumba, Andrew Sakharov, Vaclav Havel, Julius Nyerere and all the great Saints of the religions and the uncountable good names in history books.

It is unarguable that the modern age is confronted by the belief in individual and autonomous freedom, which often leaves little space for social responsibility. Many ideological and philosophical deconstruction theories question everything, making all things relative, while offering few answers or solutions that can guarantee certainty. There is an offer of liberty devoid of adequate duty, of rights and privileges with indefinite quest to have more for the purposes of self-fulfilment. Previous generations did not have to face these situations in this manner.

The 1960's and the de- constructivist theories in philosophy, referencing the works of the Frankfurt school led by Herbert Marcuse, Juergen Habermas and Max Hockheimer continue to influence modern thinking. The tensions experienced globally with a growing lack of certainty on virtually every item of discourse has created a big gap to the much desired inner and external peace which people seek, thus the mountainous problems facing humanity.

The observation remains that the origin of the problem is that much of contemporary society is so confused at accepting or finding orientation, having denied any certainties or truths. The consequences of course are noticeable in the growing forms of nihilism, desperation, depression, unhappiness, doubts and of disorientations prevalent everywhere.

The Philosophy of Nihilism

Nihilism is a word culled from the Latin "Nihil" – which literally means "nothingness".

> It is the "…denial of any objective and real ground or state of truth. The theory that nothing is knowable. All knowledge is illusory, worthless, meaningless, relative and insignificant. No knowledge is possible. Nothing can be known"
> (Peter A. Angeles, *Dictionary of Philosophy*).

The Greek philosopher Gorgias who lived before Christ had propounded an extreme form of scepticism, sometimes referred to as nihilism, which denied the possibility of any knowledge and doubted whether anything existed as nothing can be said to exist. The stronger nihilistic version is that nothing exists. *"If anything did exist, we would not be able to know it, and if we were able to know it, we would not be able to communicate* it" (Peter Angeles, *Dictionary of Philosophy*; p. 25). Scepticism ranges from complete, total disbelief in everything to a tentative doubt in a process of reaching certainty.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher of the 19th century spent much of his time researching and living this idea. His books influenced the period of the Post-Enlightenment in Europe, an era which sought for liberation from religion, authority, traditions and the establishment of the autonomous individual into a freedom "from" but not "for". The works: *Beyond Good and Evil; Thus Spoke Zarathustra; The Will to Power* and *Ecce Homo* remain best sellers even to this day. Nietzsche contested the belief in any truth with a philosophical hermeneutic, arguing that the philosopher should not seek the truth but instead the metamorphoses of the world in the human being. Nietzsche eventually advocated the thinking of suicide as a way to deal with

nothingness[227]. By doing so the person could freely think to end one's life, – without in facts acting so, but on the contrary, postponing every day the same dreadful project, he/she considers the power of a radical hope, the affirmation of life and eternal return to our life.

In a more trivial sense, nihilism in ethics simply refers to the theory "*that moral values cannot be justified in any way; not by reason, by God, by intuition, by consciences or by the authority of the State or Law*". It is therefore equivalent to a psychological and philosophical state in which there is a loss of all ethical, religious, political and social values. In fact, nihilism, perhaps equivalent to anarchy (which it is still not), corresponds to the sceptical denial of all that is regarded as real or unreal, knowledge or error, being or non-being; illusory or non-illusory. In the philosophy of nihilism,

> "…moral values are: expressions of arbitrary and capricious behaviour; expressions of loose feelings and reasonless social conditioning: and they are worthless, meaningless and irrational".

In an earlier work on Friedrich Nietzsche at the International School of Postgraduate Studies in Dubrovnik (which I published later), I distinguished in philosophy between two types of nihilism – metaphysical and political[228].

Metaphysical nihilism is a theory that states:

- The universe is meaningless and without a purpose;
- Human Life and activities are of no value or significance
- Nothing is worth existing for.

---

[227] Editor Note: Nietzsche had a mental breakdown at 44 ending in a dementia with total physical dependence due to stroke. He died at 56 from pneumonia.

[228] Obiora Ike: "Cultism versus Freedom and Learning in Educational Institutions", in *Development is about People, Business is about Ethics*, Obiora Ike (Ed.), CIDJAP, 2003, pp. 97-98.

Political nihilism is the belief that social organisation is so corrupt that its destruction is desirable, sometimes coupled with a form of anarchism's whereby no constructive alternative forms of organisations are advocated. It is my firm conviction that aberrations persistent in our societies owe their origins to these forms of both metaphysical and political nihilism, which extends to the lack of any standards. If only the wise words of Richard John Neuhaus were taken seriously by nihilists: that "culture is the root of politics and religion is the root of culture". One point that many ardent souls of our time most passionately disseminate is what I call "*vulgar relativism*" or "*nihilism with a happy face*". For them, it is certain that there is no truth. Only opinion or point of view matters: my opinion, your opinion. They abandon the defence of intellect. There being no purchase of intellect upon reality, nothing else is left but preference, and will is everything. They retreat to romance of the will. Vulgar relativism is an invisible gas, odourless, deadly that is now polluting every free society on earth.

Nihilism would not be as acceptable as a way of life or even an option. Thus, the further reflection on what is known as reality and naturalism, and whether they were enough to constitute the whole truth about existence and meaning is the challenge for ethics and the truth.

Reality and Real?

We focus on the much used word reality. What is reality? Is it just the personalist or naturalistic view of the physical world, the world of biology, chemistry, and physics? Is reality only matter and energy, space and time? Could we further question if everything in human experiences is just effects of the physical universe, illusions generated by our neural activity?

Naturalism says, yes, that is it – the default explanation for everything we refer to as real, actual, and factual. For within naturalism's worldview, all human beings are merely biochemical

things, despite our consciousness, our consciences and our rational capabilities. All beings are merely things, biochemical things. Nothing more.

Within a naturalistic philosophy, morality is nothing more than custom, a product of historical consensus, which may be amended to suit contemporary tastes and preferences, as is necessary and expeditious. Also, in the absence of fixed moral truths, each person is deemed to be the primary definer of morality for any and of every area of living, in the private domain and in many areas of public life. For if science is the only way to know truth of any kind, that assertion can only be proved with scientific investigation and empirical experimentation. Some people stop with relating truth only to that which is measurable, empirical and real. How do we, who so explicitly and implicitly accept the rationality inherent in the scientific method, miss the certainty inherent in simple rational proofs and arguments?

For example, a tacit tenet of contemporary culture is its implicit relativism ─ the belief that beyond the sciences all other statements of meaning and value are matters of personal perception, not matters of fact. This point of view implicitly rejects reason's rightful role in formulating ideas, developing arguments, and elaborating opinions to sound conclusions. Dr Cronin, F.X makes this argument in his article, published in the Catholic World Report in 2020 where he writes:

> "For the nature of reason and its subordinate science open up reality's true clarity and its deep sophistication to the eager seeker and the sound thinker, to the true lover and the fearless learner. For true reality is a cosmic and contemporary adventure of exploration and application, a temporal and timeless divine gift, an opportunity to live life fully with a joy and a passion that arises not from personality, but from the very nature of reality's truth, its promise and its purpose ". (Cronin, F. X; *The Triumph*

of Truth; https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2020/10/28/the-triumph-of-truth-restoring-reality/)

Cronin argues that

> "if the only reality is the physical one, then there is no way to explain our consciousness or our rational thinking, except to see those as illusions of logic and thinking generated by our brain's neural activity. And this means that reason, so elemental to the conduct and application of science, is nothing more than a mere neural sensation. And that inherent and unavoidable contradiction is absolutely fatal to the assertion that the physical reality is the only real reality".

Other aspects of human nature and experience move toward a more objective designation and a more certain actuality. If we would just think about morality or beauty as some form of objective truth, we would understand generally what was meant by the partner in a dialogue. This was the thinking of the well-known German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. In his two master works: *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Practical Reason*, he argued that transcendental philosophy alone was the sure path to knowledge but needed practical application. This lead to truth as knowable but grounded in practice through an Ethics of Life, beyond simple transcendental speculation. In recent times and arising from the hegemony of science, both of these dimensions have been remanded to the realm of personal perception and preference in the wake of relativism's dominance and the foundational belief in naturalism. But is this really the total truth about reality? The answer for the purposes of this debate is that it is not. It is not even close.

Critique of Naturalism

"*Homo homini lupus" – "man is wolf to fellow man*", so wrote Thomas Hobbes in the Leviathan. As modern "*naturalists*," some blindly believe only science can give us real truth – practical and demonstrable truth. Truth, in naturalism, is confined to the realm of physical things alone. Consequently, all other truth claims of an intangible nature, be they metaphysical or moral or even aesthetic, are relegated to the realm of raw belief with no possibility of real proof. This belief in science's dominance is so silly and irrational, it is hard to find softer and more sensitive ways to describe it. For this belief in science as the sole source of truth is founded on a flagrant and fatal contradiction. For if science is the only way to know truth of any kind, that assertion can only be proved with scientific investigation and empirical experimentation.

Yet, our modern epistemological and metaphysical mind-set is wrong to such a degree and with such frequency, it is all but astounding we miss the scale and substance of it. For the assertion of science's complete hegemony over truth cannot be demonstrated scientifically. This assertion of science's sole explanatory power is grounded not in the scientific method, but in rational argumentation and deductive reasoning of a faulty and flawed nature. When we understand the fatal contradiction of naturalism, reality no longer is mere mechanics, the grinding reduction to physicality of our many human powers and principles. Once we shed naturalism's narrow and false assumptions, reality is liberated from the error of its mechanistic materialism.

In his Essay on "The Triumph of Truth: Restoring Reality, F. X. Cronin arguably states that

> "under naturalism, love and reason and everything else we know and value become neural events of no significance or meaning".

Under naturalism, love isn't love. It's just biochemical activity, an illusory sensation generated by the matter and energy in our brains. Love and reason and everything else we know and value become neural events of no significance, devoid of content, importance, reality. Naturalism means everything is either matter or energy. That's it. *Cronin maintains that*

> "real REALITY, – the reality we know from science, reason and our consciousness and common sense – is a symphony of truths. It is a harmony of truth, physical and metaphysical truth, moral and relational truth, theological and teleological truth. Life has an abundance of truth of a depth and breadth that is intriguing, intelligible and inspiring". (Cronin, F.X; *The Triumph of Truth*, ibid.).

Under a naturalistic philosophy, however, all these virtuous traits inherent to our deepest relationships, and even our superficial ones, are mere social conventions or products of some form of negotiated arrangement between the individuals engaged in such relationships. That is because there truly are no real virtues, no real moral truths, no real reality beyond the physical plane for naturalism's solitary plane of matter and energy within the space and time of the cosmos.

With this new rational grounding, differences of opinion now must be argued and proved – not merely asserted and accepted. All opinion must be subject to the laws of logic and sound evidence. No longer is the individual opinion above evaluation or outside critique. The power of truth moves from the sovereignty of each person to the laws of logic, reason, and common sense. Reason's power is once again the arbiter of truth, not the individual's preference, perception or politics.

Once the single truth of naturalism which is self-refuting is dismissed and reason begins to assume its rightful role in reality, a whole spectrum of truth presents itself for our inquiry and discovery. Because reason is freed from naturalism's singular and limited focus,

logic, reason and common sense can once again uncover timeless truths and find new nuances of understanding and application for these many truths. With the demise of naturalism, our rational capacities also take on their appropriate authority and certainty, without diminishing the nature and role of the scientific method and the truths of the various sciences. Now reason's abilities and applications present enticing and intriguing opportunities to discover truths of many types – and not just more physical truths.

Individuals may have opinions about morality and beauty. But reason now plays a significant role in ascertaining the truth in these broad areas and to the many specific questions comprising them. For once reason is released and restored to its epistemological prominence; our path to truth becomes clear. Not only are our deductive powers acknowledged, but our common sense and our intuitive senses become viable paths to moral truth too. Our many characterological virtues and relational truths such as love and fidelity, sacrifice and generosity, honesty and understanding, honour and commitment provide real standards and sophisticated judgement and application.

Yet the case for science's supposed singular source of truth can only be made with reason, not with empirical experimentation. In light of this fatal contradiction, science's limitations are clearly circumscribed. Science is our way of knowing how the physical world works–its many laws, its order, its dynamics, and its composition. In this realm, it is the predominant method, a powerful path to the truth about the physical world. Understand that science isn't really a separate way of knowing, despite our tacit modern assumptions. It is a composite way of knowing that relies on the order of the physical universe, the reliability of our human perceptual senses, and our rational abilities.

Now, we know we are truly human in the fullest sense. For our full humanity is only ours if we are more than just biochemical machines, more than just an accidental composition of mere matter and energy. For

correcting our faulty epistemology changes everything, and that everything includes all the aspects and areas of life that make human life truly human and magnificent.

Ethics - the Constant Basic Need and Rational Moral Compass for Meaning in Life

The poet and literary giant T. S. Eliot had asked the question a century ago:

> "Where is the life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in Knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

To respond comprehensively to these questions, one must need to bring into the answer the domain of ethics.

Ethics is about life. It is the study and discipline for rational beings to know the distinction between good and evil. Ethics is about doing the right thing, making the right choices, protecting the common good, promoting good behaviour and avoiding harm. Ethics helps to promote collaboration and community coexistence, and is a subject taught within the family, in schools and higher education institutions. Through ethics, young people and adults reconnect with a moral and ethical compass for life by practicing virtue. It is indeed clear that without ethics and values based education, a better world is not possible. Our common challenge therefore is to integrate ethics in education so that people think ethically, govern ethically and act ethically.

Ethics is the rational compass for moral behaviours and for doing good, which is innate. Indeed, rational beings have this capacity. Human beings according to Aristotle are "*animalis rationalis*" – "*thinking animals*". They have the ability to think, and to do good. They can also do evil because they are free to decide with their freewill. Freewill and enlightened conscience can help people choose between right and

wrong. Ethics is the moment that helps build togetherness with a rational platform because of humanity's ability to think. It doesn't have to be a clash of cultures or religions, but rather a search for harmony.

In the 21st century, ethics challenges us to reflect the reality of children who go hungry at night without food, without water, without basic health care and education in a world that can afford basic needs to all. Why should babies in Africa die of Malaria, knowing that we have enough medication to cure the disease? They can't be cured because some people have taken money that belongs to the common good and kept it for themselves alone. The culture of corruption is not sustainable. Ethics teaches us to imbibe principles of solidarity, respect for human dignity, regard for the common good and promotion of all life. When we learn the principles of respect for my own life and the lives of others, we learn to integrate diversity and inclusion. There are challenges to being ethical, especially where vice and lack of knowledge are precedent. But the learning process helps reduce fanaticism. People who do not know tend to be inward looking, holding only to the things they know and resisting such great ideas that open up to a universal human family, irrespective of colour, creed, language and social class.

As is widely known, humanity stands at the crossroad on a global scale. There is this disparity and disconnect due the lack of ethical ingredients in the way human beings think and do things. We seem to have reached a dead end with unethical behaviour and practices leading to dysfunctional societies, climatic disasters, economic-declines and political gridlocks. We see these dead ends in the world of business and politics, in commerce and industry, governance and education, religion and culture, in technology and social behaviours. Thus the confusion, the disorientation and the lack of happiness is noticeable everywhere. We are aware that the centre is not holding any more.

Modern society has brought much noticeable progress to the fields of arts, medicine, agriculture, sciences, longevity, technology and

lifestyles. Yet, people are not happy, and many seem not to find orientation towards ethical values or some rational meaning in anything. Modern society unfortunately has continued to build walls of racial and class distinctions, gender bias and ideological contradictions, which distort a better world for everybody. In the past, people lived on specific values; they knew what to hold onto. There was a difference between a truth and a lie, and children were cultured accordingly. Currently, there is urgent need to re-discover such sustainable values. This disconnect happens when the past is disjointed from the present; when the present is disconnected from the future; when intergenerational transmission of knowledge and values are not happening.

Ethics is the glue that binds humans and their communities with the supernatural realities. In the past, people held onto God. Religion and its values helped orientate communities. Religion remains a traditional domain of the divine guiding communal and individual behaviour. In a growing secularised world, religion is pushed to the margins and even manipulated, thus the gap. There is therefore need to bring consensus around life and around ethics as a moment of unifying focus. This is necessary, because religious, philosophical, educational, traditional and cultural traits contribute to making life meaningful, and thus ethical and valuable. Ethics is a rational moment.

Humans can say yes or no. Ethics helps us do so based on rational thinking. Due to the lack of constant rational reflection before action, or even because of it, people fail sometimes to take a moment to ask: 'why am I doing this?' "What consequences does it have on others?" The market drives you to buy something for the sake of buying something. At such times, passion and the urge to buy drives you. Ethical reflection could help to slow down the act before you act.

Ancient wisdoms teaches that thought and action go together, thus "*sow a thought and reap an act, sow an act and reap a habit, sow a habit and reap a character, sow a character and reap a destiny"* .

The first is the thought. If the thought was values-based in the first place, the end product which leads to destiny shall be values-inclined also. If the thought was faulty in the first place, the consequential action would lead to bad habit.

Education has added value by integrating ethical thinking in the young as they shape the future. The idea of the autonomous individual, which is a philosophical debate in modern society is fanciful but is not compelling. Likewise, current debates promoting de-constructivism as a theory fail to show a human being as tabula rasa. One is always born in a community of others and as the African wisdom teaches: "*UMuntu Ugabantu Mgamuntu*" meaning – "*A human being is human through other humans*". In the rich words of Professor John Mbiti, "I *am because we are; since we are therefore I am*" . This wisdom is applied across life. For example, Arithmetic is a subject teaching the use of numbers, while ethics applies this knowledge to connect humans and all life in the world. The transformation of society through ethical education elevates the quality of education that has values. When we negate ethics, we increase the potential for global crisis.

Thought leadership is the challenge of the 21st century. It needs leaders with rational thinking, moral integrity and ethical standing who work to create a world for everybody.

The Challenge of Truth

African wisdom is known as ancient and primary. The continent is the origin of humankind with the oldest civilisations. It is here that the "*homo erectus*" and the "*homo sapiens*" emerged on planet earth and found their first home. The Igbo culture in modern Nigeria shares wisdom as African heritage and defines Truth as "*Eziokwu bu Ndu*" – "*Truth is Life*". In its extensive meaning, therefore, truth in various African cultures refers to a community attribute which is shared by the

community "Ubuntu", is knowable; touchable, thinkable and even metaphysically imaginable, and serves life in its entirety. To be true is to be both real in the natural and transcendental dimensions. For the African cosmology, which is indeed cyclical (past-present and future), sees the human being as made up of body and mind and soul.

Aristotle's well known definition of truth is found in his Metaphysics 1011b25:

> "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that is not, is true".

The famous philosopher Thomas Aquinas who dominated and influenced Western philosophical thought over centuries with his scholastic method of logic defined Truth as

> "adequatio mentis et rei" – meaning the "correspondence of the mind and the thing". It is a "transcendental aspect of being, which means that everything that exists is true".

In other words, truth is coextensive with being and convertible with being. Yet truth does not add anything to being, in the way an accident (such as colour) adds something real to substance. It is clear therefore, that truth refers to reality, to nature, beyond nature and to transcendence.

The opening lines of the scholastic philosopher and theologian St Thomas Aquinas in *De Veritate*[229], where he quotes Muslim thinker Ibn Sina asserts:

> "What the intellect first conceives as most evident is Being. Knowledge of truth begins with ordinary sensible perception.

[229] The questions on truth, disputed by St. Thomas during his first period of teaching in Paris (1256-1259) are found in the scientific editions by A. Dondaine: *Sancti Thomae De Aquino Opera Omnia*; 22-23. Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate, 22, Vol. 3, Fasc. 1, Roma, Editori di San Tommaso, 1970-1976, 3 vol.

> God in his wisdom made perception of things, as first principle our universal starting point for acquiring knowledge and truth. Whatever knowledge we may infer through reason it must correspond with its basis in the perceivable world. That is especially true for ethics" (St Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*).

The Russian Alexander Solzhenitsyn had this insight in 1970 upon receiving the Nobel Prize and in his address said:

> "One single truth is more powerful than all other weapons in the world: Communism advancing everywhere, truth would prevail against the lie and that those who clung to truth would overturn tyranny".

He was correct and less than twenty years later, it happened with the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. Given the many technological and scientific advances over the last two hundred years, it is startling to consider the stupefying malaise and paradoxical plague that prevents so many of us from seeing the obvious truths of living.

Truth is not merely subjective, not something we make up, or chose, or cut to today's fashions or to tomorrows pragmatism.

> "We obey truth. We do not "have" the truth. Truth owns us, truth possesses us. Truth is far larger and deeper than we are. Truth leads us where it will. It is not ours for mastering. Truth is the light of God within us. In obeying truth, a human being becomes aware of participating in something greater than oneself, which measures our inadequacies and weakness".

How do we, who so explicitly and implicitly accept the rationality inherent in the scientific method, miss the certainty inherent in simple rational proofs and arguments? How do we, who properly employ science to find and apply the truths about our physical world, miss the use and power of our rational and logical capacities, to find truth in the

realms of metaphysics and human nature, in morality and in culture? Such is the inversion and perversion of our modern times.

As someone has said elsewhere:

> "…the real plague besetting modern times is not the many problems occupying our political and cultural discourse. Nor is it class and race, gender and identity, or even liberal and conservative. Our primary problem is simpler than most of us may surmise and more foundational than we may suspect. Yet, it is so obvious, it is a wonder we overlook it".

Our modern problem is a solitary and severe one, yet a simplistic and superficial one. It is a self-inflicted crisis of knowing—an epistemological crisis, a crisis of truth. Derivative from this epistemological crisis, many moderns live with a malignant metaphysical confusion.

But in the realm of the intangible – like our human mind, its rational powers, its common sense, its intuitions, its pre-conscious components – science cannot really help us to determine truth. Truth about life's inherent meaning and ultimate purpose, about morality and beauty, must be pursued through a different method, a different epistemology than science. Truth about human love and brotherhood, about courage and sacrifice, and about justice and freedom can only be found with a more human and humane way of knowing, a more realistic and rational way. For these truths are only known through reason and human experience.

We are challenged to awaken from nihilism and allow the restoration of reality, which is the triumph of truth. Thought and servant leadership with impactful civic engagement, based on honest engagement, with the search for truth and social impact for positive change necessary can make this happen. In an Essay presented by Michael Novak at Westminster Abbey on 4th May 1994, the twenty fourth recipient of the Templeton Prize for Progress in religion wrote:

> "to obey the truth is to be free, and in certain extremities, nothing is more clear to the tormented mind, nothing more vital to the survival of self-respect, nothing so important to one's sense of remaining a worthy human being, no one's log, part of no one's machine and register to death against the kingdom of lies – nothing is so dear as to hold the truth"

Conclusion – Why Ethics Matters for Life and for All – Globally and Urgently

I conclude using the thoughts of James Madison, the fourth President of the USA who died in 1836 to ponder on such questions which bear repetition here:

> "Could there be a free society among citizens who habitually lie, who malign, who constantly cheat, who do not meet their responsibilities, who cannot be counted on, who bribe or corrupt or shirk difficulties, who flout the law or who prefer to live as serfs or slaves, content in their dependency, so long as they are fed and entertained".

Human beings are not the only creatures on earth that do not blindly obey the laws of their nature, by instinct, but are free to choose to obey them with a loving will. Only humans enjoy the liberty to do what we ought to do or not to do it. It is this critical adult liberty that lies at the living core of the free society. This liberty is not the freedom to do what you wish, but the freedom to do what you ought.

In the wearying journey of human history, we have discovered that free societies have been astonishingly rare. Freedom requires the exercise of conscience. It requires the practice of those virtues which we describe as ethics. These are many, but some of them are courage, courtesy, ingenuity, fairness, respect for individual choice with a patient regard for hearing evidence on both sides of the story. The ecology of

liberty is more fragile than the biosphere of earth. Freedom needs clean and healthy habits. Freedom needs particular, entire, rain forests of little acts of virtue, tangled loyalties, fierce lives, and undying commitments. Freedom needs particular institutions and these in turn need people of particular habits of her heart. In the thoughts of Michael Novak,

> "The question for our millennium is whether we can survive the most insidious and duplicitous attacks from within, from those who undermine the ethics and virtues of our people, doing in advance the work of the "father of all lies" – the devil. If one hundred million inner police officers guard a people composed of one hundred million citizens – that is, by hundred million self-governing consciences, then the number of police officers on its streets may be few. For a society without inner police officers, on the contrary, there are not enough police officers in the world to make society civil" (Templeton Prize Speech, London).

It is the liberty of self-command, a tolerable mastery over ones passions such as bigotry, ignorance and self-deceit. It is the liberty of self-government in one's own personal life. For how can people incapable of self-governing in private life prove capable of it in public life? If they cannot practice self-government over their private passions, how will they practice it over the institutions of the republic? *This is why ethics matters, and it matters for all people globally and urgently.*

Bibliography

Aquinas, Thomas, Enrique Alarcón at Pamplona (Ed.). *Corpus Thomisticum Sancti Thomae de Aquino*, Quaestiones disputatae de veritate quaestio, I, https://www.corpus thomisticum.org/qdv01.html, in English translation: https://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/translat/aquinas3.htm

Aristotelis *Opera*, in the original Greek, ex recensione Immanuelis Bekkeri accedunt Indices Sylburgiani, XI Toma, Oxonii, E Typographeo Academico. 1837, http://www.isnature.org/Files/Aristotle/; English trans.: http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0052

Cronin, F.X; *The Triumph of Truth;* https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2020/10/28/the-triumph-of-truth-restoring-reality/

Eliot, T.S. *The Rock: A Pageant Play*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co. 1934.

Ike, Obiora, "Cultism versus Freedom and Learning in Educational Institutions", in: *Development is about People, Business is about Ethics*, CIDJAP, 2003.

Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe Briefwechsel*, G. Colli and M. Montinari (Ed.), 24 vol., Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1975. Access for free: http://www.nietzschesource.org/