

Knowing the Truth in Person: Education as Conversion

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With the “epistemological turn” of the early modern period, “truth” has been understood mainly in terms of “clear and distinct ideas” or “justification of beliefs,” both of which notions, as Cardinal Ratzinger has observed, ultimately reduce to the attainment of data or knowledge of facts.¹ According to the moderns, then, to be *educated* means to be informed of such facts: facts such as, “ $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$,” “the Treaty of Paris, which granted American independence, was signed in 1783,” “hydrogen has the least atomic density of all the elements,” *et cetera*. The worth of education, on this view, is determined by its success in driving certain propositions into its learners’ memories such that, even after the eroding affects of age and antipathy, one can, if need be, recall them on command. However, so understood, truth is extraordinarily impoverished and likewise the kind of education that seeks to impart it.

And yet, truth has not always been so narrowly understood—it has not always been regarded only in terms of knowing facts. For before truth atrophied to its present emaciated form, it was once robust, nourished as it was with the perennial wisdom of the ages. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, representing the *philosophia perennis*, writes that truth is discovered not only “in the intellect” but also “*in the things themselves*.”² In addition to the truth that exists in the intellect, which the moderns dwell upon almost exclusively, Thomas points out that there is, also, what Josef Pieper calls the “truth of things,” that is, the truth of something constituted as a *being*.³ “*Omne ens est verum*: all being is true,” Thomas writes.⁴ Furthermore, according to Aquinas, the ultimate ground of being and truth is none other than Being itself (*ipsum esse*) and, consequently, Truth itself (*ipsum verum*). “[T]ruth is primarily in a thing because it is related to the divine intellect... because it is related to the divine intellect as to its cause...”⁵ To know the truth of things, then, is ultimately to know those things in light of Truth itself, which Truth is, for Thomas, personal because God is personal.

Education, then, insofar as its aim is the learners’ attainment of truth, involves far more than creative, and even jejune, mnemonic devices—it involves the very being of the learner. In fact, it ultimately involves a reorienting of the learner to the truth of things and to Truth itself. Søren Kierkegaard, perhaps more than any other thinker in the modern and post-modern period, was attuned to this fundamental character of education. Thus, under the *nom de plume* Johannes Climacus, he writes that the learner “has to be defined as being outside the truth (not coming toward it like a proselyte, but going away from it) or as untruth. He is, then, untruth.”⁶ If the learner is to come to the truth, then he must first overcome his untruth. Furthermore, according to Kierkegaard, this transformation is only possible through a *teacher* who prepares the learner to

¹ See his *Introduction to Christianity* (1967).

² Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 1, a. 6. “Veritas in creaturis invenitur in duobus, in rebus ipsis et in intellectu” (my emphasis).

³ See Josef Pieper, *Living the Truth* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1989).

⁴ *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, q. 1, a. 4.

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans., Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 13.

receive the truth by bestowing upon him the condition of its reception.⁷ That is, the teacher makes possible an interior *conversion* of the learner's soul towards truth.

In my paper, I explain the above claims in detail. First, taking insights from St. Thomas, I argue that truth is not merely a quality of cognition, but is fundamentally metaphysical or ontological. I then add to this distinction Kierkegaard's insight that education is "conversion," a process that terminates in a personal relationship with Truth itself. Finally, I argue that the role of a Catholic university, if it is indeed to be true to its name, must not simply instill in its students "facts," but the necessity of conversion, and, in turn, an openness to grace.

⁷ Ibid., 14.