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Prologue

Quid est veritas? What is truth? Often, this question and the answer have been obscured or trivialized, but its importance is paramount. Indeed, our entire life depends upon this query, or rather on its valid answer: the world revolves around it as if on a hinge. If we cannot with certitude attain knowledge about the world around us, we would be surrounded by images as bleak as the shadows of Plato's cave. Even the speech of the freed man who comes back to us to communicate the nature of the light would be an irrelevant symphony. The path of human existence is the path of seeking truth, loving it, and contemplating it in order to achieve eternal happiness.

God, through His Son, the Logos, created this world in an outpouring of Love, and placed man in it to glorify His Creator and share in His joy. Its manifold mysteries, its hierarchy of being, its beautiful design and unified order, though often veiled by the mark of original sin, propel man's sense of wonder back to the One who Is, the Alpha and the Omega, as St. Paul attests: “For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.”¹ The uncreated Logos empowers us to understand our imperfect speech, as well as the meaning of existence itself, that is, to know the Logos and love It.

Ever since man was set upon this earth for that noble purpose, he has been endowed with the powers of speech to enjoy communion with others. The seed of love within us compels our soul “to will the good of the other” and, more perfectly, to

¹ Rom 1:20.
be in union with our beloved. And what better way than to employ the greatest faculty granted us, our soul’s intellect, which is the *Imago Dei*, the image of God Himself in us? This power of language connects reality, which is independent of us, to our soul in its proper understanding, which then bears the fruit of communication with others. Man is a social animal, said Aristotle. Communication, then, is a vital power for our proper, healthy, and reasonable relation to other individuals, to society at large, and even to God. If it is corrupted, the domination of the will will ensue, where might makes right. What, then, is the nature of this power? How can and do we use it for our betterment? What are the possible abuses, and what are the ways of averting them? This exposition shall attempt to arrive at answers to these questions, notwithstanding the limitations of both this paper and its author.

**The beginnings of communication: knowledge and truth**

Aristotle says: “All men desire to know,” and all men of right reason may agree. What is knowledge? The *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas will guide us in this section and provide the main points of discussion. I possess knowledge of an aspect of reality, by forming an idea of it in my intellect, and have thus comprehended it: this may be called an intellectual creative act. Now, since all knowledge begins with the senses, it is necessary that we trust these – indeed, if this truth is denied, that is, if we take up a skeptical position, a most absurd conclusion follows: there is no reason for anything, because we could not know

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2 See *Summa Theologiae*, Ila-Ilae.23.1.
anything, and doubt would overshadow and oppress all our actions. Our experiences and right reason tell us otherwise, and so we abandon this thesis as quickly as possible. Then, it is manifest that what we experience is really there, to be experienced by capable beings. But the world must exist first, before it is experienced: I cannot drink water from a cup if there is no water. Philosophy calls this the First Act: Being, without which nothing exists. But anything that is, had to come into being from God who is the Ultimate Being, whose Essence is His Existence: “I Am Who Am,” as St. Thomas Aquinas explains in his proofs of God’s existence. All reality proceeds from Him, and finds its fulfillment in Him: Christ is the exitus and redditus, the source and return of all creation, not just human beings. Reality crumbles and life loses its proper meaning when we turn away from Him who is the cause of our and all creation’s being. Moreover, He emanates truth, goodness, and beauty, showering us in the same, guiding us towards our perfection and the more perfect knowledge of Him. That is our duty: to “grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” for He is “the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.”

Truth is independent of us. This fact opposes many modern errors, which often claim that truth is whatever we wish it to be, that it is relative to our own understanding of it, or that our will determines what truth is. How far removed this is from reality may be seen in multiple ways: for example, when I observe a branch swaying on a tree without a visible cause, I cannot make up the reasons why this is:

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3 See Summa Ia.2.2, as likewise for this whole section.
4 2 St. Peter 3:18.
the wind is the cause of the swaying, and this is independent of my desires. My will in itself does not determine whether the branch sways or not. I, by an act simply of willing, am not the cause of the swaying, and similarly, I cannot effect the cessation of this action. Natural law, a reflection of Divine Law, tells us that murder is inherently wrong, and it is not possible for us to change it. The Greeks knew this 23 centuries ago, for Antigone says in Sophocles’ play: “The unwritten laws of God that know not change. They are not of to-day nor yesterday, But live for ever.”\textsuperscript{6} The Catholic Faith affirms this; moreover, these mandates are set in stone so that those in error recognize them clearly and correct their false beliefs. It would be an unhappy world if adultery, murder, stealing were commendable and protected under law. These laws are defined for our own benefit. Thus, we understand that even in ethics, these mandates are not subject to our whims. Knowledge and belief are not the same: there may exist a false belief and a true belief, but a false knowledge cannot, as Socrates points out in \textit{Gorgias}.\textsuperscript{7}

After our senses experience any aspect of the world, our cognitive faculty, the intellect, processes it for our understanding of these realities. This is the Second Act. Truth, then, consists in the apprehension of being insofar as being/reality is made present to the intellect in the same fashion that it exists outside the intellect. Our intellect unites an aspect of reality and our beholding of it by forming an idea/concept/image in our minds. For example, by focusing on a tree with my eyes, I comprehend what it is and make it present to my mind by way of its idea. The tree,

\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Antigone} 498-500.
\textsuperscript{7} At 454.
in a sense, becomes part of me, because its idea is present in my intellect, which is said to be true to the extent that it corresponds to the real tree itself. There must exist a proper intellectual relation between the object and its concept in my mind.

But how can we be certain that this relation is true absolutely, that is, whether the idea really corresponds to the reality that generates it? Whence does this awesome power of judgment come to be in our fallible reason? Or, as St. Augustine asks: How can our fallible reason attain to such infallible truths as 3+4=7? The answers are found, literally, in the Ultimate Cause of All Truth, God Himself, Who for Plato represented “the Good,” where the perfect Ideas reside. God is the Source of all ideas, who comprehends them perfectly, and who is the True standard whereby all ideas are judged. Further, man, created in the Image and Likeness of God, that is, as possessing a soul (with an intellect) and free will, may comprehend an object or universal because of this Divine reflection in him. Still, as a result of our fallen nature, our intellect may err, and increasingly so the farther it is removed from God’s Light. By participating in the Divine Illumination, by employing our reason properly, we come to attain knowledge of reality, a true correspondence between a thing and idea, and the natural operation of a rational being.

In sum: reality, God’s creation is established in relation to the ideas found in Him. In this sense, creation is said to be true as it corresponds to the ideas within the Divine Mind. Our senses experience this reality, after which our intellect first apprehends these ideas, and then understands them (knows them more perfectly;
being precedes cognition). We attain knowledge when these ideas formed in our minds correspond accurately to created reality, and ultimately, to the Ideas in the Divine Mind. As St. Thomas puts it: “What is true is in the intellect insofar as it is conformed to the object understood” on an individual human level, while absolutely, that is, with respect to the Divine Mind, truth “exists insofar as it is related to the intellect from which it depends.”

How, then, can we communicate these ideas? When do we speak truth fully? Is it possible to communicate a falsehood? The answers to these questions arise from reflecting on the process of communication and language.

**Words and communication**

St. Thomas provides a summary of what constitutes “word.” Vocal sounds become words when they signify a concept of the intellect (an idea), which should correspond to reality. Words are conventional signs that we use to point to this reality in the mind, and they “are said to be true so far as they are the signs of truth in the intellect.” As explained above, the cause of this truth is the being of a thing, experienced by the senses, then apprehended and made present to the mind through the idea. “Word” itself signifies four things: first, the interior concept or idea apprehended by the intellect; second, the spoken word (vocal sound) that can be understood by another and which points to this concept (meaningless noise is not

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8 *Summa*, Ia.16. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Gwendolyn attaches too much value to the name of her man, but not who he is, what he really stands for, or what virtues he possesses. The word itself does not matter by itself, if it does not point to some reality.

9 Ibid. la.34.

10 Ibid. la.16.1.
considered a “word” proper); third, the interior or imagined vocal sound, such as the words produced when silently reading; and fourth, the metaphorical signification, that is, the word represents the deed or action to be effected by it, for example, in the command “to do his word.”

The first three point towards the reality that the word signifies and so are related to each other. Thus, words may be called “pointers” or “signs” of these realities as a consequence of these definitions. The fourth sense is a metaphorical one, which nevertheless contains the aspect of pointing to a reality: by carrying out one’s word, we are meant to effect that which this “word” consists in. In this way, at the Annunciation, the Blessed Virgin Mary consented to the Will of God, manifested in the Angel’s words, by replying: “Be it done to me according to thy word.”

In this paper, concerned with communication and language, “word” will primarily signify the spoken sound which points to the idea in the speaker’s mind. However, since other forms of communication, such as sign language, may also signify concepts, the analogy still holds, for they also consist of communicable “signs” when they point to a concept that is to be communicated. Then, since truth consists in the conformity of idea and outside reality in the speaker, this relation should be extended to that which is spoken or signified, in order for communication to exist, since this is the appropriate function of “word.” Naturally, then, communication occurs when a reality is comprehended and transmitted to another

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11 Ibid. 1a.34.1.
person, to the extent that this is possible or expedient (considering the listener’s condition, the type of exposition, the time requirements, etc).

Before moving on to some reflections about the systematic organization of words into language, a technicality should be resolved. The conformity of an idea signifying an aspect of reality (one that exists, i.e., possesses being) presupposes that aspect’s existence (First Act vs. Second Act) and this relation is called truth, while being alone does not constitute “truth” per se. Hence, Aristotle states that “a word is true from that fact that a thing is, not because a thing is true.”¹³ Truth is the intellectual principle that relates the object and its idea, and judges, as it were, whether the two correspond to each other. In this meaning, our senses do not know truth, for they cannot judge the relations between the object and its idea – senses only sense that which exists, while the next step involves ordering and judging this information attained by the senses, which belongs to the intellect. On a different scale, this is the proper business or function of a wise person, according to the Latin sapientis est ordinare et iudicare: it is of the wise man to order and to judge. This is a closely intertwined process such that the various actions of sensing, apprehension, and their relations, cannot be separated in ordinary circumstances, since all this is brought together in an individual intellectual act, and further, in communication, when the result of this process is transmitted to another person.

Now, language consists of a vocabulary of words (verbal language is meant here, though any of its various non-spoken forms applies as well) which designates ideas in the mind. These ideas do not always signify tangible (material) objects

¹³ Quoted Summa Ia.16.
experienced by the senses, but also include principles and concepts that can be reasoned from them (ideas such as justice, mercy, goodness, law). The variety of created things and their qualities, as well as the abstract realities that are employed in daily life, necessitate a complex system of language: hence the variety of words and their multiple, related meanings. A detailed, complex, and highly inter-related vocabulary reflects the created world in its complexity and depth, and allows for meaningful, enjoyable, and accurate discussion.\footnote{In this sense, since languages are intrinsically tied to the culture that formed them, they are also a repository of culture, and in a sense, can inculturate those who assimilate it by a largely unconscious process.}

The act of signification reaches its fulfillment in relation to the recipient, another rational being who “receives” the word. Consequently, communication consists in the transmission of knowledge by words (or signs) to another person. We begin a dialogue, discussion, or debate.\footnote{Dialogue will be used to signify all these in most instances of the word used here.} The very nature of man as a social, rational animal requires that proper communication take place, without which society could not be established and could not function well. It would be bleak speculation indeed to reflect on the state of life if language ceased to communicate truth. Nevertheless, numerous such tendencies exist that manipulate culture by corrupting language and obscuring truth. In its nature and fullness, language is meant to communicate truth, and only truth: anything else would be anti-human, that is, a perversion of the nature and purpose of language.\footnote{Ironically, this is the exact understanding of language by the Houyhnhnm, the reasonable horses, in the fourth part of Gulliver’s Travels. See Part IV, Chapter 4. These creatures even had difficulty comprehending anything in excess of this.}

These spoken words “echo,” if you will, our intellect and the inner state of our soul. Thus, we say that vulgarity in words grows from a vulgarity of the heart, even
if formed by habit, for habit had to be willfully formed earlier (though its familiarity depletes its negative effect: habits are often done instinctively, and are not fully premeditated actions). Before simply uttering a vulgar phrase, we have already conceived of the notion in our minds and have stained our soul. But by uttering these words, we “infect” others, as the Houyhnhnm in *Gulliver’s Travels* said after Gulliver related to him the great advances of contemporary European warfare: “He [the horse] thought his ears being used to such abominable words, might by degrees admit them with less detestation. [...] He dreaded lest the corruption of that faculty might be worse than brutality itself.”\(^{17}\) Conversely, we assimilate the language we are exposed to and sully our soul by listening to debased speech. On the other hand, edifying and graceful thought manifests itself in the words we (as speakers) choose, and pour forth, as it were, a stream of golden speech that may resonate in the mind of the listener to uplift him as well.

But words are not just echoes of our intellect. There is a creative power to the word, a power to effect a change in nature. However, creation is too strong a word for this, since it implies an “ex nihilo (out of nothing)” operation, proper only to the Creator, while most of us are aware of our limitations in that regard. The term is, then, metaphorically employed, suggesting the power that God gave to Adam, for example, to name all the animals. The most important and profound example of the power of words occurs at the most solemn part of the Mass, at the Words of Consecration, when the substance of bread and wine is changed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ: the Transubstantiation. In the Mass, simply by pronouncing

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\(^{17}\) *Gulliver’s Travels*, Part IV Chapter 5.
these Sacred Words, the Priest “effects” the change, an extraordinary cooperation of man in the miraculous work of God through language. On a much smaller scale, by employing our faculties already inherent in us, we “create” or form words that represent realities that we have cognized. But once a falsehood severs this relationship, the relationship between reality and its presence within us signified by the word, it is not wholly inaccurate to say that creation is undermined, and a de-formation is aimed at, or at least passively implied. We will come back to this later.

Finally, verbal abuse demonstrates the powerful effect of words. By their nature, words properly speaking only address the immaterial aspect of the human person. A word cannot break a bone, but it can break a heart. Our speech can hurt more than actions, exactly because it affects the more relevant realities than just the pure senses. More directly, it influences the inner psyche (the soul), and its balance, often more important than the state of the body.

**Abuses of communication attack truth**

Let us now investigate the possible abuses of communication and words that can take place, and their gravity, in order to learn to guard against these. For truth itself is destroyed by such abuses—*corruptio optimi pessima*—the best, corrupted, becomes the worst. The corruption of truth into falsity constitutes a denial of reality, and a substitution of an usurping false “creation.” This is important to realize as it affects many areas: definitions, proper interpretations of texts, and
correct translations, all of which are necessary for the development of true science (because, as G. K. Chesterton would say, error is often a matter of emphasis, while finding the mean is a virtue). Heresies have origins in wrong readings of texts (hence, an authority is necessary), while mathematics, any natural science, or even the study of music would be chaotic without strict definitions. Even a small aspect may have a profound effect. For example, at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., the Christian bishops, in discussing Christ’s Nature, fought over a single letter in the word *homoousios*. If an *iota* ($ι$) was inserted between the double O, it would signify that Christ was of *like* substance with the Father, while *homoousios* truly indicates of *one* substance with the Father. By resisting the addition of a single letter, the true Trinitarian doctrine was affirmed, namely, that Christ is God, just like the Father (and Holy Spirit). All subsequent Christian theology has been affected by this word.

If we employ words precisely, still, what about the moral aspect of using words in their true sense? Do not abuses in communication ultimately depend on willed misrepresentations of reality? The virtue of truth, says St. Thomas, consists in the conformity of that which is signified (spoken) with that which is known in the heart. We thus honor truth by using appropriate words as tools or pointers to signify that which is. It may be called “courting truth,” just like philosophers are said to court wisdom by a humble, worthy, and honorable approach to the noble things they wish to contemplate. The virtue of truth stimulates us to a proper ordering of life by making it simpler, clearer, and more livable, for ourselves and in
our relationships with others. Simplicity is appropriate here, because “it rectifies
the intention, not indeed directly […], but by excluding duplicity, whereby a man
pretends one thing and intends another.”

Likewise, hypocrisy, simulation, and false witness have no place in a just,
happy life, one that works for the good of the individual and the common good.
Justice demands the donation of that which is another’s due, and so only truth
should be given to another. This is clear at the natural and supernatural level, first,
because it is necessary to the proper function of society for humans to communicate
truth to each other (in law courts, for instance), and second, the Divine Precepts,
given for our own good, command us to utter the truth to others.

Furthermore, it is just to speak the truth by communicating that which is
due to another. H. Wendell Howard, in “The Stewardship of Words” recalls how two
professional literary public presentations referred to an earlier paper about a
concept in Joseph Conrad’s work that was based on a misreading of an already
“carelessly edited edition of Heart of Darkness.” “Varnished” was misread as
“vanished,” while the corrupted text read “spirits” instead of “sprits.” “So a
paragraph in which Conrad talked of the quite tangible ‘varnished sprits’ of boats in
the Thames produced an unsupportable concept of ‘vanished spirits’ in the mind of
an overzealous and careless interpreter.” The speakers (two!) then spread this
error by incorporating the idea into their respective studies, now totally based on a
false theory. Howard states that “intellectual integrity demands particular care of

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18 Summa, Ila-IIae. 109.
19 Howard, 4.
statement or argument because the words used become in the reading or in the hearing a part of who one is.” 20 Here, justice demands that the audience, comprised of human persons, be allotted their share in reality, especially since the discipline requires that facts be true. In the same way, daily speech should also accurately reflect the reality we describe, in order to share truth with others.

Besides justice, speaking truth is an act of charity, when we speak in order to be understood and not to deceive. In a healthy society, this must be accepted and fostered. When communicating, we need to consider our speaker, understand our relationship, and proceed with speech in order to communicate truth and be understood, since we speak differently to a little child than to our parents. Charity asks that we judge the condition and status of the person to whom we speak, and then communicate accordingly, again, in order to “honor” wisdom, justice, and charity. Usually, we ascertain our relationships immediately (out of habit), but often regret an uncouth phrase that escapes our lips as acts of injustice and a lack of charity.

We may observe these violations more clearly when these hierarchical relations are abolished. Modern pseudo-fashions suggest that we level the playing field and raze all proper social conventions, for example, that children become parents, and students teachers. Everyone’s opinion matters and we speak of everyone as our “buddy.” However, it is clear from experience and reality that this is not in accordance with our nature, and we do not naturally behave in this fashion. Reflecting upon nature and the Divine Law, it is clear that a hierarchical

20 Ibid., 7.
order exists, one that does not deny the dignity of another human being as such, but without which society could not function. Not all dialogue is created equal. Otherwise, pure chaos would result if students taught teachers, if children educated parents, or if the inexperienced governed the people. We notice that authority demands proper respect which should be instilled at a young age; otherwise, what laws will the young follow when grown up? Human societies throughout history have recognized this and have maintained some morality, not to curb freedom, but in order to cultivate virtue by separating a person from false passions and weak behavior which deform their nature as human beings.

Before we discuss in detail the abuses of communication, specifically lying, hypocrisy and dissimulation, and sophistry, we recall that in order to speak truthfully, we must maintain proper order with respect to three things: first, that our knowledge be ordered according to reality; second, that what we communicate be ordered according to our heart; third, that what we speak or signify correspond to our subject, as a human being.

Specific misuses of communication

The first and major violence against truth is manifested in a lie. When our speech does not conform to what is in our hearts, that is, when we intentionally misrepresent to another what we know to be the case, this constitutes a lie. But what if our original notion is incorrect? Can we call this a lie? As said above, truth exists in the intellect when the idea in the mind corresponds to the object itself. If it
does, we call this (right) knowledge. However, because we are not perfect, we may either be deceived by our senses (as in a mirage), or our fallible intellect can fall into error concerning the idea itself, and this cannot be properly called knowledge, since it does not correspond to the Ultimate Ideas in the Divine Mind. It is rather a false belief. Yet, if what is believed to be true is communicated as true, in light of the above definition of truth, a lie formally speaking does not take place (when the person is in invincible ignorance) because strictly speaking, an equality exists between that which is spoken and that which is understood. Human society requires a reasonable degree of trust and faith.

The vice of falsity or lying develops when we habitually and willfully speak an untruth in order to deceive. St. Thomas writes:

Accordingly if these three things concur, namely, falsehood of what is said, the will to tell a falsehood, and finally the intention to deceive, then there is falsehood—materially, since what is said is false, formally, on account of the will to tell an untruth, and effectively, on account of the will to impart a falsehood. However, the essential notion of a lie is taken from formal falsehood, from the fact namely, that a person intends to say what is false.21

Lies, then, may be divided in three ways: with respect to their nature, their magnitude, and in a more general way, their relation to some end.22 According to the first, lies may go beyond truth to become boastful, or stop short of truth to become irony (false humility). According to the second notion, lies, most grievously, may tend to another’s injury (the mischievous lie), or to give pleasure or entertainment to another (the jocose lie), or in order to help another (the officious

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21 Summa, Ia-I, 118.
22 Ibid, article 2.
lie). The third division classifies lies according to their weight, and is enumerated in St. Augustine’s treatise “On Lying.”

The first division separates virtue from vice insofar as the vice strays from the mean by excess or defect. The former notion occurs when, while intending to exalt ourselves and glory in pride, we boast of our deeds by ceasing to speak the truth about ourselves. In all moral acts, the matter and the intention need to be considered. Presently, though self-exaltation may not always be evil, the use of a lie is never permitted, and constitutes a sin. The latter notion occurs when we try to belittle ourselves by appearing humble and uttering an untruth about ourselves, though in fact the motive is again to glory in pride through a false humility. Again, it is no evil to speak truth of oneself, but it becomes evil once this action is opposed to the proper manifestation of truth. Hence, Pope St. Gregory says: “It is a reckless humility that entangles itself in lies.” And St. Thomas sums up this division well with a story about St. Augustine: “It is related [of him] that he was unwilling to possess clothes that were either too costly or too shabby, because by both do men seek glory.”

The second division distinguishes lies according to the intention, into the mischievous, the jocose, and the officious lie. The first intends to harm another, a direct violation of the Law of Charity. A lie infused into a joke may be shrugged off

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23 On Lying, XIV. Augustine distinguishes many abuses of the virtue of truth, and notes the many paths that lead away from the true road. Yet we must take the straight path, perhaps like the Elves in the Tolkien’s mythology: once the sorrows of Middle Earth are overcome, they were granted the privilege to leave its shores and sail on the “Straight Way” to a different world, the “Blessed Realm.” If we study the ways that lead away from the straight path, we shall understand how to avoid them, and proceed to our “Blessed Realm.”

24 Summa, Ila-Ilae. 113.

25 Ibid.
lightly, if no deceit is meant and it is obvious, but when an untruth is uttered nevertheless, a privation exists, and it does not constitute a good act, which must be wholly devoid of any privation. Similarly, an officious lie, meant to effect a greater good, cannot be defended. “The ends never justify the means” is a well-known maxim, and applies directly to situations such as these. If but once a justification creeps in, law loses its power and becomes arbitrary. A single lie undermines the authority of law and truth, as St. Augustine says in “On Lying.”

In this light, Aristotle’s views on the truthful man are appropriate:

The man who in the matters in which nothing of this sort [i.e., specific contracts] is at stake is true both in word and in life because his character is such. But such a man would seem to be as a matter of fact equitable. For the man who loves truth, and is truthful where nothing is at stake, will still more be truthful where something is at stake; he will avoid falsehood as something base, seeing that he avoided it even for its own sake; and such a man is worthy of praise. He inclines rather to understate the truth; for this seems in better taste because exaggerations are wearisome.

People have always praised truth in speech and action, but this praise should always be a result of uprightness, not its cause. Today, modern fashions often overlook and disdain truth, sometimes even proposing lies as necessary. In addition, skill in words is on the decline too: Chesterton’s stories at seventeen could be

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26 On Lying, XI.
27 Once Saruman’s white cloak was fashioned to subtly reflect a whole spectrum of colors, it became more brilliant, but was no longer white.
28 Ethics IV, 7.
mistaken for his much later writing, and this was barely a hundred years ago: it shows that a lessened awareness and respect for the complexity of reality diminishes one’s capacity for expression. There is no need to mention the greats of other times. Currently, the bestseller lists include diet books, self-improvement guides, and politicians’ memoirs (much inferior to the rhetorical prowess of the ancient, mediaeval, even early modern statesmen).

Since truth consists in the relation between a signifier (i.e., the word, but ultimately the concept) and the signified (i.e., the thing itself), a lie may be called “an act of ontological violence,” insofar as it tries to bring something into being which does not exist, a mockery, so to speak, of God’s Person, His power, and His creative act. This results in the creation of a false world, one subservient to the motives of the speaker. A lie, then, cannot properly be called a mode of communication, according to Josef Pieper:

A lie is the opposite of communication. It means specifically to withhold the other’s share and portion of reality, to prevent his participation in reality [...] This is, in Plato’s dialogues, the constantly repeated lament and accusation [against the sophist...]: reality, you think, should be of interest to you only insofar as you can impressively talk about it! And because you are not interested in reality, you are unable to converse.29

After lying, hypocrisy and dissimulation are the next two misapplications of words, according to Aquinas.30 We apply the same principle here, namely that what we manifest by our outward actions and words must conform to what we intend or believe in our hearts. Dissimulation consists in the pretence to do something

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29 Abuse of Language, 16-17.
30 Summa, Ila-IIae, 111.
unintended by deed or outward sign, for whatever purpose, while hypocrites assume an appearance of a person which they are not (hypocrisy is etymologically derived from *hypocrites* [actor] and is the double talk condemned in the Pharisees). Real actors get paid for this, but if an employee simply pretends to do the work and gets paid for it, we would call this unjust. We can repeat again: communication unites human beings in a bond of charity and justice if truthful, and divides if intentionally false.

Sophistry completes the survey of the misuse of communication, but because of its importance, ubiquity, and dangerously subtle attack, it will be the focus of the second half of this essay. By hiding behind flattery, it conceals a more evil, utilitarian motive, and is a powerful adversary of truth, one which mutilates philosophy and wages a perennial battle against it. Flatters not only praise others in order to please them, but also neglect truth, by concealing it, or worse, destroying it altogether. Since this weapon is concealed, it can wreak great damage to society, and may perhaps be called the most dangerous abuse of communication.

**Sophistry as the ultimate attack on communication**

We have seen, then, how the various forms of lying oppose the proper manifestation of truth as a relation between word and object, realized in communication/dialogue. We should remember that any virtue, including the virtue of speaking truth, should be carried out for its own sake, and not for any other motive, as Plato points out in *The Republic*. Indeed, this book’s thesis argues just
that: a virtuous life is worth living for its own sake, and because it alone conduces man to a happy life. The famous “Allegory of the Cave” illustrates the soul’s incessant search for the light of truth and its contemplation, while most content themselves with the transient, material things of this world. St. Thomas Aquinas, when explicating the proof of another science necessary to satisfy the desires of man, namely Sacred Theology, notices that great thinkers of all times have shown a deep yearning and a longing for the “completion” or perfection of their person. In the first Article of the first Question in the Summa, St. Thomas Aquinas states:

It was necessary for man’s salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God besides philosophical science built up by human reason. Firstly, indeed, because man is directed to God, as to an end that surpasses the grasp of his reason: "The eye hath not seen, O God, besides Thee, what things Thou hast prepared for them that wait for Thee" (Isaiah 66:4). But the end must first be known by men who are to direct their thoughts and actions to the end. Hence it was necessary for the salvation of man that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation. Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors. Whereas man’s whole salvation, which is in God, depends upon the knowledge of this truth. Therefore, in order that the salvation of men might be brought about more fitly and more surely, it was necessary that they should be taught divine truths by divine revelation. It was therefore necessary that besides philosophical science built up by reason, there should be a sacred science learned through revelation.

Because the whole question addresses man’s salvation, that is, the ultimate end, it was necessary that a reasonable means be instituted whereby human beings could attain this goal. By knowing God first (through Divine Revelation), we may attain our completion in Him through an ever-increasing and more perfect ordering
of our lives towards Him (even here, we notice the principle of First Act-Second Act, how Being precedes knowledge).

But, in light of this goal of human life, the morality of what has been described so far, presents many problems for men who have been led away from the pursuit of truth and into vice, lethargy, indifference. They ask, “who follows all these precepts? Are they necessary? Why are they so important?” The first question is of no consequence, since a good does not depend on the number that practices it: these are objective values that cannot be denied. The answer to the latter two questions suggests the whole of morality, and the “big questions” of life: purpose, meaning, etc. Hence, they are important. A meaningless life, lived day to day without much concern for the future does not satisfy a human soul, but following Divine Law, contemplating Divine Truth, sharing it with others, truly leads to joy, when undertaken properly, and is the final source of this joy. Through diverse distractions, contemporary culture shies away from these questions, easily pleased with fleeting episodes that pass away as swiftly as they come. Once vice takes the reins and guides life, man is never satisfied, but follows a broad path which leads to confusion, mistrust, and the corruption of the nature of the human being. A rational being is truly satisfied only in the discovery of truth. He is enriched by it, and grows in wisdom, understanding, charity, and finally, into all that his nature and destiny promise. Examples as countless as the Saints in heaven may be provided: they show us that the goal can be reached and that an inestimable prize awaits those who have fought the good fight.
We have seen that the theme of virtue profiting man and society surfaces continuously. When sophistry or lies distort communication, all trust is lost, the authority of truth is undermined, and human relations no longer matter. But trust is another necessary commodity, without which man cannot function in society. Hence, all our personal interactions with others depend on this.

Besides destroying relationships between other individuals, a lying man is in danger of becoming accustomed to the lie and the world it creates. The lie grows with every usage, increasing the necessity of a good memory to keep track of them, until the person detaches himself from reality and lives in a fabricated world. If the vice of lying and all its associated defects take solid hold of a man, an attempt of a return to reality may be impossible: the hole may be so deep that the rays of light cannot reach its depths, whereas light is the source of life. To return back to life and reality is no easy task, and requires that one “knock down the idols” worshipped in the past in an occultish fashion, and that justice and a proper relationship to reality be restored. We must conform ourselves to what is real, and in turn give back to others what is their due: truth. Our powers of speech and reasoning, our “creative powers” (as explained earlier) must be employed for a proper purpose: the reasoning, communication, and contemplation of being manifested in truth. This will detach us from falsity and fickleness, will strengthen our character, and guide us on the right way.
Only God, as Creator and Sustainer of all life, commands the power to create out of nothing, and all our individual creation,\textsuperscript{31} must conform to the Plan of God, and indeed it does when properly used. Any lie is a false creation, one that is not conceived of by the Creator, and is an usurpation of the power given to us by Him. A lying man wishes to become God, wishes to order all reality to himself and to his will.

Now the sophist is a prime example of this: he may not lie materially, but the intention is present, sufficient to constitute a formal lie. Through refined reasoning, a thorough knowledge of the human person, and the will to dominate all by his corrupting communication and language, while flattering the unsuspected at the same time in order to fulfill his own purposes, a skillful sophist shows himself to be a mighty despot. Exploiting cowardice and indifference, coloring speech with sweet but deadly poison, mixing truth with error until neither can be distinguished: these are the weapons he wields. Pieper states: “the case can be made that Plato recognized, identified, and battled in the sophistry of his time a danger and a threat besetting the pursuits of the human mind and life of society in any era.”\textsuperscript{32} A direct connection exists between the life of the mind and the life of the body, and between the life of the individual and the health of the state. The sophist is an enemy of the people who attacks properly ordered society and destroys the links that hold it together.

\textsuperscript{31} Not unrelated to J. R. R. Tolkien’s use of the term “subcreation.” See his essay “On Fairy Stories.”
\textsuperscript{32} Abuse of Language, 7.
Pieper begins the investigation of this creature with an exposition of what communication entails. The details have already been described, and may be summarized as follows:

Word and language form the medium that sustains the common existence of the human spirit as such [...] Human words and language accomplish a twofold purpose, as Plato without doubt would have answered—in clear agreement with the entire tradition of Western thought [...] First, words convey reality. We speak in order to name and identify something that is real, to identify it for someone, of course—and this points to the second aspect in questions, the interpersonal character of human speech [...] The one does not exist without the other.\(^{33}\)

I will pause here to reflect on a point which I always found important, namely, that this interpersonal communication of reality is often obscured and dismissed for more base claims. Pieper gives us an anonymous quote: “A writer can be defined as someone whose second nature is the conviction that the content of his thoughts and writings does not matter in the least.”\(^{34}\) By this admission, almost any lie may be admitted, and it has been shown above that this is very destructive to society. A news story illustrates just what I mean. A few months ago, in a controversy over a CSI-type criminal investigation reality show (note, reality), crafted by writers of course, resulted in a TV guru’s statement of this kind: “TV shows are not meant to portray reality, they are meant to entertain.” Perhaps he meant “to make money.” But the point is: reality is removed from reality. Apparently, though, the actual professionals who were represented in the show should have been made aware of the fact, because after using it as a training tool, they complained of its inaccuracy and falsification of that reality (we no longer

\(^{33}\) Abuse of Language, 15-16.  
\(^{34}\) Abuse of Language, 18.
know what this reality is, though; notice how even the word “reality” is thrown around like a dirty rag. This is precisely the point).

But let’s consider what fiction is supposed to be about. Aristotle tells us that fiction must be believable, that is, realistic, and should of course employ various literary devices. Stories and parables are meant to transmit a truth about reality, usually in order to teach a lesson, and the creative aspect of literature only enhances this concept. In a few words, fiction transmits truth, and that is why, for all its literary value, Plato, in his *Republic*, would have banned even some of Homer’s epic writing (recall that both were Greeks, and Homer was the greatest storyteller ever, when storytelling was an art) because they taught immorality and portrayed falsehood, especially with respect to the gods who by definition can do neither of these. Again, Pieper, warns us of the stumbling blocks and trenches dug before us:

I said this danger is evident. It would be more correct, however, to say it is evident that there can be such a threat; unfortunately, the threat itself is not so readily recognized, for it is part of its nature to be concealed and disguised. It is, therefore, extremely difficult, at times impossible, to take a specific item (such as a novel, a stage play, a movie, a radio commentary, or a critical essay) and identify the borderline that separates genuine communication rooted in reality from the mere manipulation of words aimed solely to impress [...] A philosophical discourse, or notably even a theological discourse, can equally be listed here [...] especially when it exploits the general intellectual ennui.35

We return to the sophist-at-large. He attacks “the human spirit” both directly and indirectly: directly, because he strikes at the fundamental relationships, and indirectly, because it is concealed (as it is commonly said, “the worst falsehood is the

35 *Abuse of Language*, 28
one closest to the truth”). A falsehood enmeshes the intellect in a web of deceit or confusion, preparing for it a jumble of truth, error, and everything in between. This pantomime of error is a deadly comedy which serves up much choice but little meat: onlookers will be either easily deceived or will shrug their shoulders and turn back towards the TV, and the reality it affords.

The sophist’ skill consists in, indeed requires, the hidden aspect. We can envision it as magic, because no one would listen if the sophist declared his true motive (a foul one) at the beginning of his speech. Though we shouldn’t be surprised even if that crept into his discourse, since he can open and close the eyes and ears of the audience at will, if he is of Gorgias’ calibre (Gorgias was one of the great sophists whom Socrates fought, for the reasons stated here). The next point has been anticipated and hinted at: Gorgias’ heirs must be brilliant children indeed, who have experienced, learned, and discovered the secrets of the human person, and cleverly attack what is now exposed. It is an ugly affair, and Pieper, when noting Plato’s disgust for it, recalls a few episodes in Socrates’ life that illustrate the point. On one occasion, Socrates ironically muses about the “beauty” and “handsomeness” of the sophist Protagoras, whose occupation is the distortion of truth for his own gain. He is not handsome, but ugly, and Pieper compares this ironic scene to the difference between “perfection” (as in completion) and “perfectionism.”36 Perfection is beautiful, good, and desirable because it completes, but its corruption into perfectionism is ugly, evil, and repulsive. A woman’s beautiful face, ordered and natural, emanates an almost beatific light that penetrates the depths of the soul,

36 Abuse of Language, 14.
imprinting its visage upon the heart: it is blissful just to behold it. On the other hand, a gaudily “made-up” one simply repels. Moreover, the latter often hides that which is, and portrays that which is not... Corruptio optimi pessima.

But the sophist exploits a weakness, such as a moral defect or an inordinate passion, or clouds the intellect to such an extent that “he appears as a true philosopher himself.” Gorgias, in Plato’s dialogue of the same name, boasts of his skill in rhetoric and claims that a skilled rhetorician, such as himself, could convince a crowd of people about health matters in the presence of the best physicians! That’s not all: he calls this type of rhetoric

The greatest good, and the source, not only of personal freedom for individuals, but also of mastery over others in one’s own country. I mean the ability to persuade with words judges in the law courts, senators in the Senate, assemblymen in the Assembly, and men in any other meeting which convenes for the public interest [...]. By virtue of this power you will have at your beck and call the physician and the trained, [and] that businessman of yours will turn out to be making money for somebody else! Not for himself will he make it, but for you who have the power to speak and persuade the vast majority.

All one needs is skill, gained by studying how the human person thinks and acts (advertising, politics, and entertainment all depend on this “science”). The rhetorician, though, persuades without regarding the truth of the matter. What, then is the purpose? Well, Gorgias himself admits it in the above quote. Pieper says: “[Socrates] forces Gorgias [and all the other sophists] to admit that such sophisticated language, disconnected from the roots of truth, in fact pursues some ulterior motives, that it invariably turns into an instrument of power, something it

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37 Pieper’s quote of John Wild, in Abuse of Language, 29.
38 Gorgias 452.
has been, by its very nature, right from the start.”\textsuperscript{39} This rhetoric attacks liberty, not propagates it. Once the mind separates itself from truth, it is free to accept and agree with numerous foolish ideas, and becomes rather a slave to the most appealing, most satisfying one, and to the sophist that prepares the most colorful arguments (education is the weapon against this). Further, flattery alone cannot be a sufficient motive: it would be very tiring in a large “audience,” and what benefit would be gained?

We have reached the crux of the matter: since language and communication are meant to convey reality to another person, false rhetoric therefore does not belong to communication. It creates an artificial reality, a false world that captures the unwary mind, and seeks to manipulate and take advantage of it. Sophistry destroys our humanity, that is, it destroys the proper relationship necessary for society to function, subverts the freedom of the individual, and is a powerful means whereby one can justify tyranny and dictatorship. In this regard, Pieper asks rhetorically:

\begin{quote}
An instrument of power? Is this not too strong and too overbearing an expression? [...] Whoever speaks to another person—not simply, we presume, in spontaneous conversation, but using well-considered words, and whoever in so doing is explicitly not committed to the truth—such a person, from that moment on, no longer respects the other as a human person. From that moment on, to be precise, all conversation ceases; all dialogue and communication come to an end.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

If we recall the propaganda campaigns of dictatorial regimes from the past or present, we will realize the connection between power, will and word. The sophist

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{39} Abuse of Language, 20.
\textsuperscript{40} Abuse of Language, 21.
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commits ontological violence: a pseudo-reality is manufactured, and imposed upon another, in a unique type of slavery, a slavery tailored specifically against our humanity. Surely, persons led to such a state cannot be happy? Who likes to be deceived and rejoices in it? No one.

A final important possibility needs to be mentioned, one not unrelated to the above question. When something false is presented to us, do we resist it or do we allow it to please us? If known, more than likely we shall resist it, wary of being made into objects to be used by others. On the other hand, if we were persuaded, if we came to accept the pseudo-reality fashioned just for us, without looking through the mist at the ugly face, we are deprived of our personhood and become manipulated objects. Sophistry bombards us with carefully crafted images, fleeting chimaeras, unreal worlds, interfering with our intellect and attacking our freedom. Pieper gives us a memorable quite:

True and authentic reality is being drowned out by the countless superficial information bits noisily and breathlessly presented in propaganda fashion. Consequently, one may be entirely knowledgeable about a thousand details and nevertheless, because of ignorance regarding the core of the matter, remain without basic insight.\footnote{[This occurs much too often in modern education.]} [...] The place of authentic reality is taken over by a fictitious reality; my perception is indeed still directed toward an object, but now is a \emph{pseudoreality}, deceptively appearing as being real, so much so that it becomes almost impossible any more to discern the truth.\footnote{Abuse of Language, 33. Chesterton, to journalists: “not facts first, truth first.”}

A different sort of sophistry exists too, even more subtle yet equally worrisome, which manifests itself as a kind of casual speech which contains little or no truth, and consists in a random thoughtless remark uttered solely for the sake of
saying something or to end an inconvenient silence. Chesterton calls this “prevalence of a sort of casual and even conversational skepticism” a kind of “feeble revolt against all traditional truth.” It may not be a formal lie, it may not occur at an important speech, and it may not even have any lasting effect, yet still it corrupts everyday language. It is a paradox of “the omnipresence of the insignificant.” Chesterton asks, in all seriousness: “Why has this cheap and really worthless sort of scepticism got into such universal circulation?” A numberless collection of such trifles “debase[s] the currency of current thought and speech,” and may be more threatening than an avalanche of blunt falsehood, since it conduces to a maddening rage. Chesterton states: “so the seemingly insignificant individual irritation produced by these insignificant individual perversities may be, in its cumulative effect, more corrupting to a whole culture than the great heresies that have been hardened and hammered into a certain intellectual solidity.” It is a flippant, sophistic attack on the very nature of communication, with its carelessness and thoughtlessness.

Finally, when this superficial talk is combined with true sophistry, which occurs often, then the result is more than just a corruption of communication: it seeks to corrupt the very nature of the human person as a rational, social being and his proper goal of attaining truth. The virtuous person, dedicated to truth, will have a hard time conquering these threatening trivialities, and may himself be overcome by them. Pieper says that the greatest danger in this, according to Plato, consists in

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43 On Thoughtless Remarks.
44 Ibid.
actually undermining the meaning of life itself. What is our purpose in life? Our happiness: that is what all desire. According to our intellectual tradition, this is fulfilled in man’s search for and contemplation of truth itself. The ancient philosophers affirmed this, Catholicism continues to teach it. If our search for truth is blocked or darkened by superficialities, our freedom of existence and purpose is denied, and our pursuit of happiness is made even more challenging than it already is. Sophistry turns the world upside down, spinning it so fast that a sense of direction, speed, and location is lost. And if sophistry’s pseudoreality is embraced, our humanity is lost. This acceptance, especially if willed, represents a satisfaction akin to that of “bread and circuses,” when someone desires to satiate only the basic animal instincts of food and effortless entertainment. A person is far too easily pleased, the proper goal is displaced, and the search for truth cut short. Sooner or later, it will be realized that this is not happiness in any authentic sense: there must be more to human life. Pieper summarizes Plato’s philosophy of life and the meaning of human existence in these terms:

First, to perceive, as much as possible, all things as they really are and to live and act according to this truth (truth, indeed, not as something abstract and “floating in thin air” but as the unveiling of reality) – in this consists the good of man; in this consists a meaningful human existence.

Second, all men are nurtured, first and foremost, by the truth, not only those who search for knowledge – the scientists and the philosophers. Everybody who yearns to live as a true human being depends on this nourishment. Even society as such is sustained by the truth publicly proclaimed and upheld.

Third, the natural habitat of truth is found in interpersonal communication. Truth lives in dialogue, in discussion, in conversation – it resides, therefore, in language, in the word. Consequently, the well-ordered human existence, including especially its social dimension, is essentially based on the well-ordered language employed [...] A language is well-ordered
when its words express reality with as little distortion and as little omission as possible.\(^45\)

The intellect must strive for the understanding of reality, both experiences and abstract concepts, which points to the Highest Ideas. This requires reflection, investigation, as well as training, and is addressed by education, which ideally does not infuse mere facts nor push students from one class to the next. Rather, it forms their souls and minds for the sake of a genuine, happy life. The university is a unique place of the search for truth, but not a sophistic truth: it must recognize that there is an aspect of goodness and beauty in things, which the uneducated should be educated into, in order for society to thrive. In a word, education should cultivate the character of the student to recognize these things and cherish them.

To conclude, all the relations that operate in the human person to communicate truth, namely, the conformation of reality and its conceived idea in the intellect, its correspondence to the Divine Mind, its true manifestation in speech, all guided by wisdom, justice, and charity, constitutes the true nature of communication, fundamental for a healthy society. Further, the proper orientation of man towards the Ultimate Truth, God, tends toward the perfect contemplation of Him in a unifying state of Charity. By laboring here on earth in restoring the proper relations of our speech in consistency with truth, we carry out our duty of restoring the world more fully to Christ.

\(^{45}\) Abuse of Language, 36.
To know, love and serve God is our duty, because He is Truth. Therefore, since we benefit by cooperating in this task in this life, and strive to live this with all our heart, mind, and soul, it is called the telos, the goal, of human life. All our actions must be ordered according to this principle (and life is all about principles, as the movie “Beckett” illustrates⁴⁶), and once this is fulfilled, everything else will be given to us, that is, everything necessary for our happiness and salvation. Pope Benedict XVI says:

Knowledge of the truth has knowledge of the good as its scope. This is also the meaning of Socratic self-questioning: What is that good that makes us true? The truth makes us good and goodness is true: This is the optimism that lives in Christian faith, because to it has been conceded the vision of the Logos, of creative Reason that, in the incarnation of God, has revealed Himself as the Good, as Goodness Itself.⁴⁷

We are called to spread this Good News, by example first, and by verbal communication second, as need arises. But to fulfill this, since we are in this world, other things, though subordinate to the highest ideas, are necessary too. If our proper relationship with God, in whom “are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,” is lost or corrupted, our unity with Truth, our proper orientation, is likewise lost or corrupted. Language itself is deformed too: our imperfections, assumed after the Fall, have crept into all areas of our life and actions, and can only be restored by our proper reorientation to Truth.

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⁴⁶ Thomas Beckett, previously an important, worldly advisor to King Henry II of England, converts when he receives the Archbishopric of Canterbury. Now, he is faced with the dilemma of who has the higher authority in Church matters: the king or the ecclesial office. Often, the bishops respond that it is the principle that matters, not a specific concession or individual whim. All particulars must be subordinated to a higher principle.
⁴⁷ Benedict XVI’s Planned Lecture at La Sapienza.
Because of the great difficulty of attaining even a glimpse of the higher truth in this life, the Ultimate Truth, the Logos, the Word, became Incarnate to show us the way. In His humility, by becoming like us, Christ, “full of grace and truth” “dwelt among us,” and “to as many as received Him, He gave the power to be made the sons of God.” “In Him was life; and the life was the light of men [...] that was the true light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world.”

Darkness is overcome with light, and darkness of the mind is cleared away by the True Light, emitting joy as its effect, with the uniting command “to love God and one another.” Simple, yet our fallible reason could not ever reach this height naturally.

Then, guided by the Spirit of Truth, our mouths shall pour forth words of wisdom that overcome all sophistry, sweeping it away like leaves before an autumn wind, or the mighty wind of Pentecost, when the Apostles taught in diverse languages and produced the sweetest fruits.

**Epilogue**

Rome is called “the Eternal City” because, though besieged, sacked, plundered, and left in ruins multiple times in its history, each time it rose up again in splendor and munificence. St. Augustine, in the fourth century, successfully rebutted the arguments of the Roman pagans who claimed that the acceptance of “the new God, the Christian’s God,” the overthrow of the Pantheon, and the subsequent waning of the protection of its gods resulted in Rome’s sacking by the...
Visigoths around that time. But history has shown that it rose up again, to unite all Europe in an even stronger bond, and *that* is its true testament. Similarly, Ancient Greek philosophy grew once it was truly guided by the “Spirit of Truth,” maturing and culminating in scholasticism and Thomism, proving its common-sense strength and worth even unto now. “That Thomism is the philosophy of common sense is itself a matter of common sense,” as Chesterton remarks. These bastions of philosophy, like Rome, have endured the attacks of countless legions of sophists, which even until now are incapable of denting a brick in its walls. The crooked swords of false definitions, wasted cannonballs of fallacies, useless explosions of heresies, and broken ladders of uncommon sense rot at the feet of the unyielding rock, impregnable gates, unassailable bastions of this school, because it is built on Reality, strengthened with right reason, and shielded by Truth. Even if the only soldier inside was St. Thomas Aquinas, his flame would not die. How much more futile are the efforts of their enemies when he has an army of God with Him? Indeed, the Source of Truth dwells within, with “the Kingdom in His hand, and power, and dominion.”
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