Booknotes

Stylishly written and short, Simon Blackburn's *On Truth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) is what far too much contemporary philosophy is not. It is, measured, well informed, in the main accessible to non-specialists and well argued (which most would-be popular presentations are not); it is clear and clearly about matters of interest and importance, and saying some substantial things about them too (on which scores most academic philosophy fails).

On Truth is a book of two halves. In the first Blackburn gives a judicious run-through of the main philosophical positions on truth (the correspondence theory, the coherence theory, pragmatism, deflationism and the semantic theory). In the second Blackburn sees how the notion of truth might apply in various fields of human endeavour, what he calls 'varieties of enquiry': aesthetics, ethics, religion, and *en passant,* science, law, politics and reasoning generally.

Despite Blackburn's clarity (or perhaps because of it), the non-philosophical reader, to whom the book appears in part to be addressed, might be a little bemused by the first part, and even at times lost in the details of the arguments. Are there facts to which true statements correspond, and if so, what are they? To what extent do true statements come in clusters, and are there true statements outside what would feature in the best system we humans hit on (coherence)? Similarly, with pragmatism, can we be confident that what human enquiries ultimately converge on in any given field will give the whole truth, or even be true (might we not all be on the wrong track, unless what we do is underpinned by some compatibility between our minds and the universe, or God, even)? In calling a statement true, are we really adding anything to merely asserting it, and if so what (deflationism)?

These are some of the questions and theories which have occupied philosophers concerned with the notion of truth over the last century or two. The non-philosopher might wonder what might be gained from analyses of these sorts. How do any of them help us in our activities and enquiries? Does it really matter to a scientist, say, whether we opt for one or another of the different theories of truth? They all sound rather abstract and high-level, and most of what we actually want to say and do can be accommodated by each of them. This is often the way of philosophical systems and theories: with ingenuity,

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more or less anything can be made to fit with most of them, our actual practices going on just as they did before.

Of course, and importantly, having a degree of scepticism about philosophical theories about truth, or about their significance, some of which Blackburn seems to share, is not the same as having a scepticism about truth itself. On this point Blackburn is suitably robust. 'Reality presses us to believe what is true', he says (42); the fanatic in his desert hideout uses 'a bank account accessed with a mobile phone' to plot the overthrow of Western civilization (38), and so relies on the truth of much in (Western) science and technology, as we might add does the fashionable post-modernist academic flying across the Atlantic to deliver yet another ground-breaking lecture purporting to show that (scientific) truth is a racist or capitalist or paternalistic construct.

While unsurprisingly finding elements of truth in each of the philosophical theories of truth, Blackburn's own sympathies lie with a combination of the pragmatism and deflationist approaches. Don't worry about what truth is in some highfalutin and overarching sense. Look rather at what we do and say in our various varieties of enquiry, as he calls them. He quotes James Clerk Maxwell, whom William James cites as responding to philosophical abstraction by saying, 'Yes, but I want you to tell me the *particular* go of it', and James himself as saying that 'true ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify'. (71)

In this Jamesian spirit Blackburn turns first in his second part to our actual practice of aesthetics and literary criticism. Here the particular go of things is supplied by T.S. Eliot: 'The critic, one would suppose, if he is to justify his existence, should endeavour to discipline his personal prejudices and cranks – tares to which we are all subject – and compose his differences with as many of his fellows as possible in the common pursuit of true judgement'. (Blackburn, page 79, from section 1 of Eliot's seminal essay of 1923, 'The Function of Criticism'.) Blackburn shows deftly and engagingly how we can look at many human activities in terms of the common pursuit of true judgement, including ethics, and religion, as well as aesthetics itself, and that where this is not achieved or achievable, there is nothing of real weight or significance. Talk of truth would have no place outside a common pursuit. Without too much stretching one could also see C.S. Peirce's famous adage in this light: 'The opinion which is fated ultimately to be agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real.' (From Peirce's 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear" of 1878, quoted by Blackburn on page 40)

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Blackburn sums up his position thus: 'We only have the language, the resources of thought that we do, because some activities have proved useful or essential. These activities include trying to thrash things out: trying to warp our own heritage of beliefs and dispositions as little as possible in order to accommodate the problems that friction with the world throws up. The language of truth, reason, justification, knowledge, certainty and doubt is our instrument for discussing all this.' (122). He adds that looking at our activities in this way diminishes the gap often perceived between scientific enquiries on the one hand and ethical and aesthetic ones on the other. In all these cases we are concerned with the common pursuit of values and priorities, and in all cases what is at issue is a common pursuit, because all of us stand on 'a huge deposit of history and culture, the work of generations of trial and error and refinement'. (126)

Blackburn could at this point have referred to the closing sentences of Eliot's essay: 'For the kinds of critical work which we have admitted, there is the possibility of co-operative activity, with the further possibility of arriving at something outside of ourselves, which may provisionally be called truth. But if anyone complains that I have not defined truth, or fact, or reality, I can only say apologetically that it was no part of my purpose to do so, but only to find a scheme into which, whatever they are, they will fit, if they exist.' The stress in both Blackburn and Eliot on the co-operative nature of enquiry and on the way in which abstract notions like truth, reality, reason and so on have the home in specific activities of action and enquiry is wholly congenial. Further it is a useful corrective to the perennial philosophical temptation to talk about pure ideas, as Peirce has it in Blackburn's epigraph to his book, 'vagabond thoughts that tramp the public highways without any human habitation', rather than starting with 'men and their conversation'.

Having welcomed Blackburn's book thus far, along with the general direction of his argument, we must add a gentle caveat or two. We have seen James talking about truth as referring to the ideas that *we* can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. We have at some point to ask who the 'we' are. In Blackburn's book, short as it is, there are what among intellectuals and the like are the now ritual swipes at the election of President Trump, at Brexit, and even at the second Iraq war. No doubt it is good to get such things off one's chest, and the swipes may not be un-merited, but given that in the first two cases anyway electoral majorities went one way rather than the other, one wonders what has happened to the commonality of our common pursuit. Who are the 'we' here? Can or should everything about these majorities be written off as cases of

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unsophisticated people being taken in by lies and deception, as Blackburn (among many others, it has to be said) seems to imply?

The question of the commonality of 'our' common pursuit is perhaps more significant when it comes to religion. Here Blackburn is not altogether unfair. He writes about the social binding religion can supply and also quite positively about some of the attitudes – such as a beatific or awe-struck attitude to the world – which religions can engender. But, like his mentor Hume, he is wholly negative about anything beyond a religion of silence, anything which purports to tell us anything substantial about the infinite or a world beyond the empirical.

The music of Bach is one thing, he says, 'and if appreciating it exhausted religious practice, all would be well, but the hatreds and sectarians and jihadists are another'. (119) The music of Bach is indeed one thing, and one thing with which non-believers struggle, for what that music is expressing is a fully dogmatic, guilt laden and grace seeking Lutheranism, the Epistle to the Romans raised to the highest level of human expressive creativity. In listening to Bach, of at least to huge portions of Bach, whether we like it or not, we are being shown in the most forceful way possible what it is like to be a Lutheran. We are brought to entertain the truth of these things, at least as long as we are listening to the Passions and the Church Cantatas. We are brought to entertain and experience the possibility that these things might actually be true to our experience, and just true.

Of course, more than Bach may have been able to do, we appreciate the existence and even the validity of religious traditions other than those of eighteenth century Leipzig. But the option our common pursuit might suggest is not that between Luther and sectarians and jihadists. If, in listening sympathetically to Bach, we begin to entertain the possibility of what he is telling us, we can also examine sympathetically other religious traditions to see how far in their own terms similar possibilities to those of Bach and Luther are being articulated. In other words, if listening to the music of Bach, or looking at the work of Michelangelo, or reading Dante coveys to us certain religious possibilities, we can equally approach other religious traditions as also conveying, in their own terms, similar possibilities. Religions have their own faults, and sectarianism and jihadism are two of them, but seeing the best of religious practice and expression as pointing to truths beyond the empirical does not force us into such deformations. And given that we are about the common pursuit of true judgement, ruling out as irrational almost

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a priori one powerful stream of human practice, as Blackburn appears to do, is far too quick.

Actually Peirce, whom Blackburn esteems, is relevant here. As we have seen, Peirce speaks of the truth as that opinion on which it 'is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate'. What Blackburn does not mention here, and what will provide some answer to the doubt we have already raised about the conformation of the human mind to the cosmos, is that Peirce sees our investigations as being part of a process by which the universal mind gradually comes to understand itself and the cosmos which it supports. Peirce is an idealist; we are part of the universal mind, and as such, as we read in his *Collected Papers* (Belnap Press, 1935, Vol. VIII, para 211), we have 'some glimmer of co-understanding with God or with Nature'. We and our investigations are part of an evolutionary process driven by divine purpose and love. Seeing science in this way would go some way both to explaining its extraordinary success in areas way beyond what is necessary for our survival, and also to giving us confidence that what we arrive at in our best scientific investigations is not going to be way off key.

The reason for raising these Peircean thoughts is not to endorse them, but to indicate the way in which an examination of human activities, such as science here, and also perhaps, ethics, politics and aesthetics, may in a non-dogmatic way suggest that they themselves point to realities beyond the merely human, that they intimate transcendent realities and are supported by them. Religion(s) can then be seen not as disconnected from human life and gesturing at things we have no knowledge of or competence in, but rather as arising from our very grounded life on this earth, and as attempting in partial ways to articulate the transcendent realm and reality we have intimations of. A perspective such as this would explain why in Peirce's view, honest enquirers are ultimately *fated* to agree, and also fill out Eliot's sense that our common pursuit can afford us the possibility of arriving at something *outside* of ourselves.

Blackburn is in today's sense a humanist thinker, coolly critical of any formal religion or religious claims. In fifteenth-century Florence, humanism meant something different. In particular it meant the renewed study of Plato and the ancient Greeks, as well as an attempt to reconcile Christianity with the myths and practices of the ancient world. At the centre of the group of humanist thinkers, artists and poets gathered around the Medici was the neo-Platonist philosopher Marsilio Ficino. That interest in this once neglected figure may be reviving is suggested by the appearance of *Plato's Persona: Marsilio Ficino, Renaissance Humanism and Platonic*

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Traditions by Denis J.-J. Robichaud (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

While Ficino was certainly a Platonist in a general sense, he differed from Plato in a number of significant respects. Unlike Plato, or at least unlike the Plato canonically conceived, Ficino finds a doctrine of divine immanence as opposed to transcendence in the pseudo-Platonic *Epinomis*. The world in which we live and which is studied by astronomy among other sciences thus affords intimations of the divine, so the divided line is not an absolute demarcation between the earthly and the heavenly. Each division on the line has a divine aspect. The light by which we understand things is God's light, by which all things are made. In knowing others we begin to know ourselves, and also come to know God.

This sense that God is in a way present in the world is given an incarnatory twist by Ficino through a fortuitous misreading of *Laws* 716c as saying 'God is the measure of all things; and much more so, if, as they say, he is a certain man'. The Christological drift will be obvious, but we should also note that Ficino is here departing from Protagoras (for whom *man* is the measure of all things) and from Plato himself (for whom anything corporeal was a regrettable falling off from the perfect world). But he is also departing, as Robichaud emphasizes, from Augustine, the erstwhile Platonist, who came in sectarian fashion to disparage Platonism in the absence of Christian revelation and to insist that pagan virtue is a false virtue. Ficino memorably sees Socrates as foreshadowing Christ.

Botticelli was, of course, part of Ficino's circle, and in considering especially *Primavera* and *The Birth of Venus*, it will come as no surprise to find Ficino emphasizing in his commentary on *Phaedrus* 'how the contemplator of beauty may become divine and emerge as the lover of divine beauty', a passage quoted by Robichaud on page 122. Beauty is the reflected splendour of the divinity. Innate ideas of beauty within thus transport us to the sight of divine beauty outside us. There is still in Ficino at least a hint of the perennial Platonic temptation to yearn for an abstract beauty with no material clothing; but he also suggests that discursive reasoning is capable of taking us only so far. Light must come from other sources, of which aesthetic experience may be one. And when he writes of Botticelli's Venus (in *Primavera*), he takes the goddess to express humanitas as a whole, adorned with the virtues of love, charity, dignity, magnanimity, liberty, magnificence, comeliness and modesty, as well as temperance, honesty, charm and splendour. Leaving aside the details of the specific example, it is surely true that truth or truths can be articulated poetically, visually and musically in ways that

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evade the verbal and discursive. Where our culture is far more literal and analytical than the one in which Ficino lived, this remains a neglected area of study, from which we may learn from Ficino. And Ficino follows Plotinus in seeing human artistry as deriving from divine seeds within us.

It cannot be said that Ficino in any way shows Blackburn to be wrong in his particular, characteristically modern sense of humanism. But what Ficino and Robichaud's book do show is that Blackburn's strictures on what human experience can show and where we can be taken by it are not unquestionable. Where Ficino is interesting, and deserves more study than he is normally accorded, is in his sense that the structures of one religious tradition may be mirrored in another (or others), and also that there are or could be intimations within human experience of a higher reality than the purely human.

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