



What is Truth? Thomas Aquinas

The question is concerning truth and it is inquired first what truth is. Now it seems that truth is absolutely the same as the thing which is [*ens*], for Augustine says in the book of *Soliloquies* chapter V, that the true is that which is. But that which is, is nothing but the thing which is. Therefore the true signifies absolutely the same as the thing which is.

2. Replying to this, it was said that the true and that which is are the same with respect to subjects [*suppositum*] but that they differ with respect to reason [*ratio*]. But on the other hand, the reason of any thing is that which is signified by its definition. But that which is, is given by Augustine as the definition of the true after he had rejected certain other definitions. Since, therefore, the true and the thing which is agree with respect to that which is, it seems that they are the same in reason.

3. Moreover, things which differ in reason are so constituted that one of them can be understood without the other, wherefore Boethius says in his book *De hebdomadibus* that the divine being [*Deus esse*] can be understood if God's goodness be abstracted for a time by the understanding. The thing which is, however, can in no wise be understood if the true be taken away: for it is understood by the fact that it is true. Therefore, the true and the thing which is do not differ in reason.

4. Moreover, if the true is not the same as that which is, it must be a disposition of that which is. But it can not be a disposition of that which is. For it is not a totally corrupting disposition, otherwise it would follow: this is true, therefore it is that which is not, just as it follows: the man is dead, therefore he is not man. Similarly, the true is not a diminishing disposition, otherwise it would not follow: this is true, therefore it is, just as it does not follow: this person is white with respect to teeth, therefore he is white. Similarly, the true does not constrain or specify the thing that is, since it would not then be converted with that which is. Therefore, the true and that which is are wholly the same.

5. Moreover, things whose disposition is the same are the same. But the disposition of the true and of that which is is the same. Therefore, they are the same. For it is said in the IInd book of the *Metaphysics*: *The disposition of a thing in being is the same as its disposition in truth*. Therefore, the true and the thing that is are entirely the same.

6. Moreover, things which are not the same, differ in some manner. But the true and the thing that is [*ens*] differ in no manner, for they do not differ in essence [*essentia*] since the thing that is is true by its essence, nor on the other hand do they differ by other differences, for it would be necessary that they should agree in some genus. Therefore, they are wholly the same.

7. Moreover, if they are not absolutely the same, the true must add something to the thing that is. But the true adds nothing to the thing that is, since it would then be more than that which is. This is stated clearly by the Philosopher when he says in the IVth book of the *Metaphysics*: *Defining the true we say that that which is is or that that which is not is not*, and so the true includes that which is and that which is not. Therefore, the true does not add to that which is and so it seems to be entirely the same as that which is.

1. BUT TO THE CONTRARY, nonsense is useless repetition. If, therefore, the true were the same as the thing that is, it would be nonsense to say true being; this is false: therefore, they are not the same.

2. Moreover, that which is and that which is good are convertible. But the true is not convertible with the good, for a thing may be true which is not good, as that this man commits fornication. Therefore, that which is true is not converted with that which is.

3. Moreover, Boethius says in the book *De hebdomadibus*: *In all creatures being [esse] and that which is [quod est] are diverse*. But the true follows from the being of things. Therefore, the true is diverse from that which is in creatures. But that which is [*quod est*] is the same as the thing that is [*ens*]. Therefore, the true in creatures is diverse from the thing that is.

4. Moreover, things which bear the relation to each other of prior and posterior must be diverse. But that which, is true and the thing that is are of such sort that, as is said in the book *on Causes*, the first of created things is being; and the Commentator says, commenting on that book, *all other things: are predicated as in-forming the thing that is*, and thus they are posterior to that which is. Therefore, the true and that which is are diverse.

5. Moreover, those things which are predicated in common of a cause and of things which are caused, are one in the cause rather than in the things caused; and particularly in God rather than in creatures. But in God the following four, being, one, truth, and good, are so appropriated that *being [ens]* pertains to essence [*essentia*] one to the person of the Father, *truth* to the person of the Son, *good* to the person of the holy Spirit. But the divine persons are distinguished not only according to reason but according to fact: therefore, they are not predicated of each other. Consequently, in creatures these must all the more surely differ more than in reason.

I REPLY that it must be said that, just as in demonstrables there must be a reduction to some principles known through themselves to the understanding, so too in investigating what anything is; otherwise one would in either case go on *in infinitum*; and thus science and the knowledge of things would perish utterly. That, however, which the understanding conceives first as best known, and in which it resolves all conceptions, is that which is, as Avicenna says in the beginning of his *Metaphysics*, book I, chapter 9. Therefore, all other conceptions of the understanding must be arrived at by an addition to that which is. But something can not be added to that which is as an extraneous nature, in the fashion that a difference is added to a genus or an accident to a subject, for every nature is essentially that which is, and therefore the Philosopher in the IIIrd book of the *Metaphysics* proves likewise that that

which is cannot be a genus. But some things are said to be added over and above that which is so far as they express a mode of it which is not expressed by the name of that itself which is. This is possible in two ways: *in one way* so that the mode expressed be some special mode of that which is. For there are diverse grades of entity according to which diverse modes of being are taken on, and in accordance with these modes, diverse genera of things are taken on. For substance does not add over and above that which is, any difference which signifies some nature superadded to that which is, but rather a certain special mode of being is expressed by the word substance, namely, that which is through itself [*per se ens*] ; and so it is in the other genera. In a second way, so that the mode expressed is a mode generally consequent to each thing that is, and this mode can be taken in two ways, in one way as that which follows each thing that is, in itself; in another way as that which follows each thing that is, in its relation to some other thing. If in the first way, it is said to express something affirmative or negative in the thing that is. But nothing affirmative is found predicated absolutely which can be taken in each thing that is except its essence according to which it is said to be; and thus the word thing [*res*] is imposed, which according to Avicenna in the beginning of his *Metaphysics* differs from the thing which is [*ens*] in this, that the thing which is is derived from the act of being, but the name *thing* expresses the quiddity or essence of the thing which is. The negation, moreover, which is the consequent absolutely to each thing that is, is indivision, and the word *one* expresses this, for *one* is nothing else than an undivided thing which is. If, however, the mode of being is taken in the second way, that is, according to the order of one thing to another, this can be in two ways. In one according to the division of one thing from the other, and this is expressed by the word *something*, for it is called *something* as if *some other thing*; and therefore as that which is is called *one* in so far as it is undivided in itself, so it is called *something* in so far as it is divided from others. In a second way, according to the conformity of one thing that is to anything else, and this can not be unless there is given something which is formed to accord with all things that are. But this is the soul, which is in a measure all things, as is said in the IIIrd book *on the Soul*. There is in the soul, however, a cognitive power and an appetitive power. Consequently, the word *good* expresses the conformity of the thing which is to appetite, as is stated in the beginning of the *Ethics*: *the good is what all desire*. Clearly the word *true* expresses the conformity of the thing which is to understanding. But all knowledge is perfected by the assimilation of the knower to the thing known, so that that assimilation is said to be the cause of the knowledge, just as sight knows color through the fact that it is disposed by the species of color. Consequently, the first comparison of the thing which is to understanding is that the thing which is correspond to the understanding, which correspondence is called the adequation of the thing and the understanding; and the principle [*ratio*] of truth is perfected formally in this. It is this, consequently, which the true adds over and above that which is: namely, conformity or adequation of thing and understanding, and to this conformity, as has been said, the knowledge of the thing follows. Thus, therefore, the entity of the thing precedes the reason of truth, but knowledge is a certain effect of truth. According to this, therefore, it is found that truth and

the true are to be defined in three ways. In one way, according to that which precedes the principle of truth and in which the true is founded, and thus Augustine defines it in the book of *Soliloquies*, chapter V, *The true is that which is*, and Avicenna in the IInd book of the *Metaphysics*, chapter XII, *The truth of any thing is the property of its being which is the stablition of the thing*, and a certain other philosopher, *Truth is the indivision of being that of it which is [eius quod est]*. And in another way truth is defined according to that which perfects formally the principle of the true, and thus Isaac says that *Truth is the adequation of thing and understanding*; and Anselm in the book *on Truth*, chapter XI, *Truth is rightness perceptible to the mind alone*. For this Tightness is so called from a certain adequation according to which the Philosopher in the IVth book of the *Metaphysics* says, that defining the true we say that that which is is or that that which is not is not. And in a third way, the true is defined according to the effect which results; and Hilary defines it thus, that *Truth is manifestive and declarative being*, and Augustine in the book *on True Religion*, chapter XXXVI, *Truth is that by which that which is is shown*, and in the same book, chapter XXXI: *Truth is that according to which we judge concerning inferior things*.

To the first, therefore, it is replied that this definition of Augustine is given of the true according to that which it has as foundation in the thing and not according to that which the reason of the true fulfills in the adequation of thing to understanding. Or it must be added that, when it is said, the *true is that which is*, it is not taken there as it signifies the act of being but rather as it is the name of the composite understanding, that is, as it signifies the affirmation of a proposition, so that the sense is: the true is that which is, that is, when it is said of anything which is that it is; so that the definition of Augustine comes to the same as the definition of the Philosopher introduced above.

The answer to the second is obvious from what has just been said.

To the third it must be replied that for something to be understood without something else, can be taken in two ways. In one way as follows, that something is understood when the other thing is not understood; and thus those things which differ in reason are so constituted that one can be understood without the other. For something to be understood without something else can be taken in another way, in which the one is understood when the other does not exist, and thus that which is can not be understood without the true, because that which is can not be understood without that which corresponds or is adequated to the understanding. But it is not necessary that whosoever understands the reason of the thing which is, understand the reason of the true, just as not any one at all understands the active intellect, and yet without the active intellect man can understand nothing.

To the fourth it must be said that the true is a disposition of the thing that is, not as adding some nature nor as expressing some special mode of that which is, but something which is generally found in that which is but which is not expressed by the expression, the thing which is. Therefore, it is not necessary that it be a disposition corrupting or diminishing or contracting into part.

To the fifth it must be said that disposition is not taken there in the respect

that it is in the genus of quality, but in the respect that it imports a certain order. For since those things which are the cause of the being of others, are in the highest degree things that are, and those which are the cause of the truth of others are in the highest degree true, the Philosopher concludes that the order of any thing is the same in being and in truth, in such wise that where that is found which is in the highest degree a thing which is, that is found which is in the highest degree true. Nor is this so because that which is and the true are the same in their reason, but because a thing is naturally equated to the understanding by the circumstance that it has something of entity; and thus the reason of the true follows the reason of that which is

To the sixth it must be said that the true and that which is differ in reason by the fact that there is something in the reason of the true which is not in the reason of that which is. But they do not so differ that there is something in the reason of that which is, which is not in the reason of the true. Nor do they differ in essence, nor are they distinguished from each other by, opposed differences.

To the seventh it must be said that the true is not something more than the thing which is. For the thing which is, taken in a certain way, is predicated of that which is not, according as that which is not is apprehended by the understanding. Therefore, in the IVth book of the *Metaphysics*, the Philosopher says that negation or privation of being is in one sense called being. So, too, Avicenna says in the beginning of his *Metaphysics*, that discourse can not be formed except of that which is, because that concerning which the proposition is formed must be apprehended by the understanding; from this it is obvious that each true thing is in a certain sense a thing that is.

To the first of the objections to the contrary it must be said that it is not nonsense to speak of true being, because something is not expressed by the word being; not because they differ in fact.

To the second it must be said that although he who commits fornication is evil, nevertheless, according as he has something of entity, he is made to be conformed to the understanding, and the reason of the true follows according to that, and thus it is evident that the true does not exceed nor is it exceeded by that which is.

To the third it must be replied that when it is said, *being and that which is are diverse*, the act of being is distinguished from that to which the act of being conforms. The reason of that which is, however, is derived from the act of being, not from that to which the act of being conforms, and therefore the reasoning does not follow.

To the fourth it must be said that the true is posterior to that which is, in this respect, that the reason of the true differs from the reason of that which is in the manner stated above.

To the fifth it must be said that this reasoning is defective in three respects. First, that although the three divine persons are distinguished in fact, nevertheless, the persons do not differ by their appropriated fact, but by reason. Second, that although the persons are distinguished from each other really, still they are not distinguished really from being, and therefore neither is the true which is appropriated to the person of the Son distinguished from being which is maintained on the part of essence. Third, that although that

which is, the true, the one, and the good are united more in God than in created things, nevertheless, it does not follow necessarily from the fact that they are distinguished in God by reason that they are distinguished really in created things. For this happens in the case of those things which do not have unity in fact from their nature, such as wisdom and power, which although they are one in God, are really distinguished in creatures. But that which is, the true, the one, and the good have unity according to their nature; wherefore, wheresoever they are found, they are really one, although the unity of the thing by which they are united in God is more perfect than the unity of that by which they are united in creatures.

Thomas Aquinas. "The Disputed Questions on Truth" [*De Veritate*] 1.1. Trans. Richard McKeon. *Selections from Medieval Philosophers*. Vol. 2. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930. This text is in the public domain.