

Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide*  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005  
xxi + 238 pages.

Reviewed by Curtis Bowman

In recent years Simon Blackburn has published several popular philosophical works to wide acclaim. *Think: A Compelling Introduction to Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1999) addresses the perennial problems of philosophy, especially those in the fields of metaphysics and epistemology. *Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2001) presents readers with the rudiments of moral philosophy. *Lust* (Oxford University Press, 2004) investigates one of the more popular sins. Because Blackburn is a serious philosopher as well as a talented writer, his previous efforts to reach a non-academic audience have been informative, entertaining, and written with admirable clarity. Therefore, it is a sad duty to have to report that *Truth: A Guide* is less successful than its predecessors.

This is not to imply that the book is worthless. Blackburn's prose nimbly applies his intellect to the difficult task of reflecting on the nature of truth and how we come to know it. This is hardly an academic concern, for much depends on how we understand what it is for our claims about many pressing issues to be regarded as true. The most obvious examples are our moral and religious beliefs. Do they make valid demands on those who do not currently share them, or are they simply expressions of our personal opinions and preferences? Are they open to rational debate, or are they just the residue of custom and historical chance? How we answer such questions is clearly important. *Truth: A Guide* is thus devoted to a significant topic.

Although Blackburn's book as a whole is both readable and well-argued, parts of it strike this reviewer as undeveloped or misguided. The difficulties begin with the way in which Blackburn frames the debate about truth as one of absolutism versus relativism. He shrewdly acknowledges that we find both tendencies within ourselves, and so we are wise not to think of the matter as merely one of us versus them. This is all to the good. Yet Blackburn does not adequately investigate how we as individuals understand these two different approaches to the nature of truth.

Most of us are absolutists of some sort — that is, we take ourselves to be in possession of truths that everyone ought to believe — until we encounter other people whose views disagree with our own. Then our tendency towards relativism frequently comes to the fore. We set aside the disagreement by asserting that what is true for them is not true for

us, and that what is true for us is not true for them. Surprisingly enough, this maneuver immediately decides the matter for many of us. By playing the relativist card at the onset of disagreement, we thereby avoid any serious reflection on what we ourselves believe. The relativist gambit is thus a lazy form of intellectual self-defense that can be summarized in the proposition that accepting something as true makes it true.

Anyone who has ever taught moral philosophy to undergraduates (as this reviewer has on many occasions) is aware of the appeal and the ubiquity of this maneuver. Conservative critics of academia tend to think that liberal professors are gleefully infecting their students with an insidious relativism that portends the downfall of civilization. The truth, however, is that many students are already in the grip of relativism when they enter the university. To them, relativism just seems to be the obviously appropriate attitude to have towards moral issues.

But the relativist gambit is not merely a shallow form of self-defense. It is also a means of keeping the peace. Few of us relish the prospect of being forced to debate our most cherished beliefs, and we know that others share this same reluctance. Consequently, we also deploy the relativist gambit out of respect for other people, and we expect them to do the same for us as well.

It is just a fact that relativism with respect to morality is the most common form of relativism. As Blackburn says, “Our own age finds little problematic about scientific truth, truth about the world as it is, but is intensely bothered by truth about how things ought to be” (99). Relativism about mathematics, logic, and the natural sciences is too implausible to merit much attention; hardly anyone really believes that truth in these matters is simply a function of what we are inclined to accept as the truth. Consider, then, the case of ethical relativism.

Here we see, however, that what we are accustomed to regard as relativism is really better understood as a moral demand for tolerance. It is important to realize that tolerance is not equivalent to relativism. If we think of ethical relativism as the philosophical claim that accepting some moral belief as true makes it true, then as ethical relativists we are in a poor position to criticize those whose moral beliefs differ from our own, even if their acting on their beliefs leads to intolerant behavior. It makes no sense to condemn others for acting on their true beliefs, for to acknowledge the truth of a moral belief is to approve of the behavior that follows from it (or at least not to object to it).

The moral demand for tolerance is actually grounded in a philosophy that emphasizes the value of freedom. We tolerate others — within appropriate limits, of course — as a

means of preserving and expanding the realm of human liberty. Many of us, however, mistake our commitment to tolerance for an expression of relativism. This is to be expected, unfortunately. As philosophers like to say, ethical relativism is a metaethical view. That is, it is an attempt to understand the nature of our moral judgments. It is hardly surprising, then, that we often go astray when we attempt to formulate the metaethics that adequately describes our moral beliefs. After all, philosophers have been debating these issues for centuries. The truth is that many people who profess to be ethical relativists do not know what they are talking about. They identify themselves as relativists when what they are really doing is trying to make a case for tolerance. Therefore, relativism is less of a threat than is commonly imagined.

Blackburn's manner of framing the topic of his book as the conflict between absolutism and relativism would have been more helpful if he had paid more attention to the considerations briefly outlined in the previous six paragraphs. Instead, Blackburn concentrates on the complicated epistemologies of various Western philosophers from the ancient world to the present day. Consequently, many readers are likely to conclude that Blackburn flies too high much of the time, soaring over their more mundane struggles to get at the truth.

Nonetheless, there is much to be learned from what Blackburn says. For example, his opening chapter has much of interest to say about the nature of religious belief as it threads its way through the views of William Clifford, William James, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. And chapters two and three present an exciting example of the dialectical procedure of serious philosophical discourse as relativists and absolutists square off to do battle, formulating and revising their theses in light of criticism from their opponents. Blackburn's virtues as a thinker and a writer are shown to great effect in these three chapters.

In chapter four Blackburn discusses Friedrich Nietzsche, presenting him as the most significant modern exponent of the relativistic strand in Western philosophy that extends all the way back to Protagoras. Blackburn says that the Nietzschean dictum "There are no facts, only interpretations" (xv, 75) could serve as the motto of the relativist movement. Nietzsche has certainly been read this way, and many proponents of relativism have taken him as their standard bearer. Fortunately for Nietzsche, however, there have always been problems with attempts to read him as a relativist.

It must be conceded that Nietzsche says many provocative things about truth. Furthermore, it should come as no surprise that scholars have arrived at many different ways of understanding his seemingly contradictory utterances. Blackburn's notes and

bibliography indicate that he is aware of some of the secondary literature devoted to this interpretive task. Plausibly interpreting Nietzsche as a relativist, however, is difficult to do.

First of all, the slogan “There are no facts, only interpretations” is not actually a quotation from Nietzsche's writings, although it clearly has its origin in the first paragraph of §481 of *The Will to Power*. Since Blackburn provides the correct reference when he begins his discussion of this slogan in chapter four, it is safe to assume that he has actually read §481 and thus knows that he is not directly quoting the text. Many of his readers, however, will be misled into believing that this slogan is a quotation. A brief glance at §481 indicates that whatever Nietzsche has in mind about facts and interpretations must at the very least be understood in light of his understanding of late 19<sup>th</sup> century positivism. Consequently, the slogan attributed to Nietzsche may be less radical than many have thought. Once again, different scholars have different views on the matter.

More important, though, is that Nietzsche tends to display greater interest in the *value* of truth than in its very nature, arguing that the Western philosophical tradition has unquestioningly asserted that truth is preferable to falsehood, doubt, and ignorance. Maybe this is so, but perhaps it is not. Nietzsche thinks that the matter is worth investigating. But an investigation into the value of truth presupposes some sort of understanding of the nature of truth. And in this case, given that the traditional understandings have not been relativistic ones, it seems as if Nietzsche cannot be rightly accused of subscribing to relativism.

Perhaps we will never possess a fully coherent account of Nietzsche's ideas about truth. To his credit, Blackburn addresses some of the difficulties involved in trying to make sense of Nietzsche's many vexing pronouncements on this topic. But that Nietzsche is a relativist is a dubious proposition.

Blackburn's next three chapters return to more solid ground, concentrating primarily on various aspects of contemporary epistemology. His discussion and criticism of Richard Rorty's pragmatism is especially fine. Blackburn's eighth and final chapter contains useful reflections on the study of history and our ability to know the workings of other people's minds. Although many readers will find chapters five to eight rather daunting, Blackburn's knack for explaining difficult ideas guarantees that their patience will be rewarded.

It is obvious that Blackburn is no advocate of relativism. This is only to be expected, for very few professional philosophers are relativists. Yet Blackburn is no supporter of some

grand theory of truth that hands victory to the absolutists. Instead, he sympathizes with what is known as the minimalist view of truth:

. . . a good way of thinking of minimalism and its attractions is to see it as substituting the particular for the general. It mistrusts anything abstract or windy. Both the relativist and the absolutist are impressed by Pilate's notorious question 'What is Truth?', and each tries to say something useful at the same high and vertiginous level of generality. The minimalist can be thought of turning his back on this abstraction, and then in any particular case he prefaces his answer with the prior injunction: *you tell me*. This does not mean, 'You tell me what truth is.' It means, 'You tell me what the issue is, and I will tell you (although you will already know, by then) what the truth about the issue consists in.' If the issue is whether high tide is at mid-day, then truth consists in high tide being at midday. If the issue is whether [former Prime Minister Tony] Blair is a fantasist, the truth lies in Blair being a fantasist or not. We can tell you what truth amounts to, if you first tell us what the issue is. But to do *that* you must already know enough to be able to say what truth amounts to yourself. If you don't know what the truth of the matter consists in, then you cannot have really framed and understood an issue at all. (59-60)

But once we see the issue for what it is, Blackburn's minimalism maintains that we then see how we are to proceed in determining the truth of the particular matter at hand:

. . . minimalism showed us that any sentence comes with its own 'norm' of truth. If the issue is whether pigs fly, the truth would consist in pigs flying, and that is what we must investigate. If the issue is whether Cambridge is north of London, it is a different investigation, but equally directed at truth, that is, at whether Cambridge is north of London. So the very *content* of a sentence — the issue it introduces — directs where the serious inquirer should look and how to evaluate it. (160-161)

There is nothing general or abstract to say about truth. You give me a sentence, and provided that it locates a definite issue, I will say what makes it true, but only in the very terms that the sentence provides. . . . (203)

In short, says Blackburn, "the issue is the issue" (160). Once we get clear on the issue, the rest is supposed to be plain sailing.

Minimalism about truth is, as philosophers like to say, a deflationary view of truth. Truth is often presented to us as something metaphysically mysterious, something that requires a theoretical explanation. According to Blackburn's presentation of minimalism, however, a theory of truth is actually a distraction from the hard business of getting at the truth. All that we need to do, it seems, is to focus on the particular issue. There is certainly some merit to this view. Such an approach to the nature of truth seems especially well-suited to such empirical matters as determining whether or not pigs can fly. Has anyone ever seen a flying pig? No, of course not. Consequently, we can confidently assert that pigs cannot fly.

But how helpful is Blackburn's minimalism when we are dealing with moral issues? Take the case of abortion. When we raise the question of the rightness or wrongness of abortion, we certainly seem to know what we are talking about. We know what abortion is, and we know the range of actions that should follow from declaring it morally permissible or impermissible. But are the norms required for getting at the truth of the abortion issue made clear to us simply by raising the issue? Not at all. This should not surprise us, because this is precisely why abortion is such a contentious issue. And it is worth noting that the interminability of the debate surrounding some moral issues — abortion, capital punishment, and the like — is one fact that relativists advance on behalf of relativism.

Yet it is not as if Blackburn's minimalism provides an explanation as to why even genuinely uncontroversial moral judgments are not a matter of dispute. No one who is morally competent argues in favor of, say, child abuse, but our mere ability to raise this particular issue does not provide us with the norms that enable us to get at the truth of the matter. We have a firm conviction that child abuse is wrong, but how we are to articulate that conviction and to support it with reasons is subject to debate.

In short, Blackburn's minimalism has nothing useful to say about moral matters. Since Blackburn is no fool, his preferred theory of truth is silent about the nature of moral truth:

. . . minimalism does nothing to diminish the chance of moral conflict. It does not help us to decide issues just one way. So it does little to reassure us about *the* moral truth, *the* right normative order, the operating manual of the universe. In science we expect convergence on the one true theory of this and that (not necessarily the one true theory of everything, which strikes most of us as too ambitious). In ethics we do not, and for this reason we can expect relativism to stay in business. (63)

And so Blackburn rather blithely closes the book on the weighty moral issues of the Western philosophical tradition. Many of his readers are certain to begin reading *Truth: A Guide* under the assumption that Blackburn will have something more substantive to say about moral truth. Unfortunately, such readers will be sorely disappointed.

Since Blackburn's minimalism is unhelpful in moral matters, a non-minimalist theory of some sort might be required for understanding how we get at moral truths. Then again, maybe not. That is another debate for another time.

Despite the various limitations noted above, Blackburn's *Truth: A Guide* is a worthwhile introduction to some aspects of the philosophical debate on the nature of truth. Readers of his earlier popular efforts will welcome the opportunity to read more of Blackburn's work. Those especially interested in the topic will no doubt want to move on to a more sophisticated book. As should be expected, there are many to choose from. This reviewer is fond of Pascal Engel's *Truth* (Acumen Publishing Limited, 2002). Blackburn would certainly approve of this choice, seeing that he himself provided a very complimentary blurb for the back cover.

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