

ON TRUTH

JAN SOKOL

O God give truth back to the world! It would be more than peace treaties, more precious than any alliance. Nobody, no nation, no state can be secure if any human relations can be corrupted by the instrument of the lie. There will be no certainty, no treaties, nothing valid and secure, if the knowledge of every nation is distorted by the deliberate lie. Behind every lie is intrigue and violence; every lie is an attack on world security. Nobody will live in peace, not even behind the strongest walls of steel and concrete; the winged lie ridicules all our fortifications. Freeing the world from lies is more than disarmament.

KAREL ČAPEK (1938)

It is surprising how many educated people have recently been striving and perhaps are still striving to cast doubt on, ridicule and discredit the concept of truth. There are people who do not write the word truth without quotation marks, so that they do not trouble themselves. However, every person, who speaks and writes, is entirely dependent on truth and truthfulness. If the difference between true, untrue and lying speech is lost, speech loses its meaning. If we cannot rely on (almost) everybody telling the truth, it makes no sense even to ask the time.

They may object that in history people have killed each other in the name of truth. Would they not have quarrelled and killed each other if they had preferred to recognize that there are many truths and each person has his or her own. But what is “my truth”? Apparently it is precisely what Plato called “mere opinion” and he placed it in opposition to real truth, which belongs to nobody and which prevails and settles our disputes. If the sceptical idea of “private truth” were consistently applied, if everybody has his own truth and if we lost the distinction between true and untrue speech, we would lose the benefit of speech. No word could be taken seriously and instead of speech we would have to fight with fists, swords or Kalashnikovs. Nothing else would be valid.

This would certainly be an absurd result, but the dilemma is here. Is truth really both a necessary condition for speech and, at the same time, a cause of conflict and violence? Is it not the reverse, that speech, meaning truthful speech, is the natural alternative to the lie and violence, as Karel Čapek and Václav Havel realized?



I think the dilemma can be resolved, but we must distinguish, even if we risk looking like pedants. Yes, people not only fought, but also expelled and killed in the name of some sort of truth. However, the truth lies in the fact that it was not the truth, but “some sort of truth”, or one against the other. That is a rather large difference. The sentence: Two times two equals four, is truthful, but is it the truth? If we want to be more exact, we must say that in the best case, it is a truthful statement, a truthful sentence. However, there are many such statements, and they may oppose each other. But if we want to speak at all, we must distinguish which are truthful and which are untruthful or are even lies. Then we can understand the word truth in a special and not obvious light, which enables at least some people to distinguish between the truthful and the untruthful. The truth is no claim, individual fact or finding, but the admirable and common feature of all true sentences, positions and perhaps also truthful people on whom a person can rely. That such a person may be mistaken is a natural result of his humanity, which, however, relates to the truth: “I was mistaken” is one of the deepest tributes a person can pay to the truth.

Thus, people came and still come into disputes and conflicts not because of the truth as such, but only because this or that claim, position or idea they firmly associate with the truth, is regarded as “some sort of” or “their truth”. If they do not forget that truth is precisely that which enables us to distinguish the truthful from the untruthful, they can rely on it and begin to seek it, for example, precisely in speech. People, who do not see this fundamental difference or reject it, are left with no other alternative than to silence, expel or bury their opponents. Since they do not know about truth or believe in it, they can happily lie because it is all the same. But beware: even the liar must rely on the person he deceives believing that his lie is truthful speech, otherwise the lie would have no meaning.

Translation Martin Styan



Karel Čapek – autoportrét, 1925