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The Right to Truth and Moral Values

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ABSTRACT: The right to truth is an emerging principle in international, civil, and constitutional law, guaranteeing victims and their families the right to know the facts related to serious human rights violations, going beyond mere procedural truth. Truth is no longer understood as a static or transcendent entity, but as a movement manifested through the continuous becoming of things and through their relationships with the world. In law, truth is not an absolute concept, but rather one of a pragmatic and procedural character. Analyzed as a moral principle, truth represents a fundamental ethical pillar that requires sincerity, conscience, and responsibility in relation to reality and to others. This article seeks to clarify the terms of the broad and complex debate concerning the relationship between truth and law, starting even if with some inevitable approximations—from several fundamental points of philosophical reflection, taking into account the impact these arguments have had on philosophy, as well as on the theory of law and Christian morality in general.

KEYWORDS: Morality, Ethics, Testimony, Witness, Virtue

1. Introduction

The theme of truth, understood as a right of conscience, extends across philosophy, ethics, law, and theology. Its central core consists in the relationship between the individual's inner freedom and the necessity of conforming to an objective order or to a higher truth. A classical perspective maintains that the autonomy of conscience is not a subjective invention, but rather the responsibility to submit one's own judgment to truth. Since the time of Plato and Aristotle, truth—understood essentially as a correspondence between thought and reality—has been regarded as an indispensable premise of philosophical inquiry. Plato maintained that truth is found in the world of ideas, illuminated by the Idea of the Good. It is that which is eternal, unchanging, and accessible only through reason. It stands in opposition to opinion, appearance, and the world of the senses. For Aristotle, truth means the conformity of the intellect with reality. This correspondence theory, also called *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, establishes that a proposition is true when it affirms or denies precisely what things are or are not in reality (Disanto, 2026). Since then and up to the present day, reflection upon truth has never ceased: questions have continued to arise concerning truth in its ontological sense (the essence of truth), epistemological sense (the possibility of knowing truth through sensory experience or intellect), hermeneutical sense (truth as interpretation of experience), or pragmatic sense (truth as social practice); whether truth possesses an absolute metaphysical or naturalistic foundation (the existence of truth in itself); whether truth is an ethical principle to be pursued at all costs or rather a utility that favors civil coexistence and is therefore, in certain cases, open to exception; and whether language is adequate to express truth from a semantic point of view, that is, the correspondence between the meaning of a proposition (what we state) and the actual state of affairs in reality (Allegri, 2025, pp.2-3).

Thomas Aquinas argues that truth demands everything, including the involvement of the heart, the body, and other human faculties, especially the will. On the one hand, truth is a

virtue of temperance, because it controls and guides the natural desire for knowledge, which can nevertheless give way to vain curiosity; on the other hand, it is a virtue of fortitude, helping us endure the sacrifices required in the search for truth (D'Aquino, 2013). In the thought of Immanuel Kant, truth is an absolute and unconditional moral duty. According to this Kantian ethics, our actions must be guided by principles capable of becoming universal laws. If lying were to become a universal law, communication and trust among people would become impossible. Therefore, one is obliged to tell the truth regardless of the circumstances or negative consequences. For Kant, telling the truth means respecting human dignity, both one's own and that of the person to whom one speaks (Tagliapietra, 2019). This raises the issue of the legal relevance of the aspiration toward an aletheic society, that is, a society that is not indifferent to the problem of truth and that strives for its pursuit and affirmation, being aware that the proper circulation of information is essential for the formation of consensus and for the justification of political decisions (D'Agostini, 2017).

2. The Right to Truth as a Legal Principle

The right to truth is a complex concept that functions both as a moral pillar and as a legal principle, guaranteeing that individuals and society are informed about facts related to serious human rights violations. From an ethical perspective, it represents the necessity of transparency and integrity, which are essential for human dignity and for trust in institutions. A right to truth, in a general sense, thus appears to impose itself as the common origin and premise of a series of aletheic rights that may be further developed (Celano, 1990). The right to truth recognizes the legitimacy of the desire to know the "full and complete truth" regarding events that have occurred, including information concerning the persons involved, the circumstances in which the violations took place, and the motives that led to the commission of such acts. It is therefore an inquiry aimed at reconstructing what happened, including for the purpose of obtaining justice for the victims of these abuses. Precisely this reconstruction of events is often hindered by acts of disinformation carried out by individuals or institutions responsible for crimes against human rights, thereby compromising the path toward justice (Walker, 2012). The right to truth is closely linked to the right to justice, which entails distinct and autonomous obligations on the part of the state, including the obligation to investigate, the obligation to guarantee victims access to criminal proceedings, and the obligation to proportionally punish those responsible for violations (Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull'Immigrazione, n.d.).

In international law—particularly in cases involving human rights violations—this therefore concerns a form of investigation through which the relatives of victims address both institutions within their own country and supranational institutions such as the United Nations. According to a study conducted by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2006) the right to truth concerning serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law is an inalienable right of the individual; consequently, the state has the duty and obligation to protect and guarantee human rights by conducting effective investigations and ensuring equally effective remedies or compensation. A subsequent OHCHR report identified best practices witness protectionand the safeguarding of other persons involved in trials or investigations (OHCHR, 2009).Furthermore, when a person disappears or dies during migration journeys, their family has the right to know the truth (Walker 2012). In many Latin American states, such as Argentina and Colombia, truth commissions have been established with the task of investigating historical events related to human rights violations.These commissions seek to shed light on what happened, recommend reparations and promote reconciliation.

3. The Moral Value of Truth

If it is true that human reason does not and will never know the truth exhaustively, it is equally true that it can know it gradually; that is, we are not always mistaken (otherwise, we would not even realize that we are mistaken). This possibility of knowing the truth and rising toward the contemplation of ever higher truths is decisive for human life. In order to achieve this, the human beings possesses "two wings", namely reason and faith. These "wings" are never in contradiction, but rather are complementary and mutually supportive; although, evidently, since faith is the acceptance of what God Himself reveals, it allows the understanding of truth in an infinitely deeper way than reason alone could achieve (John Paul II, 1998).

In legal matters, morality has an invaluable role because it influences law through the definition of fundamental values (goodness, justice, and human dignity) that inspire legislation, and through the establishment of ethical principles (such as freedom of conscience) that the law must protect in order to bring truth to light (Belea, 2025, p. 6). "Moral truth" refers to the principles that guide human behavior, especially those of a religious nature. According to Christianity, it embodies the example of Christ and imposes the responsibility of sharing spiritual knowledge (Second Vatican Council, 1965b, n. 11).For the Christian Church, moral truth constitutes the foundation of absolute norms and the link between freedom and universal morality, originating from God. The search for truth represents an interaction between faith and reason, essential for the moral good. Within the context of Christianity, "moral truth" refers to the principles and teachings that guide human behavior and character, especially those of a religious nature.

It embodies the principles of good and evil and is regarded as the generating cause of change in a person's life and character (John Paul II,1993, p. 204). Moral truth possesses an intrinsic power within the human heart, compelling the individual to share it with others and to proclaim it with deep conviction (John Paul II, 1993, p. 204). Moral truth is a key element of the Gospel, and those who possess it bear the responsibility of sharing it, especially spiritual and religious knowledge. It concerns important ethical principles that are often neglected because of the human tendency to focus on superficial aspects of life. These principles may also be acquired outside religion, yet they risk becoming a burdensome yoke and a sterile theory. Moral truth is illustrated through the teachings of Christ and through the example of His life and conduct. Understanding moral truth, embodied by Jesus Christ, is essential for understanding the meaning of duty and the ideal of humanity. The moral value of truth lies in its capacity to serve as a pillar of interpersonal trust, authenticity, and mutual respect. To be truthful is not only a fundamental ethical duty for civilized coexistence, but also an exercise in coherence that defines our moral integrity (Rotaru, 2024, pp. 301-318).

4. To Live in Truth and Justice

To live in truth and justice is a journey characterized by both inner and outward coherence, one that rejects hypocrisy, promotes respect for others, and constantly seeks authenticity in relationships and in life choices. Human beings, by virtue of their dignity as persons, are prompted by their very nature and morally obliged to seek the truth, both in the workplace and in the Church (Catholic Church, n.d. 2467). They are likewise called to adhere to the truth once it is known and to order their entire lives according to the demands of truth. In the Christian tradition, for example, "to live in truth" means to shape one's existence according to love and justice, two virtues regarded as the luminous fruits of an inner spiritual journey. Humanity's inclination to know the truth and to manifest it through words and deeds has been distorted by sin, which has wounded human nature through the ignorance of the intellect and the malice of the will. As a consequence of sin, the love for truth has diminished, and people deceive one another, often out of selfishness or personal

interest. Through the grace of Christ, the Church can guide the Christian so that his or her life may be directed by truth through the cultivation of virtues.

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan in the fourth century (Rotaru, 2005, p. 230), consecrated the four virtues that Plato described in *The Republic* as pillars of Christian ethics and as an exhortation to live in truth and justice. These are wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice, which he reformulated in the Christian context Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance. They remain models of pure living for all human beings who seek to live in truth.

- Prudence, the first of the cardinal virtues,prepares reason to discern our good in every circumstance and to choose the proper means to achieve it;
- Justice, the virtue that brings about the harmony and balance of all the other virtues present both in the virtuous person and in the ideal state;
- Fortitude, the virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and perseverance in the pursuit of the good. It helps one resist temptations, overcome the obstacles of moral life, and conquer fear, even to the point of making sacrifices for a just cause;
- Temperance, defined as the moral virtue that controls the attraction of pleasures and ensures the will's mastery over instincts. It helps us maintain balance in the use of created goods.

5. Bearing Witness to the Truth as a Virtue

In the context of Christianity, the virtue of truth refers to a moral quality that ensures correspondence between one's own expressions and reality, improving individual character and actions. This virtue involves honesty both in speech and in deed, opposing dissimulation and encouraging individuals to present themselves as they truly are. The 'virtue of truth' stands against vanity and falsehood, emphasizing the importance of honesty and reality in contrast to self-exaggeration (D'Aquino, 2014). Every person speaks, acts, and lives in accordance with their character, unless they act toward a higher purpose. A person who loves truth and is sincere when nothing is at stake will be even more sincere when something is at stake; they will avoid lying as something base, since they have avoided it even when it brought no benefit; and such a person is worthy of praise.

Holy Scripture emphasizes the importance of speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Sincerity, like all other virtues, must be lived out of love and understanding toward God and toward people. The virtue of truth has three fundamental aspects guide a person:

a) Sincerity toward oneself: it means recognizing the truth in one's own external and internal conduct—intentions, thoughts, feelings, etc.—without fear of exhausting the truth and without closing one's eyes to reality (Rotaru, 2015, pp. 318-322).
b) Sincerity toward others: human coexistence would be impossible if people did not trust one another, that is, if they did not tell the truth or did not act accordingly, for example, by failing to respect contracts or, more generally, agreements and one's given word (Catechism, 2469).
c) Sincerity toward God: Sincerity is the path to growing in humility ("to walk in truth"). Like all other moral virtues, simplicity and sincerity, in order to be authentic virtues, must be guided by prudence (Catechism, 2469).

The testimony of truth is an act of justice that is demonstrated or made known through faith. This view of testimony actually reveals an inadequate relationship with truth and freedom, an inability to integrate into the fruitful cycle of successfully putting them into practice in our existence. The rediscovery of the Christian meaning of truth and testimony has the merit not only of bringing to the forefront a fundamental dimension of faith and spiritual existence, but also of contributing to the rebuilding of a culture marked by division and threatened by disintegration. The Christian perspective emphasizes the intrinsic link between testimony and truth and its constitutive

martyrological dimension. Christians have the duty to bear witness to the truth which is in Christ. Therefore, they must be witnesses of the Gospel with clarity and consistency, without hiding their faith. The opposite—simulation—would amount to being ashamed of the truth and of Christ, who said: "Whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:33). Knowledge of God's laws implies stability, contentment, peace, and a heart full of love, directed toward one's neighbor, offering him the same benefits and privileges.

Conclusions

The right to truth is an evolving principle that emerged in international law in order to protect victims of serious human rights violations, and today it occupies a central place within modern democratic systems. The complex system of values implied by the concept of truth is therefore correlated with a series of fundamental rights and principles already enshrined in international normative sources. More precisely, this initial formulation of the right to truth refers, in its first dimension, to the right not to be subjected to torture and ill-treatment, recognized to the relatives of victims of disappearances, and, in its second dimension, to the right to reparation. At the same time, truth lies at the foundation of trust, justice, and personal development. The authenticity of Christian life is reflected in sincerity toward others. For Christians, bearing witness to the truth is not merely a simple recommendation, but a genuine moral and spiritual duty.

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