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Simon Blackburn

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Truth is not just a recent topic of contention. Arguments about it have gone on for centuries. Why is the truth important? Who decides what the truth is? Is there such a thing as objective, eternal truth, or is truth simply a matter of perspective, of linguistic or cultural vantage point?

In this concise book Simon Blackburn provides an accessible explanation of what truth is and how we might think about it. The first half of the book details several main approaches to how we should think about, and decide, what is true. These are philosophical theories of truth such as the correspondence theory, the coherence theory, deflationism, and others. He then examines how those approaches relate to truth in several contentious domains: art, ethics, reasoning, religion, and the interpretation of texts.

Blackburn's overall message is that truth is often best thought of not as a product or an end point that is 'finally' achieved, but--as the American pragmatist thinkers thought of it--as an ongoing process of inquiry. The result is an accessible and tour through some of the deepest and thorniest questions philosophy has ever tackled

On Truth Details

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Robin Friedman says

That Weakest Of Human Passions

In his short, provocative book "On Truth" philosopher Simon Blackburn explores the nature of truth and how we search for it. Blackburn is a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge and served as Bertrand Russell Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge. There are two large concerns prompting this book. The first concern is the popularity of deconstructionist, post-modern philosophy which denies the possibility of truth and which sees all claimed truths as relative to the speaker or group. The second concern is political, with the rise of a "post truth", "alternative facts" political culture and apparent disregard for the truth in both the United States and the United Kingdom. These considerations, as well as the broad importance and interest of the topic, make it valuable to revisit the nature of truth.

This book is elegantly and cogently written and meant to be accessible to lay readers as well as to academic philosophers. With Blackburn's mastery of the subject, the book lucidly addresses difficult questions in short chapters. Still, the book addresses issues and philosophers that general readers are likely to find daunting, with consideration, for example, of the "deflationary" concept of truth and of the semantic theory of truth of Alfred Tarski. Issues are raised and resolved with much brevity. Blackburn states that his book aims to provide suggestions for approaches and materials for reflection to his readers. With that goal, he succeeds admirably.

Blackburn has been greatly influenced by American pragmatism, in particular the pragmatism of Charles Peirce. His book begins with a short, difficult saying from Peirce: "We must not begin by talking of pure ideas -- vagabond thoughts that trump the public highways without any human habitation -- but must begin with men and their conversation." Blackburn combines Peirce with an epigram from a much different thinker -- the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham who wrote: "Stretching his hand up to reach the stars, too often man forgets the flowers at his feet." Blackburn's study is a meditation and expansion of these thoughts of Peirce and Bentham.

The book is in two parts. In the first part, Blackburn examines traditional philosophical theories of truth. He devotes short chapters to the correspondence theory followed by chapters dealing with the coherence theory of truth, pragmatism, and deflationism and Tarski. The correspondence theory is roughly treated and rejected as uninformative and unhelpful. Blackburn finds a great deal of value in the remaining theories and tends, properly enough, to see them as a piece. He is particularly inclined towards Peirce's pragmatism with its emphasis on success in action for a given inquiry and the goal of convergence of opinion by informed observers. He contrasts Peirce with the more subjective understanding of pragmatism by Peirce's friend, William James, in his philosophy of religion and strongly favors Peirce over James. Yet in a summary of the contents of the first part of the book, Blackburn stresses the unity between Peirce and James at his clearest. To find the truth is not to search for a thing or a metaphysical abstraction but instead is a process that responds to a particular human question and involves a search for the "particular go" of it. Truth is not a fact or a thing but rather a method of [e]nquiry used to develop how we strive to understand and assess the facts and the ideal endpoint of investigation. The shift from fact to method in understanding truth constitutes what Blackburn terms the "sea change" in philosophy wrought by American pragmatism.

In the second part of his book, Blackburn applies his view that truth is a method of enquiry which makes a "particular go" of it in human situations to a variety of contentious, emotive areas of human experience. He considers what the search for truth involves in art and in criticism and whether any more may be said than that only matters of taste are involved. He considers truth in ethics and morals, passing from broad, wooly

relativistic theories to understanding our responses to some particular, not difficult, examples. For example, the perception that it would be wrong to put a baby on the ground and stomp on it would work as a counter-example to an unqualified relativism. It would be worth exploring why and how ethics and truth begin in particulars and in methods. The mid-point of part two is a short chapter on reason. Blackburn rejects foundational accounts and the philosophical quest for certainty but argues that we begin where we are with what we know and work forward to deal with particulars and with questions that need to be resolved to lead a better human life and then adjust our background knowledge and assumptions as may be appropriate. He writes:

"The enquiry is essentially practical: we can say that its goal is truth, but it can as well be described as knowing when and how to act, whom to admire, how to educate people, what to believe, or, all in all, how to live."

The final two chapters of Blackburn's book explore truth as a method for enquiry in probably the broadest and most contentious areas of life: the search for truth in religion and the nature of truth in broad interpretive endeavors, including the law, the study and understanding of history, and politics.

I learned a great deal from this book, which brought me back to the pragmatism and idealism I have been studying in Peirce and in the American philosopher Josiah Royce, who isn't discussed in the book. The book reminded me of why I love philosophy and think it valuable. The book is quick on some parts but should inspire readers to think for themselves. The book includes a short bibliography for readers wishing to explore further.

Robin Friedman

Bettie? says

BOTW

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If you think knowledge is expensive,

try ignorance."
