

Francis Bacon
"Truth"

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) was a major figure in the development of the English Renaissance. He became known at court and was knighted in 1603 after the succession of James I. He was later appointed Lord Chancellor in 1618 but fell from power in 1621 after going into debt and being accused of corruption. Bacon is sometimes known as the "father of the scientific method" for publishing the *Novum Organum Scientiarum* (the New Instrument of Science) in 1620. In this work, he advocated using the empirical method (induction) in all enquiries, as opposed to the "old method" (deduction) of the scholastics of the middle ages.

Bacon published the first edition of his *Essays* in 1597. He borrowed the word *essay* from the French writer Michel de Montaigne. It meant an attempt or trial, somewhat like the fragments and proverbs that were popular at the time. He wrote a second edition in 1612 and published an expanded edition in 1625.

Information readily available on the internet has not been glossed. Additions are in brackets [like this].

"What is truth?" said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer. Certainly there be that delight in giddiness and count it a bondage to fix a belief, affecting free-will in thinking as well as in acting. And though the sects of philosophers of that kind [classical skeptics] be gone, yet there remain certain discoursing wits who are of the same veins, though there be not so much blood in them as was in those of the ancients. But it is not only the difficulty and labor which men take in finding out of truth, nor again, that when it is found it imposeth upon men's thoughts, that doth bring lies in favor, but a natural though corrupt love of the lie itself. One of the later school of the Grecians [Lucian (125-180), satirist] examineth the matter and is at a stand to think what should be in it, that men should love lies, where neither they make for pleasure, as with poets, nor for advantage, as with the merchant, but for the lie's sake. But I cannot tell. This same truth is a naked and open day-light that doth not show the masks and mummeries and triumphs of the world half so stately and daintily as candle-lights. Truth may perhaps come to the price of a pearl, that showeth best by day; but it will not rise to the price of a diamond or carbuncle, that showeth best in varied lights. A mixture of a lie doth ever add pleasure. Doth any man doubt that if there were taken out of men's minds vain opinions, flattering hopes, false valuations, imaginations and the like, but it would leave the minds of a number of men poor shrunken things, full of melancholy and indisposition, and unpleasing to themselves? One of the fathers [church fathers], in great severity, called poesy *vinum daemonum* [the wine of devils] because it filleth the imagination and yet it is but the shadow of a lie. But it is not the lie that passeth through the mind, but the lie that sinketh in and settleth in that doth the hurt, such as we spake of before. But howsoever these things are thus in men's depraved judgments and affections, yet truth, which only doth judge itself, teacheth that the inquiry of truth, which is the love-making or wooing of it; the knowledge of truth, which is the presence of it; and the belief of truth, which is the enjoying of it, is the sovereign good of human nature. The first creature of God in the works of the days was the light of the sense, the last was the light of reason. And his sabbath work ever since is the illumination of his Spirit. First he breathed light upon the face of the matter or chaos; then he breathed light into the face of man; and still he breatheth and inspireth light into the face of his chosen. The poet [Lucretius, Roman epicurean poet] that beautified the sect that was otherwise inferior to the rest, saith yet excellently

well: “It is a pleasure to stand upon the shore and to see ships tossed upon the sea; a pleasure to stand in the window of a castle and to see a battle and the adventures thereof below: but no pleasure is comparable to the standing upon the vantage ground of truth” (a hill not to be commanded, and where the air is always clear and serene), “and to see the errors and wanderings and mists and tempests in the vale below,” so always that this prospect be with pity and not with swelling or pride. Certainly, it is heaven upon earth to have a man's mind move in charity, rest in providence, and turn upon the poles of truth.

To pass from theological and philosophical truth to the truth of civil business, it will be acknowledged, even by those that practice it not, that clear, and round dealing is the honor of man's nature, and that mixture of falsehoods is like alloy in coin of gold and silver, which may make the metal work the better but it embaseth it. For these winding and crooked courses are the goings of the serpent, which goeth basely upon the belly and not upon the feet. There is no vice that doth so cover a man with shame as to be found false and perfidious. And therefore Montaigne saith prettily when he inquired the reason why the word of the lie should be in such a disgrace and such an odious charge. Saith he, “If it be well weighed, to say that a man lieth is as much to say as that he is brave towards God and a coward towards men.” For a lie faces God and shrinks from man. Surely the wickedness of falsehood and breach of faith cannot possibly be so highly expressed as in that it shall be the last peal to call the judgments of God upon the generations of men, it being foretold that when Christ cometh, “He shall not find faith upon the earth” [Luke,18.8].

Topics for Writing and Discussion

1. Bacon addresses the age-old question: “What is truth?” It is not only a difficult question to answer, it is a difficult term even to define. For some, truth is what they can see with their own eyes; for others, it is what a tradition or religion has taught them; for still others, it is what can be supported by evidence. Further, truth should be distinguished from “facts,” which are verifiable statements about reality. In this age of “alternate facts” and “fake news,” how is one to determine the truth? Many people rely on some standard they have inherited or learned in judging whether something new they encounter is true or false. For example, does it fit in with everything else they know? Do people they respect say it is true? Do a number of other people believe it to be true? What standard do you use in determining whether some new bit of information you encounter is true or false? Discuss with your group and write an essay discussing how you distinguish truth from falsehood.

2. Plato famously banished poets from his ideal republic because they write what is not true. By definition, *fiction* is opposed to *truth*. Yet many writers have argued that fiction can bring us closer to the truth than a mere recital of facts can. For example, to understand what people experienced during the Depression, would it be better to read an essay by an economist about the period, or Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*? But stories can both obscure the truth as well as reveal it. Discuss with your group, or write an essay, about how your perception of the truth of someone or some thing was changed by a story (fiction) you read or a movie you saw.