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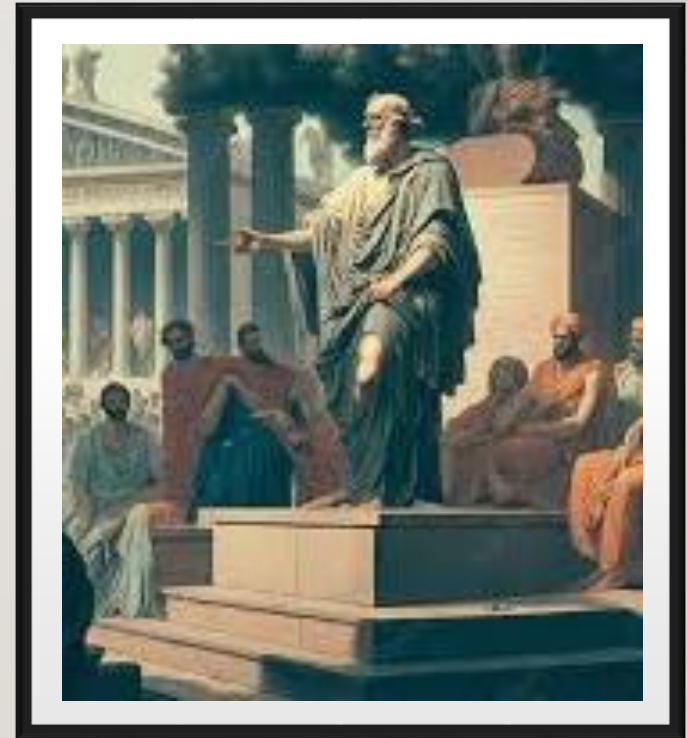
# TRUTH IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

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# THE PUBLIC NATURE OF TRUTH

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- By its very nature, truth, objectivity is public: if I succeed, through my attentive, intelligent and reasonable mental operations in coming to know truth, I go beyond myself to what is true, objective, for all – I reach the being of things beyond myself
- Of course, people can get confused about all this and fall into one or more types of ‘relativism’; ‘Oh this is my truth, but it may not be yours’; ‘what is true for me, or my group may not be for other groups of other times and places’
- This is precisely the kind of confusion we see Socrates (d. 399 BC) having to deal with in his confrontation with the sophists: thinkers like Protagoras and Gorgias – he showed that their views were contradictory and self-refuting
- The *principle of non-contradiction*: ‘if A is true then, necessarily, *not A* is false’
- You can’t have it both ways: If you say ‘All views are equally true and good’ then this necessarily *rules out as false* the view that ‘not all views are equally true and good’ – so you had to rule out a view!!



# A COMMUNAL ENTERPRISE

- As Aristotle (d. 324 BC) and St Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) observed human beings have to collaborate in the pursuit of truth:
- we see this in ordinary life; the knowledge and wisdom of one generation is passed on to the next; it is from *that basis* that the next generation may add to, improve or correct what came before
- We see it in the arts, sciences, world of applied sciences and scholarship: people have to spend some years in study and training; and then they also collaborate with others in their field
- We know many things first hand; but many other things we rightly claim to 'know' we in fact believe; without belief we would all have to start again afresh from the caves!
- This fact, and the publicity of knowing is highlighted in a great book by St John Henry Newman, *The Grammar of Assent* (1870)
- As Newman points out, it would be literally foolish, even for someone in Victorian England, to say we are not certain that Britain is an Island – but has the person come to come this first hand, or through the reasonable trust placed in evidence from others?
- As we grow from childhood, we learn how to develop skills for intelligently and reasonably trusting in others or not; this is the area of 'authority' discussed also by St Thomas





# SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY

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- Another confusion that we find, and which also has roots in what happened in western thought and culture over some centuries, has to do with ‘subjectivity’ and ‘objectivity’
- This can sometimes manifest itself in terms of people talking of their interests or talents being now more in the ‘arts/humanities’, on the one hand, or, on the other in the ‘hard sciences’ – the latter are in the area of the ‘hard, objective facts’; whereas the former have to do with ‘subjective feelings’, ‘insights’ etc
- Of course, there are differences between different areas of human research and knowledge but there are also things they have very much in common
- So, there is ‘being subjective’ in the wrong sense, as opposed to exploring, or thinking about, or talking about one’s or our ‘subjectivity’
- In therapy or spiritual direction or marriage counselling, for instance, we should want to be ‘objective’ not ‘subjective’ in the wrong sense



# REFORMATION, THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND SHIFTS IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

- With the Protestant ideas of 'sola fide' (in addition to 'sola scriptura') we have the notion that faith is only 'subjective'; a rejection of the Catholic vision of faith and reason as in harmony; rather reason is a matter of merely human 'works' – philosophy and reason are to be banished from true religion (*fideism*)
- Then in the following 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries we see, with the advance of science and its application to living, 'Enlightenment' thinkers like Hobbes and then Voltaire, Diderot and Hume (who are anti-religious) increasingly claiming that only science – which is about material reality – gives true, objective knowledge
- The 18<sup>th</sup> century image of the world is the clock
- We shall see in looking at the 'New atheism' of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century - and postmodernist reactions to it - there is nothing new at all: it is simply these two themes played out again
- And during these centuries we increasingly see the 'public square' influenced and formed by new mass media: the printing press – born in Catholic Germany in the 1400s – becomes more effective; an increase in a middle class who can read; the emergence of 'magazines', early newspapers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century



# THE COMMUNAL SEARCH FOR AND EMBRACE OF TRUTH

- Unlike the Angels, we have to *reason* to get to the truth; and since finding and living by truth is a communal matter for us, we need discussion and even debate in human community – this should be done in a virtuous way, but given *our fallen nature* debate often leads to hatred and often violent division – we need grace to correct that in ourselves and in society
- There needs, then, to be freedom for reasonable discussion and search for truth – think of the community of scientists or scholars
- The Document of Vatican II, *Dignitatis humanae* – is sometimes misunderstood as allowing a kind of ‘free for all’; but this is not so; we see the affirmation several times that ‘freedom’ of religious or other views in society has to be in accord with the ‘common good’ – there we are led back to ‘natural law’, which we will look at further
- So there always has to be some kind of censorship in society that is justified and reasonable: not exposing children to certain things; we are not free to publish libellous claims against others; we need the regulation of law based on reason, on the reasons of the natural law
- But when censorship is pursued in the name of lies or the *denial of reason* then this is a deformation of the public sphere of truth
- Unfortunately, we see this manifest in many places today not least even in the universities which should be a place for reasonable and rational discussion: we can see the ‘outing’ of professors in the name of ‘woke’ causes; the closing down of debate by intimidation and bullying; cases such as Professor Kathleen Stock of Sussex University (author of *Material Girls*) or the cancellation of an honorary doctorate for Germain Greer





# THE DICTATORSHIP OF RELATIVISM

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- This is the phrase of Pope Benedict XVI who wrote and spoke a good deal of this threat to modern society; we can think of his great address to the British parliament when he spoke of the conscience of St Thomas More and the British abolition of slavery
- In *Fides et Ratio* Pope St John Paul II wrote of the way the decline of faith is at once the decline of reason – contrary to what the 18<sup>th</sup> century enlightenment thinkers taught
- And the great G. K. Chesterton saw this too many years ago; he said that when people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing but in any old thing – nature abhors a vacuum!
- We can also think of the neo-Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse's phrase: 'The tyranny of tolerance'! 'Tyranny' is rule that is grossly contrary to reason, or without reason – thus it can be seen in shutting down or ignoring matters which should be debated and resolved for the good of people
- We can think of the media in our country which tends to completely ignore or 'shut down' the issue of abortion

