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# Veritas Fax Ardens – Truth Is a Flaming Torch

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Veritas Fax Ardens – Truth Is a Flaming Torch

A senior thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Bachelor of Arts  
in Humanities and Cultural Studies.

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For all the Keepers and Seekers of Truth.

For my Late Father, my Flaming Torch of Truth, Light, and Wisdom.

For Mathias Kornfeld.

## Abstract

Based on the vast amount of truth theories that have been suggested by a myriad of thinkers from various disciplines, it can be inferred that the question of truth has occupied humankind since the beginning of its existence. Even though some of these theories appear more promising than others, it also seems that every suggested answer poses yet further questions about what truth really is. This seemingly endless stream of debates and contradictory theories further indicates that the nature of truth remains an enigma and subject to interpretation. Reflecting on Dominican University's Latin motto "Veritas Fax Ardens" (Truth Is a Flaming Torch), this thesis explores the nature and subjectivity of truth in the form of narrative nonfiction. In particular, this creative work asks what truth is, and how different thinkers from disciplines such as philosophy, religion, science, and literature approach the question of truth. Lastly, it is also a reflection of my academic journey, which led me to believe that truth might be as variable as the flickering light of a flaming torch.

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## Introduction

Some of the most basic questions many of us have are questions such as, who are we, why are we here, and where do we go? What is the universe, and is there a creator or a first cause? Our upbringing, social, and cultural environment, or levels of education, shape our views on these questions, and we might even search for possible answers in religious teachings, philosophical reasoning, scientific research, or culture-specific beliefs. As we make our own experiences, educate ourselves, and build our own social environment, we also develop our own personal ideas and theories about such questions. Regardless which discipline we choose to consult in order to search for answers, or how developed our own ideas are, it still seems that there is no single answer that can justify such questions with certainty. Furthermore, the more one questions these possible answers and theories, or whether there *is* any certainty altogether, the more one begins to question, whether consciously or not, the very nature of truth.

Now, if one sets out to search for the truth, one will come across even more theories from the various disciplines, some more promising than others. However, one will soon also come to realize that every suggested theory has its own challenges, which raise even further questions and debates. This is precisely when one begins to realize how these very basic questions have led to the ultimate question of truth, which is an essential question in philosophy, or as the English philosopher Simon Blackburn calls it, "the most exciting and engaging issue in the whole of philosophy."<sup>1</sup> If one then, nevertheless, decides to continue this search within various philosophical truth theories, one will naturally also have to consult religious and scientific approaches to the nature of truth. As the search goes on and seemingly branches out

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<sup>1</sup> Simon, Blackburn. Introduction to *Truth: A Guide*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

forevermore, an undergraduate student like myself, will very likely, and sooner rather than later, find him- or herself in the frustrating position of not being able to come to a satisfying conclusion. Moreover, this seemingly endless stream of debates and contradictory theories can lead one to believe that the nature of truth remains an enigma and subject to interpretation. Nevertheless, I decided to take on this search for truth, which was further motivated by the *Latin motto of Dominican University of California*, and an *essay by Virginia Woolf*. Since I was aware that I would never be able to come to a conclusion from the outset, and because my studies in the Humanities allowed me to do so, I, however, decided to approach this question in the form of narrative nonfiction.

### **Searching the Truth**

While walking on the campus one day, I came across a banner with the Dominican University of California's Latin motto on it, which reads, "Veritas Fax Ardens" (Truth Is a Flaming Torch), and as I began to reflect on the meaning of that phrase, I realized that it could be interpreted in various ways. Moreover, this phrase further made me question why the concept of truth is so often represented as a torch or, subsequently, as light. In order to understand why light is regularly associated with the concept of truth, I first needed to consider what light actually is. In very basic terms, light is energy, or as Dr. William P. Blair, Astrophysicist and Research Professor in the Department of Physics and Astronomy at Johns Hopkins University, simply states it, "light is nature's way of transferring energy through space. We can complicate it by talking about interacting electric and magnetic fields, quantum mechanics, and all of that, but just remember—*light is energy*."<sup>2</sup> It is of common understanding that this energy is essential to us,

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<sup>2</sup> William P., Blair, Dr. "The Basics of Light." *The Basics of Light*, April 20, 2016. <http://www.pha.jhu.edu/~wpb/spectroscopy/basics.html>.



and that without light we could not exist. Ian Walmsley, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Hooke Professor of Experimental Physics at the University of Oxford, expresses this very clearly when he writes, “Light gives life. Literally, light plays a vital role in the biological and chemical process that underpins our and our planet’s existence.”<sup>3</sup>

However, Walmsley further also explains that light has not only a scientific importance but, moreover, is also a metaphorical representation of the divine and knowledge. “Indeed, words deriving from the idea of light – insight, illumination, clarity, for example – pertain to human, as well as physical, qualities. In fact, Latin has two words to describe light, *lux* and *lumen*, denoting both to the material and metaphysical aspects of light.”<sup>4</sup> This statement then led me to question whether light is associated with truth, because light is assumed to have divine qualities, and if that is why many religions, such as the Christian faith, associate light so closely with God and the prophets. In the Christian Bible, in John 8:12, for example, it is written that Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”<sup>5</sup>

Since, however, many academic institutions, religious or not, also use light as a symbol of truth, I also began to wonder whether such mottos had to do with the concept of intellectual enlightenment. All such ideas basically imply different aspects for why truth is regularly “depicted” as a torch or light. It seemed, however, that such ideas had one thing in common, which is that light, and subsequently truth, are powerful things. The chapter about ancient fire

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<sup>3</sup> Ian A. Walmsley, *Light: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Michael D. Coogan, Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and PHEME PERKINS. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: With the Apocrypha*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1896.

rituals in Walter Burkert's *Greek Religion* further increased this assumption, and I began to question whether a flaming torch as a metaphor, and subsequently truth itself, could be interpreted as something that is essential and desirable, but also powerful and dangerous. "Fire is one of the foundations of civilized life. It is the most primitive protection from beasts of prey, and so also from evil spirits. It gives warmth and light, and yet is always grievous and dangerous, the very epitome of destruction: things great, fixed, and solid dissolve in smoke and ashes."<sup>6</sup> Even though, a flaming torch can light our way in the dark, or be used to give light to others, it could also be used to set a devastating fire, and even runs the risk to extinguish and leave us in darkness.

As I considered all these aspects of Dominican's Latin motto, unable to draw a single conclusion what this motto really means, or what truth might be, I could eventually not help but assume that it might simply mean that truth is as variable as the flickering light of a flaming torch. At about the same time, I also read the seemingly unrelated essay, *A Room of One's Own*, by Virginia Woolf, in which she was asked to elaborate on a topic called "Women and Fiction." In order to do so, Woolf questioned the title and whether or not there is one single truth that can be told on that topic. She concluded that all she could do was offer an opinion:

The title women and fiction might mean, and you may have meant it to mean, women and what they are like; or it might mean women and the fiction that they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them; or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light. But when I began to consider the subject in this last way, which seemed the most interesting, I soon saw that it had a fatal

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<sup>6</sup> Walter, Burkert. *Greek Religion*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 171.

drawback. I should never be able to come to a conclusion. I should never be able to fulfill what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer – to hand you after an hour’s discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantle-piece for ever. All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point – a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of women and true nature of fiction unsolved.<sup>7</sup>

With the intention to offer an opinion, Woolf began to question the aspects of her topic, but like I, soon realized that every idea led to further questions. Once she understood that her own ideas could not provide her with the facts she needed to formulate her opinion, she aimed for indisputable facts from established thinkers, which she assumed could be found in the books at the British Museum.

... a thousand questions at once suggested themselves. But one needed answers, not questions; and an answer was only to be had by consulting the learned and the unprejudiced, who have removed themselves above the strife of tongue and the confusion of body and issued the result of their reasoning and research in books which are to be found in the British Museum. If truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum, where, I asked myself, picking up a notebook and a pencil, is truth?<sup>8</sup>

This very question – “If truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum, where, I asked myself, picking up a notebook and a pencil, is truth?”<sup>9</sup> – and the fact that she was not able

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<sup>7</sup> Virginia Woolf. *A Room of One's Own*. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 3,4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 25,26.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

to find a single truth about her topic, but only come up with an opinion, not unlike I, further inspired me to take on the search for truth with the position that no single truth can be told, but merely opinions offered. Moreover, because Woolf also implies in her essay that when a topic is so controversial that no truth can be told, fiction might come closer to truth, I began to reflect on that idea as well and eventually came to embrace fiction even more. This is because fiction offers a writer the opportunity to outline different ideas without forcing them onto the reader, thereby leaving enough room for individual analysis and interpretation.

At any rate, when a subject is highly controversial – and any question of sex is that – one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one’s audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker. Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact.<sup>10</sup>

### **Approaching the Question of Truth**

Highly inspired by these new insights, and motivated to write narrative nonfiction on the nature of truth, I began to conduct further research in order to offer a reasonable opinion. I searched Google for the word truth, and found more than 653,000,000 results. I consulted various truth theories in philosophy, different religious teachings, studied scientific approaches on truth, and read what fiction writers had to say on this topic. Just like Virginia Woolf at the British Museum, I found myself asking, even more, questions about each suggested idea, and eventually began to question myself, and my search for truth, which made me feel like Dante in the *Inferno*. Frustrating as this comparison to Dante’s *Inferno* felt at first, it also inspired me to use the *Inferno* as a blueprint for my story. In particular, I wrote a story in which the protagonist,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 4

similar to Dante, goes on an imaginary journey, and is guided by a person of significant importance to the protagonist. For Dante, this guide was the ancient Roman poet Publius Vergilius Maro, or simply Virgil, whereas in my story the guide is the late English writer Virginia Woolf, who also inspired my search for truth.

Similar to Dante's *Inferno*, the following story also begins in a dark forest, and just like Dante, the protagonist then also descends into an even darker place. The journey within the actual darkness, however, differs significantly from that of the *Inferno*, as the mission here is to find truth. In particular, the protagonist finds itself with its guide in a cave without any light, but with the burning question what truth and the Latin phrase "Veritas Fax Ardens" (Truth Is a Flaming Torch) might mean. The torch is, moreover, of particular importance, as once one is given to the protagonist by the Greek mythological figure Prometheus, it becomes the only light in the otherwise complete darkness, and hence an essential tool to find a way out of the darkness. Within the cave, the protagonist and its guide then continue to meet a myriad of thinkers from various disciplines, ranging from philosophy, religion and science to writers who all offer their various stances on the nature of truth. Along the way, the protagonist then begins to understand that there is very little certainty that can be told about the nature of truth, and that truth might be as variable as the flickering light of a flaming torch. However, at the end of the story the protagonist and the guide find themselves conversing within a modification of what is spoken between Socrates and Glaucon in Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*. It is there that the protagonist learns that searching for the truth is, despite effortful, also desirable and honorable and that one who decides to do so, also has a duty to provide a flaming torch to those who remain in the darkness.

## Conclusion

In the final analysis, if one asks what truth is, one will definitely not find an answer in this thesis. However, if one were to ask how truth is like the flickering light of a flaming torch, one will find many answers in this thesis. Nevertheless, it is worth summarizing that all these answers are mere opinions, and that often in opinions is where the greatest strength lies. If one holds the opinion that “Truth Is a Flaming Torch” means truth is as variable as the flickering light of a flaming torch, then one, through tolerance and acceptance, may spread the light of truth without imposition, and without running the risk of letting the world go dark. Maybe, and only maybe, then, an objective truth resides in the collective subjectivity of all individuals, and if that were to be the case, it might also explain how truth, like the light of a torch, changes in size, form, and brightness. Lastly, it might also be worth pointing out, that the story in this thesis is a reflection of an academic journey, a cumbersome search for truth, and a hint of insecurity an undergraduate student might feel before leaving the warm and comforting bosom of one’s alma mater, nevertheless hoping that the journey might indeed be the reward, or as Max Plank asserts, “it is not the possession of truth, but the success which attends the seeking after it, that enriches the seeker and brings happiness to him.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Strickland. *Weird Scientists - the Creators of Quantum Physics*. (Lulu.Inc., 2011), 28.

## Chapter One - The Woods

Obviously, he was not right when he said that I would never make it through high school. He could have been, but he was not. “Look at me now!” I want to yell at him, but what difference would it make, what satisfaction would it bring? After all, I was always extremely lucky, the kind of luck that is almost unfair to those who were less privileged. Less blessed, just like he. But is it really a blessing that I reason the way I do? That I want to know everything there is to know, only to scrutinize it anyways? “Look at me now, strolling down this beautiful campus, heading for commencement,” I want to yell at him, but what purpose would it serve? The more I think about it, the more abstract this moment appears, almost distorted. Is this moment real, am I dreaming? Perhaps it is all but an illusion, this moment, the earth and the sky, or the gleaming walls on this beautiful campus—my existence. I mean “come on,” I am heading to my graduation, I am supposed to know better, to be educated and knowledgeable, but what do I know after all, if I cannot even distinguish between what is real and what is not? All of a sudden the campus begins to resemble a dense forest, and, the more I am wondering what is happening to me, the denser and darker these woods become. I can feel the dewdrops dripping from the mighty trees, and how the wafts of mist moisten my face and hair the farther I enter into the twilight of this forest. What is happening to me? Not even joking about how I must look like a wet poodle, getting a bath before stepping onto the sacred grounds at the Westminster Dog Show, eases my fear of this place. Joking usually helps when I am scared, but this time joking does not seem to be the answer. I guess I need to be serious, grown up, knowledgeable and educated. The trees around me are devouring me, and everything grows dark, cold and quiet. Am I going to hell? I cannot help but think of Dante, and how he unconsciously lost relation to reality in the depths of a dark forest.

When I had journeyed half of our life's way,  
 I found myself within a shadowed forest,  
 For I had lost the path that does not stray.  
 Ah it is hard to speak of what it was,  
 The savage forest, dense and difficult,  
 Which even in recall renews my fear:  
 So bitter – death is hardly more severe!  
 But to retell the good discovered there,  
 I'll also tell the other things I saw.  
 I cannot clearly say how I entered  
 the wood; I was so full of sleep just at  
 the point where I abandoned the true path.<sup>12</sup>

I am desperately trying to recall how Dante eventually made it out of there. This might be helpful now, as I have no intention of going to hell, let alone meeting the devil, or any other of those creeps down there. I do not have time for this; I have to attend commencement! Oh gosh, I wish I had paid more attention in Professor Tiger's class. Maybe then I would know what to do. Ok, focus. What did Dante do in the woods? Were not there some animals he encountered? A leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf? Yes, that must be it, but how does this help me in this misery? I can feel my feet sinking into the wet and mossy forest soil, as I am walking deeper into the briarwood, gazing into the gloaming woodland—hoping to find a way out.

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<sup>12</sup> Alighieri, Dante, and Allen Mandelbaum. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Inferno, a Verse Translation*. (New York: Bantam Books, 2004), 3.



## Chapter Two – The Guide

Finally, at a small clearing in the midst of the dense forest, it struck me: Dante had a guide. He met his muse, his idol Virgil. That is it, I need a guide, otherwise, I will never make it out of here again, but who? Who is my idol? Who could help me out of here? I like many of Virgil's quotes, but then again just thinking about the Aeneid gives me the creeps. How about Homer? Gosh, no! Imagining that getting out of here could be slightly similar to finding the cumbersome way back to Ithaca freaks me out. Sorry, Homer, but hell no! Ok, what about philosophy, religion, and science? I mean, within those disciplines I must be able to find an explanation for my misery, or at least someone able to guide me. I remember Descartes, this weirdo, and how he was arguing that we might confuse reality with dreams:

At the same time I must remember that I am a man, and that consequently I am in habit of sleeping, and in my dreams representing to myself the same things or sometimes even less probable things, than do those who are insane in their waking moments. How often has it happened to me that in the night I dreamt that I found myself in this particular place, that I was dressed and seated near the fire, whilst in reality. I was lying undressed in bed!<sup>13</sup>

That I am dreaming could indeed explain what is going on here. I am just dreaming, and all I need to do is to wake up. I actually like this idea that I am dreaming right now because then I could simply enjoy myself here and start joking again. However, what are my chances that I am really just dreaming? From Jan Westerhoff and his approach to *Reality*, I remember that dreaming is associated with REM sleep in which the sleeping brain is similarly active as the waking brain. And, if I am considering that I am spending roughly 25% in REM sleep, I would

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<sup>13</sup> Bowie, G. Lee, Meredith W. Michaels, and Robert C. Solomon. *Twenty Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy*. (Australia: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2011), 267.

spend about 1.6 hours dreaming if I would sleep about eight hours a night. Now, that is a ratio of 1.6 hours of dreaming to 16 hours of waking consciousness, which means that I have a 1 in 10 chance that I am dreaming right now. In terms of probability, this means that my chances of being asleep right now are far higher than winning the average lottery that has an approximate chance of winning the jackpot of “1 in 14 millions (this means that if [I] bought a ticket every week, [I] would have one win on average of every 250,000 years).”<sup>14</sup>

Nothing certain seems to come from these probabilities either, but I guess the chances that I am dreaming are indeed not too bad after all. But still, what is if I am not dreaming? Why would he, if there is a god, permit that I stray so far from reality, or, God forbid, allow me to go insane? I guess some people would be praying right now, praying for help, praying to find their way back onto the righteous path, but I do not even know how to pray. It has been so long. Would God still hear me? Would he still help me? True, I have been a part-time devotee of a few different religions in the past, and it is also no secret that I suspect that there might be a god, but would he still love me now that I have renounced religions? And then again, can a suspicion not only be upheld by proof or faith? And are not religions there to help us have faith? What do I know? I do not even know whether I am believing in, or merely suspecting, the existence of God. All that reminds me of that ancient paradox, which says, “Only one thing is certain—that is, nothing is certain. If this statement is true, it is also false.”<sup>15</sup>

This idea gives me further creeps, but then, on the other hand, if it was not for the fact that I am supposed to know, supposed to be educated and knowledgeable at the time of my graduation,

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<sup>14</sup> Jan, Westerhoff. *Reality: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.

<sup>15</sup> "Uses and Misuses of Logic." *Logic*. April 25, 2016. <https://www.lhup.edu/~dsimanek/logic.htm>.

this idea could also be kind of comforting. What bittersweet comfort this idea brings, how easy could everything be, if there was no certainty anyways. I could simply return to joking and enjoying myself since nothing would really matter anyways. “Look at me now!” I want to yell at him, but then I realize that if I give in on that idea of nothingness, I will be just like him. I guess he must be fond of Nietzsche. Even though, I doubt that he even understands Nietzsche’s almost incomprehensible reasoning anyways. Many think that he was arguing in favor of nihilism and against Christianity, but was he not indeed arguing that Christianity is yet another form of nihilism? Truly, he was not in favor of Christianity, and even called it “the religion of pity” in the *Anti-Christ*.<sup>16</sup> However, was he, not merely arguing that through pity life is denied, and hence that “pity is the technic of nihilism?”<sup>17</sup> I mean was he not, in reality, arguing that having faith in something we cannot know with certainty, and living a life hoping for an afterlife, which is not certain either, is just another form of nihilism. I mean he said, “‘Faith’ means the will to avoid knowing what is true” but does that mean that he also said we know for sure that there is no god?<sup>18</sup> Is he not simply saying that when we allow our lives to be externally controlled that we rob our lives of meaning? What would I know, how would I be able to judge? I do not even know whether this very moment is real!

Screw it; whether this here is real or not, whether there is a god and a meaning to life, I need a solution here, I need to find my way back! After all, I still have to attend commencement, and give my speech on the nature of truth! I guess I will just have to accept this situation and

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<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm, Nietzsche. *The Antichrist*. Translated by H. L. Mencken. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918. Project Gutenberg. Web. April 25, 2016.)  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/19322/19322-h/19322-h.htm>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

play by it. First of all, I still need a guide! But how should I ever make it out of here with a crazy philosopher, mad scientist, or cleric as guide? All I get from these disciplines is that we do not know anything with certainty altogether. No, no, I need someone with a clear understanding of what truth is, someone similarly disturbed by sarcasm and humor. Dante, Virgil, Virgin Mary, Terry, Halle Berry? Damn it, you have got to Focus! Virgil, Virgin, oh yes, now I know, Virginia, I have always liked Virginia. How ironically that Dante encountered a she-wolf and now, I chose Virginia Woolf as my guide. Might that be fate at last? Maybe it simply means that we are playing according to my rules now!

While I retreated down to lower ground,  
 before my eyes there suddenly appeared  
 one who seemed faint because of the long silence.

When I saw him in that vast wilderness,  
 "Have pity on me," were the words I cried,  
 "whatever you may be—a shade, a man."<sup>19</sup>

“Not a man; I once was [woman]” answered a well-modulated female voice with British accent. “Both of my parents came from [London], and both claimed [Kensington] as native city. And I was born, though late, sub [Queen Victoria], and lived in [London] under the good [Edward VII and George V], the season of the false and lying [men]. I was a [writer], and [killed the Angel in the House in self-defense]. But why do you return to wretchedness? Why not climb up the mountain of delight, the origin and cause of every joy?”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> This conversation between Virginia Woolf and protagonist is a modification of a section from Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno*.

“And are you then that [Virginia], you the fountain that freely pours so rich a stream of speech?”<sup>21</sup>

I hear myself asking in humble voice, and cannot believe my luck when I hear the lady reply,

“Indeed, that Virginia I am, and it would be my pleasure to guide you on this journey, after all, I have taken this path many times before.”

“Oh, what distinct honor it is to meet you, Mrs. Woolf, I have thought about you and your work a lot and have at least a million questions to ask.”

“How flattering it is to hear that one is not forgotten, but we do not have time for this, you must not forget that we have a long journey ahead of us, and that you need to get back and give your speech! Speaking of which, what was the topic of that speech again?”

“It is about the nature of truth,” I respond while Mrs. Woolf looks at me as she had seen a ghost.

“The nature of truth you say?”

“Yes!” I respond eagerly. “So you are saying that you were able to extract the nugget of truth from your studies?” She asks with dismay. “I do not mean to offend you, Mrs. Woolf, but I guess so, after all, is that not the purpose of an education?” I reply. “I am glad to hear that you are confident having found the nature of truth without spending a minute in fiction, but in order to demonstrate what is meant by that, let me show you what lies ahead of us!”

As we continue the journey I had started before, even time seems to be slowing down with every step that we descend down the slope. Indeed, even the trees seem to shrink the farther we descend; as a matter of fact, it appears as if they would be sucked up by the soil as if there would be a black hole at the bottom of the slope that pulls everything with such a force that nothing could ever escape. “Not all too bad, your suspicion is not so far fetched!” says Mrs.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Woolf, “there is indeed a hole at the bottom of the hill, but it is not a black hole as you know it from your astronomy class, it is a cave.” How the heck did she do that! Can she read my mind? “Not exactly, but the closer we get to the gateway of the cave, the more everything will merge.”

### Chapter Three – The Cave

#### VERITAS FAX ARDENS

These words-their aspect was obscure—I read  
inscribed above a gateway, and I said:

"Master, their meaning is difficult for me."

And he to me, as one who comprehends:

"Here one must leave behind all hesitation;  
here every cowardice must meet its death."<sup>22</sup>

“Mrs. Woolf,” I cry out, “may I ask if you read the inscription above the gateway to this cave?”

“Certainly,” says Mrs. Woolf in a calm tone, and as if it was the most rational phrase in the world. “But what does it mean?” I ask, all agitated, and Mrs. Woolf looks at me once more as if I was not exactly lucid. “Are you indeed telling me that you found the nature of truth without making use of the Latin language?”

“Latin?” I startle, “I have studied some Latin, but I doubt my skills, after all, it has been a while.”

“I see!” answers Mrs. Woolf in a somewhat mocking tone.

How embarrassing, I think to myself, being well aware that she probably knows what I am thinking anyway! Ok let’s see, I know what “Veritas“ means, it means truth, but “Fax” and “Ardens” sound awfully strange to my ears. “Ardens” might be related to Elizabeth Arden, the cosmetic lady, but I doubt that she would have much to do with the concept of truth! No, that

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<sup>22</sup> Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, 21.

cannot be it! I guess I will have to consider the etymology. I always loved etymology! I can literally feel how the words “Fax” and “Ardens” run through my head, searching for a meaning in my internal multilingual vocabulary. It very much reminds me of the sound my computer used to make when it tried to connect to the Internet, a million or so years ago. And then there it is, resembling the feeling of satisfaction when one’s computer finally connected to the seemingly endless pleasure of the World Wide Web. “Ardens”; related to the Italian “ardente”, the French and English “ardent”, meaning blazing, burning or flaming. But still nothing for the meaning of “Fax”! The only thing this word reminds me of is the Fax machine, and just as I am thinking about it, Mrs. Woolf turns around and says, “What a clever invention these Fax machines, but what is the World Wide Web, my dear?” As if I would be capable of explaining the technologies of the 21st century to her. “Never mind, Mrs. Woolf, let me just say that it is similar to the library at the British Museum, which, however, acts a bit like the place we are in right now, a place in which everything appears to merge.”

“How interesting, is that where you set out to find truth?”

“I wish it would be so easy!” I am mumbling, as I am starting to realize that I have no clue what truth is! “I mean I do not even know what “Fax” means!”

“It is all good, my child, realizing that one cannot know everything is an important insight. I will tell you, the Latin word “Fax” means torch.”

By now we have entered far enough into the cave that the entrance is barely in sight anymore. The twilight of the woods turned into complete darkness the farther we traveled into the cave. It is now so dark that I cannot even see my hands in front of my face, and besides the echoing footsteps of my guide, which I am blindly following, there is no sound at all. I thought the woods were scary, but that was before we entered the complete darkness of this cave. “So,

have you reconsidered the meaning of the inscription?" asks Mrs. Woolf. "I have!" I answer rather quickly not wanting her to think that I am a complete idiot! " 'Veritas Fax Ardens', means truth is a flaming torch."

"Very good my child, but do you understand what this means?" she asks in a serious manner. "I guess I understand the concept of it" I respond quickly and add whispering, "beats me! I would rather have a torch right now, than wondering whether truth is a flaming torch or not, at least then I could see where we are going!" I hear Mrs. Woolf laughing and then saying "No doubt, you do indeed understand the concept now." Not even a second passes when we see a dim light in the distance. "Right on time," says Mrs. Woolf, while I am watching the light moving towards us. At first, it appeared like a flickering star in the night sky, but the closer it gets it resembles the light of an approaching ship. It is, however, not until the light is only a few feet away that I realize that it is indeed some person carrying a torch. Mrs. Woolf seems all delighted about the arrival of this man; I realize that they must know each other as they exchange friendly greetings. He turns towards me and starts to speak in a deep and mighty voice,

"I am Prometheus, who created men out of clay, I stole the fire from Zeus in order to lead mankind from primeval to civilized state. I was punished for my deed, and so were men, but if it were not for the fire, men would never have had the spiritual and material means that distinguishes them from animals. I am here to lend you my torch once again so that you might find your way through this cave. However, there are also two things I must warn you about this torch, the first being the fact that this is still a stolen gift which means that now there exists not only a relationship between you and me but also, between you and Zeus. The second thing you



must not forget is that this fire, which will hopefully provide you with the essential means, also bears the potential risk of devastation that could bring humankind back to the primeval state.”<sup>23</sup>

With these words, Prometheus hands me the torch and disappears into the darkness. I do not really understand what just happened; I am simply relieved to have some kind of light in this otherwise dark place. Mrs. Woolf is obviously amused with my astonishment of this encounter. However, I soon come to realize that I am carrying the only light in this cave, and what power and responsibility this bears. What if I let it go out? Would we ever make it out of here? What if I accidentally set everything else on fire, and hence bring the destruction Prometheus warned me about? Oh my, what if Zeus shows up? I mean, after all the weird things that already happened this could occur as well! “Do not worry my child,” says Mrs. Woolf in a calming tone, “it is good that you are aware of these dangers, as awareness is part of this journey.”

#### **Chapter Four – Enlightenment At Last?**

Somewhat relieved that Mrs. Woolf is confident in my abilities to carry a torch, we continue our journey down the cave, as all of a sudden we hear a loud battle of words coming from different voices. Slightly intimidated I look at Mrs. Woolf, and ask, “Who are those people?”

“You are going to enjoy this” answers Mrs. Woolf, and adds, “we have entered the valley of those who love wisdom, and you might now begin to ask those you will meet about the nature of truth.” As we approach the debating circle, Mrs. Woolf points at one of the men and says, “This is Aristotle, and you might address him first, but remember to keep your question short, as you do not wish to start a dispute!”

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<sup>23</sup> The information about Prometheus comes from Carol Dougherty’s book *Prometheus*.

“Mr. Aristotle, what a great honor to meet you here. May I interrupt your discussion and ask your opinion on the nature of truth?” Unambiguously bothered by my sudden interruption, Aristotle begins to speak as if my question was a fly he tries to repel:

To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true; so that he who says of anything that it is, or that it is not, will say either what is true or what is false; but neither what is nor what is not is said to be or not to be.<sup>24</sup>

As I am trying to make sense of what Aristotle just said, another voice begins to speak, while Mrs. Woolf whispers in my ear, “this is the German Philosopher Martin Heidegger.”

‘Truth’: what is that? The answer to the question ‘what is that?’ brings us to the ‘essence’ of a thing. ‘Table’: What is that? ‘Mountain’, ‘ocean’, ‘plant’; in each case the question ‘what is that?’ asks about the ‘essence’ of these things. We ask – and yet we already *know* them! Indeed, *must* we not know them, in order afterward to ask, and even to give an answer, about *what* they are?<sup>25</sup>

“But” speaks another voice apparently disagreeing with what Heidegger just said.

“That in order to seek truth, it is necessary once in the course of life, to doubt, as far as possible, of all things.”<sup>26</sup>

“Now that sounds like my kind of a guy” I whisper to Mrs. Woolf,

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<sup>24</sup> Aristotle, and W. D. Ross. *Metaphysics*. (Stilwell, KS: Digireads.com, 2006), Kindle edition.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Heidegger, and Ted Sadler. *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*. (London: Continuum, 2002), 1.

<sup>26</sup> René Descartes, and John Veitch. *The Meditations, and Selections from the Principles of Rene Descartes*. (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1959), Kindle edition.

“after all, he also seems to question everything! May I ask your name?” I am addressing him once more. “I am René Descartes, but as I said before, you may doubt that as well!”

“You may doubt as much as you wish, eventually, ‘Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself’<sup>27</sup> Argues yet another voice, whose as I learn from Mrs. Woolf, is that of Jean-Paul Sartre. “Indeed,” echoes a voice of a man, whom I recognize as Immanuel Kant,

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! [Dare to be wise!] Have courage to use your *own* understanding!<sup>28</sup>

“And on that notion I add,” says yet another voice, “the mind is of all truths it ever shall know.”<sup>29</sup>

“Did you hear that, Mrs. Woolf? If the mind is indeed of all truths it can ever know, then I was right that I had found the nature of truth! Who is that guy?” Mrs. Woolf smiles in that same old suspicious manner and informs me that this is John Locke. She further also reminds me to make sure to ask all those who are present. I look around the circle and notice the remaining two men who continue their silence as if they waited for a special invitation to join the discussion. From

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<sup>27</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre. *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1985), 15.

<sup>28</sup> Immanuel Kant. *An Answer to the Question: 'what Is Enlightenment?'* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 1.

<sup>29</sup> John Locke, and Kenneth Winkler. *An Essay concerning Human Understanding: Abridged and Edited, with an Introduction and Notes*. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub., 1996), 9.

Mrs. Woolf I learn that the man, who looks even more annoyed by my disturbance than Aristotle did, is Confucius, and so I approach him and say, “May I also ask you, about your opinion on truth?” and the man begins to speak in a snappish tone, “I do not open up the truth to one who is not eager to get knowledge, nor help out any one who is not anxious to explain himself.”<sup>30</sup> What a likable person, I think to myself, but then I turn to the last, a friendly looking man in riding suit whose name is Robert Pirsig, and he begins to speak in an amused tone. “The truth knocks on the door and you say, “Go away, I’m looking for the truth.” and so it goes away. Puzzling.”<sup>31</sup> “Puzzling, indeed!” I say to Mrs. Woolf, and think that I certainly enjoyed this debate. Even though, my understanding of truth appears to be farther away than ever before. “I am delighted that you did enjoy this debate, but let us not lose any more time, we still have a long way to go.”

As we walk on, the debating voices fade away behind us, and once again we find ourselves in complete silence. My head feels dizzy and heavy, and I am still trying to put together the pieces of the puzzle, as all of a sudden I hear Mrs. Woolf yelling, “Watch out!” Terrified, I find myself back in the moment and realize that I am standing in front of an abyss. “You have to be more careful, you almost fell off the rim, and the torch with you!” “I am so sorry, Mrs. Woolf, it is just that I am still trying to understand what these men told me about the nature of truth!” “Excellent,” answers Mrs. Woolf and adds, “nevertheless, you must not permit your search to engulf you in misery, but now that we stand here above the valley of those who love the light, you may be able to find additional pieces of the puzzle among those who are down there.” Mrs.

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<sup>30</sup> Confucius. *Complete Works of Confucius*. (Minerva Classics, 2013), Kindle edition.

<sup>31</sup> Robert M. Pirsig. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 5.

Woolf guides me to a narrow staircase, and we descend even further. Me first, Mrs. Woolf following closely. As we arrive at the bottom of the staircase we hear another group of voices, but this time, the tone seems to differ. It does not take long until we hear a welcoming greeting coming from the voices. “We have already expected you,” says one, and Mrs. Woolf quickly informs me that this is the voice of Xenophanes. “You may now address him with your question” she adds. “Thank you for having me,” I say, and continue, “I am searching the truth, and would appreciate hearing your position.” The circle responds with friendly laughter, but then Xenophanes begins to speak in serious tone.

The gods did not reveal from the beginning  
 All things to us; but in the course of time  
 Through seeking, men found that which is better.  
 But as for certain truth, no man has known it,  
 Nor will he know it; neither of the gods,  
 Nor yet of all the things of which I speak.  
 And even if by chance he were to utter  
 The final truth, he would himself not know it;  
 For all is but a woven web of guesses.<sup>32</sup>

“A woven web of guesses” I mumble to myself, trying to make sense of what I am told right away this time. “What do you think Rabbi Isaac?” Xenophanes asks another man who eagerly responds:

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<sup>32</sup> Martin Cohen. *Wittgenstein's Beetle and Other Classic Thought Experiments*. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Pub., 2005), 92.

The light created by God in the act of Creation flared from one end of the universe to the other and was hidden away, reserved for the righteous in the world that is coming, as it is written: 'Light is sown for the righteous.' Then the worlds will be fragrant, and all will be one. But until the world that is coming arrives, it is stored and hidden away.<sup>33</sup>

“The light is stored and hidden away until the world that is coming arrives,” I repeat and then ask, “but does that mean that this coming world, to which you refer, has arrived with the birth of Jesus? Because is it not mentioned in John 8:12, that Jesus is the light of the world?”<sup>34</sup> The Rabbi does not seem willing to answer my question, as he and most other men remain silent. After a few seconds of complete silence, however, one man, with black curly hair, dark eyes, and brown skin, steps forward and says, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”<sup>35</sup> Curiously, I look at Mrs. Woolf and whisper, “I recognize this phrase as one of Jesus’, but this man appears strange to me!” Before Mrs. Woolf can say something, another man begins to speak as if he had heard what I whispered in her ear. “Ask not what is truth [reality] for immediately the darkness of corporeal images and the clouds of phantasms will put themselves in the way, and will disturb that calm which at the first twinkling shone forth to thee, when I said truth [reality].”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Daniel Chanan Matt. *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism*. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 90.

<sup>34</sup> Michael D. Coogan, Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: With the Apocrypha*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1896.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 1897

<sup>36</sup> Augustine, John F. Thornton, and Susan B. Varenne. *Late Have I Loved Thee: Selected Writings of Saint Augustine on Love*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 267.

“Well-spoken Saint Augustine,” says another, and continues in strange accent, “Truth resides in every human heart, and one has to search for it there, and to be guided by truth as one sees it. But no one has a right to coerce others to act according to his own view of truth.”<sup>37</sup>

“This is Mahatma Gandhi.” Says Mrs. Woolf, and she barely finishes her sentence, when another man, Marcus Aurelius, speaks up in a rather upset tone:

For all things throughout, there is but one and the same order; and through all things, one and the same God, the same substance and the same law. There is one common reason, and one common truth, that belongs unto all reasonable creatures, for neither is there save one perfection of all creatures that are of the same kind, and partakers of the same reason.<sup>38</sup>

“This is because God is the Truth,”<sup>39</sup> answers another, who introduces himself as Abu al-Qasim Muhammad Ibn Abd Allah Ibn Abd al-Muttalib Ibn Hashim. “But how can he be so certain?” I say in complete bewilderment, and Mrs. Woolf responds, “to help you with that question you may want to listen to what the gentleman over there has to say, his name is Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali.” So I approach the man and before I can speak he says:

You do not limit yourself to believing what you have experienced. On the contrary, you have listened to the reports of experienced men and have unquestioningly accepted their statements. Listen, therefore, to the utterances of the prophets: for they have indeed

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<sup>37</sup> William Borman. *Gandhi and Non-violence*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986), 220.

<sup>38</sup> Marcus Aurelius. *Meditations*. (Public Domain Book, 2012), Kindle edition.

<sup>39</sup> Abdel Haleem, M. A. 2005. *The Qur'an*. New York: OUP Oxford, 2005. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (April 16, 2016). 22:5, 22:6

experienced and seen what is true in all that revelation has brought us. Follow in their path, and you will perceive some of that by direct vision.<sup>40</sup>

“And I will perceive some of ‘that ‘by direct vision!’” I mutter under my breath so that no one can hear it, or so I thought. But as it appears there is one, who feels destined to address me on that notion:

Look at it but you cannot see it!

Its name is *Formless*.

Listen to it but you cannot hear it!

Its name is *Soundless*.

Grasp it but you cannot get it!

Its name is *Incorporeal*.

These three attributes are unfathomable;

Therefore they fuse into one.

Its upper side is not bright:

Its under side not dim.

Continually the Unnameable moves on,

Until it returns beyond the realm of things.

We call it the formless Form, the imageless Image.

We call it the indefinable and unimaginable.

Confront it and you do not see its face!

Follow it and you do not see its back!

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<sup>40</sup> Ghazzālī, Richard Joseph. McCarthy, David B. Burrell, and William A. Graham. *Al-Ghazālī's Path to Sufism and His Deliverance from Error: An Annotated Translation of Al-Munqidh Min Al-dal'al*. (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2006), 77.



Yet, equipped with this timeless Tao,

You can harness present realities.

To know the origins is initiation into the Tao.<sup>41</sup>

“Ok, now I am really confused!” I say to Mrs. Woolf, and she informs me that the man who just spoke is Lao Tzu. “His teachings certainly appear confusing, but you must not doubt his intellect.” And just as she said that another responds, “Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus: Truth is the equation or adaequation of things and intellect”<sup>42</sup>

“This is Saint Thomas Aquinas.” Whispers Mrs. Woolf, and signals me that we should move on, but as we are about to do so, I notice a few remaining men and ask her if I may address them too.

“Certainly, you may ask them as well, but again, keep it short as you do not wish to create more commotion.” Deliberately, I approach the remaining men sitting slightly away from the former, and ask, “May I also hear your position on what truth might be?” The first man introduces himself as Siddhartha Gautama, and explains:

Those who know the essential to be essential

And the inessential as inessential

Reach the essential,

Living in the field of right intention.<sup>43</sup>

“One needs to know the essential in order to live with the right intention?” I repeat, and wonder how this could explain what truth is, but since I promised Mrs. Woolf to keep it short, I move on

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<sup>41</sup> Laozi, and Jingxiong Wu. *Tao the Ching*. (Boston: Shambhala, 1990), 19.

<sup>42</sup> David Marian. "The Correspondence Theory of Truth." *Stanford University*. May 10, 2002. April 10, 2016. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-correspondence/>.

<sup>43</sup> Gil Fronsdal. *The Dhammapada: A New Translation of the Buddhist Classic with Annotations*. (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2006.), 3.

and ask a second about his name and stance. The man responds in familiar accent and mentions that his name is Carl Jung:

To this question there is a positive answer only when the individual is willing to fulfill the demands of rigorous self-examination and self-knowledge. If he follows through his intention, he will not only discover some important truths about himself, but will also have gained a psychological advantage: he will have succeeded in deeming himself worthy of serious attention and sympathetic interest. He will have set his hand, as it were, to a declaration, of his own human dignity and taken the first step towards the foundations of his consciousness — that is, towards the unconscious, the only accessible source of religious experience.<sup>44</sup>

A third man addresses me, and briefs that he is Charles Darwin, “I cannot pretend to throw the least light on such abstruse problems. The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us; and I for one must be content to remain an agnostic.”<sup>45</sup> The two remaining men laugh lustily when one begins to speak in a know-it-all manner, “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”<sup>46</sup>

“I know this expression, so I guess you must be Karl Marx?” I say, and the man nods in a confident manner but somewhat baffled that I knew who he is. The last man, who is now yelling with laughter, must be Friedrich Nietzsche. I recognize him because of his prominent mustache.

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<sup>44</sup> Carl G. Jung. *The Undiscovered Self*. (New York.: Signet, 2006), 89.

<sup>45</sup> Christian C. Young, and Mark A. Largent. *Evolution and Creationism: A Documentary and Reference Guide*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 161.

<sup>46</sup> Karl Marx, Joseph J. O'Malley, and Annette Jolin. *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 131.

Mrs. Woolf confirms my assumption by nodding and saying, "Go ahead, ask him." Once the man calmed himself down from laughing I do what she said and he answers:

Every true faith is indeed infallible; it performs what the believing person hopes to find in it, but it does not offer the least support for the establishing of an objective truth. Here the ways of men divide. If you want to achieve peace of mind and happiness, then have faith; if you want to be a disciple of truth, then search.<sup>47</sup>

"Great," I say to myself, and start to realize how my knowledge of truth decreases with every word I hear. Mrs. Woolf reminds me that we really need to move on, "We still have a fair way to go, and you know how wars are fought based on the opinion that one belief system is superior over any others, so let us not kindle more hatred."

We leave the valley behind us and descend even further into the darkness. By now we have entered so deep into the cave, that the air is muggy and stuffy, and just like the heavy air, confusion lies heavy on my mind. Neither of us seems to be in the mood for talking, and so we progress to the echoing sound of our footsteps. After a while, Mrs. Woolf breaks the silence and says, "We are about to approach the valley of those who love life, and you may find further answers here."

"Nice, more answers adding to my confusion is exactly what I need!" I respond in agony.

As we approach the circle of men, I begin to understand what Mrs. Woolf meant when she said "those who love life", and immediately feel new excitement, as I realize that these men are all scientists. I mean here I might finally find some hard facts. Mrs. Woolf greets the men and informs them of our mission. In scientific method, the men look at each other as if they were to

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<sup>47</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, and Christopher Middleton. *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub., 1996), 7.

measure in which order they should speak, and after a few seconds and many affirmative nods and grunts, the first man introduces himself as Konrad Zacharias Lorenz, and begins to speak, “Truth in science can be defined as the working hypothesis best suited to open the way to the next better one.”<sup>48</sup>

“See now the power of truth;” says a second, and continues, “the same experiment which at first glance seemed to show one thing, when more carefully examined, assures us of the contrary.”<sup>49</sup>

From Mrs. Woolf, I learn that the man is Galileo Galilei, and as I repeat what he said, I begin to wonder if we can ever know the final truth altogether. “The skeptic will say,” continues another, who must be Albert Einstein, “It may well be true that this system of equations is reasonable from a logical standpoint, but this does not prove that it corresponds to nature. You are right, dear skeptic. Experience alone can decide on truth.”<sup>50</sup>

“Experience alone can decide on truth,” I repeat and question how one person could ever live long enough to experience the whole truth when most of the time we find ourselves in error?

“From error to error one discovers the entire truth.”<sup>51</sup> Another man continues my thought and introduces himself as Sigmund Freud. “Discovering the truth by excluding error is kind of logical, is it not Mrs. Woolf?” I ask, but keep wondering how we would recognize that we have found the entire truth! “There are two kinds of truth, small truth and great truth. You can

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<sup>48</sup> Manfred Dietrich Laubichler, and Gerd Müller. *Modeling Biology: Structures, Behavior, Evolution*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 47.

<sup>49</sup> Stephen Hawking. *On the Shoulders of Giants: The Great Works of Physics and Astronomy*. (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2002), 523.

<sup>50</sup> Albert Einstein, and Carl Seelig. *Ideas and Opinions*. (New York: Crown Trade Paperbacks, 1995), 355.

<sup>51</sup> Peter R. Mercer. *More Calculus of a Single Variable*. (New York: Springer. 2014), 357.

recognize a small truth, because its opposite is falsehood. The opposite of a great truth is another great truth.”<sup>52</sup> Speaks another man who is Niels Bohr. “But is that not a contradiction?” I ask in disbelief, and another man responds in rational tone, “A tautology's truth is certain, a proposition's possible, a contradiction's impossible.”<sup>53</sup> He must be very fond of logic, I think to myself and learn from Mrs. Woolf that the man is Ludwig Wittgenstein. “But, if logic is the means to find truth, does that mean that only philosophers and scientists can find truth? And if so, why has none of them found the complete truth so far?” I ask inquisitively.

If we do discover a complete theory, it should in time be understandable in broad principle by everyone, not just a few scientists. Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason — for then we would know the mind of God.<sup>54</sup>

“I know who you are, you are Sir Stephen Hawking, but why this reference to God? Are you not an atheist?” Mr. Hawking does not show much interest in answering this question, he does, however, point out that he does not wish to be called Sir. By now, there are only two more men remaining and as usual, I am asking Mrs. Woolf's permission to query them as well, and learn that they are Isaac Newton and Max Planck. Before I can even voice my question once again, the great Isaac Newton begins to speak:

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<sup>52</sup> Larry Chang. *Wisdom for the Soul: Five Millennia of Prescriptions for Spiritual Healing*. (Washington, DC: Gnosophia Publishers, 2006), 723.

<sup>53</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, David Pears, and Brian McGuinness. *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*. (London: Routledge, 2001), 42.

<sup>54</sup> Stephen Hawking. *A Brief History of Time*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1998), 191.

I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.<sup>55</sup>

As I am still admiring what Newton just said, Max Plank continues in likely humbleness. “It is not the possession of truth, but the success which attends the seeking after it, that enriches the seeker and brings happiness to him.”<sup>56</sup>

“What a nice way to put it,” I say to Mrs. Woolf, “I suspect this might be true, as it is usually the anticipation that brings the greatest joy, but then again, how would he know unless he had found the truth?” Mrs. Woolf smiles the way she always does when I am lost in confusion, and whispers, “We really have to go now, remember we are short on time.”

As we walk on, Mrs. Woolf informs me that we will visit one more valley, the valley of those who love words, and that I might also consider the words spoken there. “Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact.”<sup>57</sup> She says, and continues, “Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truths mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth, and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping.”<sup>58</sup> I am listening so cautiously that I barely realize how we have already arrived in the valley. Not far from us I start to recognize familiar faces, faces of people whose works I have always admired. Mrs. Woolf is obviously equally

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<sup>55</sup> Isaac Newton. "Cambridge University Library - Newton Exhibition." *Cambridge University Library - Newton Exhibition*. April 11, 2016. [http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/exhibitions/Footprints\\_of\\_the\\_Lion/introduction.html](http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/exhibitions/Footprints_of_the_Lion/introduction.html).

<sup>56</sup> Jeffrey Strickland. *Weird Scientists - the Creators of Quantum Physics*. (Lulu Inc., 2011), 28.

<sup>57</sup> Virginia Woolf. *A Room of One's Own*. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 4.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

delighted to be here and begins to introduce me, and the purpose of my visit. Not surprisingly, it is Virgil who approaches and addresses me first. “Obscūris vēra involvēns.”<sup>59</sup> He says, and I, with my limited knowledge of Latin, I cannot help but think how strange this sounds.

“Tis strange - but true; for truth is always strange;

Stranger than fiction; if it could be told,

How much would novels gain by the exchange!”<sup>60</sup>

Adds another one, who as it turns out, is Lord Byron. “But Mrs. Woolf,” I ask, “did you not say before that it is in fiction that we often find truth?” Mrs. Woolf smiles once again, and I understand that she does not care to elaborate, she simply points at another man, who seems anxious to speak, and introduces him as Henry Louis Mencken.

The man who boasts that he habitually tells the truth is simply a man with no respect for it. It is not a thing to be thrown about loosely, like small change; it is something to be cherished and hoarded and disbursed only when absolutely necessary. The smallest atom of truth represents some man’s bitter toil and agony; for every ponderable chunk of it there is a brave truth-seeker’s grave upon some lonely ash-dump and a soul roasting in Hell.<sup>61</sup>

“So are you guys now saying that truth should only be told when absolutely necessary? Is that why you remain silent Mrs. Woolf?” I ask, but Mrs. Woolf just giggles, and then encourages me to think about the latter part Mencken just said. “For every ponderable chunk of truth there is a

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<sup>59</sup> Maro, Publius Vergilius, Clyde Pharr, and Alexander Gordon McKay. *Vergils Aeneid, Books I - VI: With Introd., Notes, Vocabulary, and Grammatical Appendix*. (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci, 2007), 313.

<sup>60</sup> Lord Byron. *Don Juan*. (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), 320.

<sup>61</sup> Henry L. Mencken. *A Mencken Chrestomathy*. (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1949), 15.

brave truth-seeker's grave." I repeat, and wonder what this means, as James Baldwin begins to speak, "But that battered word, truth, having made its appearance here, confronts one immediately with a series of riddles and has, moreover, since so many gospels are preached, the unfortunate tendency to make one belligerent."<sup>62</sup>

"How true!" I say, realizing that the more I learned about truth, the less I understand.

"There are very few human beings who receive the truth, complete and staggering, by instant illumination. Most of them acquire it fragment by fragment, on a small scale, by successive developments, cellularly, like a laborious mosaic."<sup>63</sup> I hear a female voice saying, whose, as it turns out, is that of Anaïs Nin. How hopeful that sounds, I think to myself, and just as I am about to gain new confidence that eventually I am might still be able to find the meaning of truth, I hear another voice saying:

A hunger for absolute justification is a neurosis, not a tenacity to be admired. It is like checking every five minutes that there is no nest of hissing cobras under your bed, or like the man in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* who buys a second copy of the daily newspaper to assure himself that what the first copy said was true. Justifications must come to an end somewhere; and where they generally come to an end is in some kind of faith.<sup>64</sup>

"So would you then say that we need some kind of faith because truth is beyond our understanding? I ask the man who makes himself known as Terry Eagleton, but yet another

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<sup>62</sup> James Baldwin. *Notes of a Native Son*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 15.

<sup>63</sup> Anaïs Nin, and Gunther Stuhlmann. *The Diary of Anaïs Nin*. (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1969), Kindle edition.

<sup>64</sup> Terry Eagleton. *Reason, Faith, & Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 124.



voice answers, “Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn’t.”<sup>65</sup>

“Wait a second, you are Mark Twain!” I say with astonishment. “And are you then saying that because truth is not obliged to stick to possibilities, that everything would in truth be possible, including that, which we assume to be impossible? And is that then why we like fiction, and as Umberto Eco says even ‘risk feeling homesick for Disneyland’ or that such illusions are the only truths we can know, and hence do not fear?”<sup>66</sup>

“Truth is a torch but a huge one, and so it is only with blinking eyes that we all of us try to get past it, in actual terror of being burnt” utters a man who goes by the name Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.<sup>67</sup> “Yeah, I kind of get that. How many times have I now almost burnt myself with this torch that Prometheus gave me? But do we fear truth because we do not know it, or because some found it to be indeed dangerous?”

“Believe those who are seeking the truth. Doubt those who find it” says a man whose name is Andre Gide.<sup>68</sup> “Doubt those who find it,” I repeat and begin to think about who those people are, who claim to know the truth, as I notice how Mrs. Woolf is once again laughing at me.

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<sup>65</sup> Mark Twain. *Following the Equator: A Journey around the World*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1989), 156.

<sup>66</sup> Umberto Eco. *Travels in Hyper Reality: Essays*. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 44.

<sup>67</sup> Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, and T. Bailey Saunders. *Maxims and Reflections*. (London: MacMillan, 1908), Kindle edition.

<sup>68</sup> Chang. *Wisdom for the Soul*, 723.

“So, is it then really simply about searching for the truth?” I ask, and Mrs. Woolf introduces me to a man called Constantine Cavafy, who does not waste any time but begins to speak in poetic voice:

As you set out for Ithaka  
hope the voyage is a long one,  
full of adventure, full of discovery...  
Keep Ithaka always in your mind.  
Arriving there is what you are destined for.  
But do not hurry the journey at all...  
Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.  
Without her you would not have set out.  
She has nothing left to give you now.  
And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.  
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,  
you will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.<sup>69</sup>

As soon as the man ceased to speak, everything falls into complete silence once again, and all the people who were here a second ago faded into nothingness. Mrs. Woolf and I find ourselves once more all alone in the cave. Somewhat overwhelmed by all the things I have been told, I look at Mrs. Woolf and ask, “What Now?”

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<sup>69</sup> Constantine P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*. Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. Edited by George Savidis. Revised Edition. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 36-37.

### Chapter Five – I See, Says The Blind

My guide and I came on that hidden road  
 to make our way back into the bright world;  
 and with no care for any rest, we climbed –  
 he first, I following - until I saw,  
 through a round opening, some of those things  
 of beauty Heaven bears. It was from there  
 that we emerged, to see-once more-the stars.<sup>70</sup>

“You have visited the valleys of those who love wisdom, light, life, and those who love the words, and now, we only have one more stop ahead of us. This is a special place, and I must warn you as it will shed light on ‘how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened,’” says Mrs. Woolf in serious tone.<sup>71</sup> “Here now, you must also leave the torch behind, as it was never yours to keep *ab ovo*. But before doing so, you may use it one last time to light a fire.”

I do as Mrs. Woolf told me, and once the fire enlightens this place, Mrs. Woolf asks,

“Do you see now, this wall, which is like a stage in a puppet theater?”

“I see” I answer.

“And do you see,” Mrs. Woolf continues, these men moving all kinds of objects like marionettes along the wall? ‘Some of them are talking, others silent?’”

“Yes Ma’am, I do!” I respond.

“Good!” answers Mrs. Woolf, “Now we will proceed to the other side of the wall, but behold, once we reach the dark side, you will see ‘human beings living in a underground den, [where]

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<sup>70</sup> Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, 317

<sup>71</sup> This conversation between Virginia Woolf and the protagonist is a modification of what is spoken between Socrates and Glaucon in Plato’s *The Allegory of the Cave*.

they have been from their childhood [on], [with] their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads.”

“You are showing me a strange place, [Mrs. Woolf], and they are strange prisoners,” I say.

Mrs. Woolf replies, “Now that you see them, do you understand how they can only see ‘their own shadows, and the shadows of one another’?”

“Yes.” I respond, and continue, “how could they see anything else if they are not allowed to move their heads?”

“Excellent,” says Mrs. Woolf and adds, “and of the objects the marionette players are showing along the wall, can the prisoners not also only see the shadows?”

“Yes, indeed!” I reply.

“And if the prisoners talk to each other, do they not name the shadows, and assume that they are real objects?” Mrs. Woolf asks further.

“Yes! They probably do.” I respond.

“And because of the echo in this place are the prisoners not sure that the voices of the marionette players are actually coming from the shadows?” asks Mrs. Woolf.

“No doubt!” I reply.

Mrs. Woolf continues, “and do you not think that these prisoners assume these shadows to be the truth?”

“I suspect so!” I answer.

“Now imagine, what would happen if you were to release one of those prisoners?” Mrs. Woolf continues, “will he not, at first, endure pain as he stands up and looks at the light, and be unable to see the realities of the things which hitherto he only saw the shadows of?”

“I guess so!” I respond.

“And what do you think would the prisoner say, if you would then tell him that what he saw before was nothing but an illusion, and that now that he is turned to more reality he will see clearer?” Mrs. Woolf asks.

“Poor guy, he will probably be overwhelmed!” I say.

“And so, do you not think that when you would ask him to name the objects, that he will be puzzled, and assuming that the shadows which he previously saw are truer than the objects themselves?” Mrs. Woolf continues.

”Far truer!” I agree.

“And since the light is still hurting his eyes, do you not think that he will prefer to keep looking at the shadows that his eyes are used to?” Mrs. Woolf inquires.

“Obviously!” I say.

“Now imagine what would happen if you were to take him outside and introduce him to the daylight. Will he not be in severe pain, and unable to see anything at first?” Mrs. Woolf asks in a very serious tone.

“Probably not at first.” I comply.

“His eyes will need to adapt, and so he will probably see shadows and reflections first, and only then be able to look at objects themselves. In a likely manner, will he not first be able to look at the light of the moon and the stars, before looking at the light of the sun?” Mrs. Woolf inquires.

“I would think so.” I respond.

“And once that he will finally be able to look at the sun and the objects themselves, will he not assume that the light of the sun is the source of all things he sees?” Mrs. Woolf continues to ask.

“I guess, once he will see clearly, he will probably start to question all things.” I admit.

“And if he then would remember his previous life and fellow prisoners, would he not be happy to be out in the light, and feel sorry for those who remain in the darkness? And would it then not be his duty to free them as well?” Mrs. Woolf requests.

“One would hope so!” I say confidently.

“Now imagine that he would be placed back into the darkness, and put into a competition against his fellow prisoners, would he not fail to see the shadows at first as his eyes are not used to the darkness anymore? And would the other prisoners hence not think that the daylight has done nothing for him except robbing his sight? And if you would now want to free the other ones as well, would they not want to kill you?” Mrs. Woolf asks.

“Oh gosh, I guess they probably would!” I respond.

Mrs. Woolf looks at me with a sweet smile but continues in a serious tone,

“Do you see now, how this place represents the world of sight? And how the fire you lit represents knowledge, and how the one you freed stands for a soul’s journey into the intellectual world? Who knows whether this is true or not, but in this world of knowledge, it seems, light can only be seen with effort, and if one were to see the light, one would understand it to be the source of reason and truth, and of all things right and beautiful?”

“I guess I agree.” I respond, and whisper, “as far as I understand!”

Mrs. Woolf hugs me and says, “We have now arrived at the end of our journey, and you may now take this spiral staircase that will lead you back into the world of sight.”

Somewhat wistfully, I take one last look at this place and begin my ascent up the circular stairs.

“What is that awful smell?” I ask Mrs. Woolf, but learn to my dismay, that she is gone.

“Get up!” I hear a familiar voice saying, but cannot recognize a thing as my eyes hurt from the intensive light.

“You are up next!” repeats the voice in urgent tone, and now that my eyes have adapted to the light, I realize that it is Hibernia calling me to get up and give my speech. In complete bewilderment, and still reflecting on the craziness that just happened to me, I walk to the podium and clear my throat.

“Good morning fellow graduates, esteemed faculty and administration, dear parents, family members and friends. First of all, I would like to congratulate the class of 2016, and thank you all for giving me the honor to speak to you today. As some of you might know, I am here to tell you about the nature of truth, but the truth is...”

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