In Favour of Truthfulness

Andrew Murray


Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen, and welcome.

Our event tonight is both a public lecture in its own right and the beginnings of a conference that will span the next two days. I wish in seven or eight minutes to introduce both the conference itself and tonight’s lecture.

The theme of the conference is ‘Truth and Truthfulness in Uncertain Times’. Truth is something that most people value but for different reasons. It is seen as a good in itself, as in the medieval understanding of the transcendental modes of being, which see being, good, one and true as co-extensive.1 Truth is also valued for pragmatic reasons, for we soon learn that when we act on principles that are false, our actions fail to achieve their goals. It was Plato, however, who recognised that for action, correct opinion is as useful as true knowledge and that in many of the situations we face, correct opinion is the best that we can achieve, a view contested by the Enlightenment.2 Truth is valued for a third reason that proves to be more problematic, Truth is coercive. In other words, faced with a claim of truth that we cannot refute, we are generally pushed to accept it or to risk looking and feeling foolish. This gives claims to truth political weight, and those who would control us are often ready to marshal such claims to their advantage.

In uncertain times, and we surely live in those now, we tend to grasp more desperately at truth, at least for the pragmatic reason that failure of our actions in moments of adversity exposes us to risk. In this situation, we often forget Plato’s distinction and accept the claims of those who are most forceful in their assertion of truth while failing to seek out those with the best record of achieving correct opinion. This gives rise to various forms of dogmatism and fundamentalism, some of which we will hear about tonight.

Religious certainties can also be deceptive. As far back as Augustine and as recently as the encyclical Fides et Ratio, we find a stream in Christian thought that rejoices in the truth that has been revealed and that remains stunned by its contrast with a world often sceptical.3 While we might rejoice too, we also need to take care that this response is not engaged unreflectively. We should remember with Aquinas and Aristotle that truth has to be achieved and that it is achieved only in the act of understanding of particular intellects.4

Part of the reason for the strong response to the theme of this conference, would seem to be the failures in regard to truth that are part of the current moment. In our political life, we are confronted by people who have not been proved to have told a lie, yet whom we have gradually come to recognise have systematically misled us. The use of devices of speech, such as the counterfactual conditional, that are used to mislead has become common. If I may distort for dramatic emphasis, ‘If we ourselves were the kind of people who threw their children into the sea, we would accept those other among us’, but of course, we are not. The apparent validity of the argument disguises the fact that neither do the people we are rejecting behave in such a gross fashion.5 Similarly, Parliamentary structures have been redesigned in order to obscure. Ministerial Advisors now stand between public servants and ministers enabling ministers to avoid accountability for what they do or do not know.

It is in these contexts that theme of truthfulness comes alive. Although we value it highly, truth is not easy to achieve and those who do best are delicate in their assessment of what they have achieved. Those who are truthful do not simply claim to hold the truth and proclaim it. Rather they accept that truthfulness has two moments – that of seeking the truth in all its difficulty and that of telling the truth with frank recognition of the extent of their knowledge.6
These are some of the themes that will flow through the papers and discussions of the next two days. Forty-two papers will be presented. A number of them will examine responses to conflict and uncertainty and failures in truthfulness in contemporary life. Papers will also investigate the nature and character of truth and truthfulness; truth and action; truth, politics, religion and public life; scepticism and relativism; fundamentalism and dogmatism; stories and myths; lessons of history and literature; human life and happiness. Speakers are drawn from universities and theological colleges and the disciplines of philosophy, theology, classics, the social sciences, literature and history. They come from Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, India and the United States. One of the things we value most at a conference like this is the conversation that arises between people of diverse experience, expertise and interest, who yet share a common humanity. If any of you would like to attend the conference but have not registered, you will be able to do so after this lecture.

I would like now to introduce tonight’s speaker.

Douglas Pratt is Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies and Director of the Religious Studies Program at the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand. He was Visiting Research Fellow at Rippon College at Oxford University in 2005 – 2006. He has eight published books to his name, the last being The Challenge of Islam: Encounters in Interfaith Dialogue, as well as a large number of edited works, chapters and journal articles. He has been involved in various interreligious dialogues, and has worked and published on Christian-Muslim relations since the early 90s. He is currently an Associate of the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at the University of Birmingham and of the Centre for the Study of Religion and Politics at the University of St Andrews. His earlier theological writings investigate elements at the core of Christian belief and practice. His topic is timely, ‘Fundamentalism and Terrorism: The Contemporary Religious Challenge’ and he comes to us well prepared to address this issue.

And so I welcome, Associate Professor Douglas Pratt.…. 

Andrew Murray is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at Catholic Institute of Sydney and was Convenor and Organiser of the Conference.


2 The best discussion of this is in the Meno, where Plato investigates the relationships between ignorance, error, knowledge and true opinion. Knowledge (or philosophy) can only tether opinion to a certain limit. Statesmen need to act according to their best judgement, and they have no time for endless and often indeterminate investigation.

3 Pope John Paul II use the term ‘absolute truth’ twice in his encyclical, Fides et Ratio. It is not clear from where the term came. It is not the same as Thomas Aquinas’s ‘eternal truth’, which rests in God and stands behind human truth seeking (De veritate 1, 5). The term seems to have been first used by Hegel, though it is also used simply and perhaps improperly as the opposite of ‘relative truth’. N. 15 of the encyclical makes it clear that John Paul II is using a transcendental sense of truth. A superficial reading might suggest that this is something to which human beings might have immediate and complete access. The fallacy of equivocation, however, enters in when people shift meanings between transcendental truth and ordinary truth.

‘The truth of Christian Revelation, found in Jesus of Nazareth, enables all men and women to embrace the “mystery” of their own life. As absolute truth, it summons human beings to be open to the transcendent, whilst respecting both their autonomy as creatures and their freedom.’ Fides et Ratio, n 15

‘No-one can avoid this questioning, neither the philosopher nor the ordinary person. The answer we give will determine whether or not we think it possible to attain universal and absolute truth; and this is a decisive moment of the search. Every truth—if it really is truth—presents itself as universal, even if it is not the whole truth. If something is true, then it must be true for all people and at all times. Beyond this universality, however, people seek an absolute which might give to all their searching a meaning and an answer—something ultimate, which might serve as the ground of all things. In other words, they seek a final explanation, a supreme value, which refers to nothing beyond itself and which puts an end to all questioning. Hypotheses may fascinate, but they do not satisfy. Whether we admit it or not, there comes for everyone
the moment when personal existence must be anchored to a truth recognized as final, a truth which confers a certitude no longer open to doubt. ‘Fides et Ratio’, n. 27

4 See Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on Aristotle’s De Anima (II, 4 – 430a2-4) Book III, Cap 3, Leonine, p. 216, ‘intellectum in actu et unintelligen in actu sunt unum’. The understood and the understanding are one in act. The point here is that while much in the world is potentially intelligible and human minds are in potential to understand it, it is only in the act of understanding that things in the world becomes actually intelligible and human minds become actually understanding. This allows Thomas to cut between dogmatism and relativism. There is truth about the world and all that is in and beyond it, but truth has to be achieved. Failure is possible as well as only partial or even vague achievement.

5 The counterfactual is one of John Howard’s methods of persuasion. Another, which may be linked logically is straight out denial of a position more extreme than the one that might be used to challenge him. Some detailed analysis of his speech would be interesting. For examples, see, David Marr and Marian Wilkinson, Dark Victory (Sydney: Unwin & Allen, 2003), passim. A later example is his response to the Federal Government’s High Court win against the States over the use of its corporations power to institute its Industrial Relations Law: ‘It’s not the intention of the Government to interpret this decision as some kind of carte blanche for some massive expansion of Commonwealth power’. The Sydney Morning Herald 15 November 2006.

6 There is a further distinction between the intended meaning of the words said and the effect that they have in the hearer. This is a rhetorical dimension of the question of truth-telling and recognises, as every teacher should, that what matters is how the receiver of a discourse is able to deal with it. The medieval dictum, ‘whatever is received is received in the mode of the recipient’ holds. It is the responsibility of the speaker to engage with the receptive possibilities of the hearer. This relationship is often played with, for instance, in diplomatic language.