

Excerpt from Harry Frankfurt's *On Truth*

"What I have been dealing with so far, in my discussion of truth, is essentially a pragmatic—i.e., a consequential or utilitarian—consideration. It is a consideration, moreover, that has to do with "truth" as understood distributively—i.e., not as referring to an entity of some mysterious sort that might be identified and examined as a separate reality in its own right, but rather as a characteristic that belongs to (or that is "distributed" among) any number of individual propositions and that can be encountered only as it characterizes one or another true proposition. The consideration with which I have been dealing pertains to the usefulness of many truths in facilitating the successful design and pursuit of social or individual ambitions and activities, a usefulness that those truths possess only by virtue of being true. This utility is a feature of truths that is easy to grasp, difficult to overlook, and quite impossible for any sensible person to deny. It provides the most obvious and the most elementary reason for people to care about truth—about the characteristic of being true—and to regard it as being important to them. Let us make an effort now to go a little farther. We may be able to expand our appreciation of the importance of truth by considering a question that arises quite naturally, in one form or another, when we begin to reflect on the obvious pragmatic utility of truth. How is it that truths possess this utility? What is the explanatory connection between the fact that they are true and the fact that they have so much practical value? For that matter, why are truths useful at all?"

"Surely it is apparent, however, that in large part we select the objects that we desire, that we love, and to which we commit ourselves, because of what we believe about them—for instance, that they will increase our wealth or protect our health, or that they will serve our interests in some other way. Hence, the truth or the falsity of the factual statements on which we rely in explaining or in validating our choice of goals and our commitments is inescapably relevant to the rationality of our attitudes and our choices. Unless we know whether we are justified in regarding various factual judgments as true, we cannot know whether there is really any sense in feeling and in choosing as we do. For these reasons, no society can afford to despise or to disrespect the truth. It is not enough, however, for a society merely to acknowledge that truth and falsity are, when all is said and done, legitimate and significant concepts. In addition, the society must not neglect to provide encouragement and support for capable individuals who devote themselves to acquiring and to exploiting significant truths. Moreover, whatever benefits and rewards it may sometimes be possible to attain by bullshitting, by dissembling, or through sheer mendacity, societies cannot afford to tolerate anyone or anything that fosters a slovenly indifference to the distinction between true and false. Much less can they indulge the shabby, narcissistic pretense that being true to the facts is less important than being "true to oneself." If there is any attitude that is inherently antithetical to a decent and orderly social life, that is it. A society that is recklessly and persistently remiss in any of these ways is bound to decline or, at least, to render itself culturally inert. It will certainly be incapable of any substantial achievement, and even

of any coherent and prudent ambition. Civilizations have never gotten along healthily, and cannot get along healthily, without large quantities of reliable factual information. They also cannot flourish if they are beset with troublesome infections of mistaken beliefs. To establish and to sustain an advanced culture, we need to avoid being debilitated either by error or by ignorance. We need to know—and, of course, we must also understand how to make productive use of—a great many truths. This is not only a societal imperative. It also applies to each of us, as individuals. Individuals require truths in order to negotiate their way effectively through the thicket of hazards and opportunities that all people invariably confront in going about their lives. They need to know the truth about what to eat and what not to eat, about how to dress (given the facts concerning climatic conditions), about where to live (in view of information about such things as tectonic fault lines, the prevalence of avalanches, and the proximity of shops, jobs, and schools), as well as about how to do what they are paid to do, how to raise their children, what to think of the people they meet, what they are capable of achieving, what they would like to achieve, and an endless variety of other mundane yet vital matters. Our success or failure in whatever we undertake, and therefore in life altogether, depends on whether we are guided by truth or whether we proceed in ignorance or on the basis of falsehood. It also depends critically, of course, on what we do with the truth. Without truth, however, we are out of luck before we even start. We really cannot live without truth. We need truth not only in order to understand how to live well, but in order to know how to survive at all. Furthermore, this is something that we cannot easily fail to notice. We are therefore bound to recognize, at least implicitly, that truth is important to us; and, consequently, we are also bound to understand (again, at least implicitly) that truth is not a feature of belief to which we can permit ourselves to be indifferent. Indifference would be a matter not just of negligent imprudence. It would quickly prove fatal. To the extent that we appreciate its importance to us, then, we cannot reasonably allow ourselves to refrain either from wanting the truth about many things or from striving to possess it.”