

## Simon Blackburn

**Have you ever been in a heated debate at which someone tried to put an end by saying "you believe in your truth, and I believe in mine"? Did you ever face people trying to level antagonistic explanations such as creationism and Darwinism just by saying that truth depends only on the analyzer's point-of-view about life's immense diversity and complexity? Well, if arguments like these bother and confuse you, maybe you would like to know about British philosopher Simon Blackburn's ideas.**



Danilo Albergaria

In 2005, the University of Cambridge professor published the book *Truth: a guide*, in which he seeks to clarify for the general public some of the most important points on the long-term philosophic debate between "absolutists" (truth's believers) and "relativists" (inclined to skepticism). Apparently a harmless concern, the truth problem has disturbed Western conscience for over two millennia: after all, is there any truth?

Are there universal truths valid everywhere and in every situation or are they just dangerous illusions? At the beginning of the modern age, there were some confident agreements towards positive answers. But in the last century, because of the hi-tech wars' horror and also the development of science and philosophy itself, the answers to those ancient questions strongly pushed the philosophic pendulum back to the relativistic side. Speaking about truth has not been taken seriously nowadays, unless if done so with the expected commas and caveats. As someone who tries to face today's so-called "truth crisis" and sees the pendulum going too far to the skeptics' side, Blackburn granted this spontaneous interview to *ComCiência*.

**ComCiência:** Your book *Truth: a guide* have a clear intention to "take to the streets" the main philosophical problems about the truth. How do you see the relevance of this discussion for the general public, particularly in modern technoscientific democracies?

**Simon Blackburn:** I hope it is relevant in several ways. First of all, there has been a lot of confusion about "truth", especially in the light of "postmodernism" which is supposed to stand for a particularly sceptical attitude towards truth. I hoped to give a better discussion of that than was readily available. Second, I think people become particularly confused about moral and political truth, and whether there is any such thing, or only the clash of opinions. I hoped to show that relativism was not a position to be feared, but one that is actually quite easy to avoid.

**ComCiência: Philosophical concerns about truth and reality seem to have a pendulum kind of movement, but historical thinking reminds us that historical particularities cannot be easily thrown away. So, what distinguishes our time's "truth crisis" from, let's say, Pyrrho's time? What characterises the most skepticism of these days?**

**Blackburn:** I think the emotional drive is the collapse of Western confidence. For several centuries we have been confident of scientific, educational, and social progress. But the twentieth century showed us instead only a succession of horrors, and on top of that we have environmental problems and face an uncertain future in terms of resources, climate, biodiversity, and so on. We have also lost confidence in the big stories of communism, and even democracy. I think this loss of confidence is not, actually, a bad thing. But the remedy is not to throw away rational thinking, but to apply it better. I am afraid I do not know enough about the political situation in Pyrrho's time to make much of a comparison. But it is supposed that he travelled (with Alexander) and therefore had the opportunity to compare different views in different places, and perhaps that was one source of his scepticism.

**ComCiência: A decade ago, Alan Sokal justified his efforts on the so-called "Sokal affair" or "Sokal hoax" and later on the book *Impostures intellectuelles* (1997) by saying that his ultimate goal was to save the left from itself - more precisely, from its "post-modern", relativistic academic version. What were your political concerns behind your positioning on the "truth wars"? What political target (if any) you had in mind while writing "Truth" and how do you see yourself regarding political positioning in a broader sense?**

**Blackburn:** I don't think of myself as being a political activist, when I am writing philosophy. I just try to clear things up a little. Analytical philosophers like me like clarity; the people Sokal was attacking were untrained, pretentious, and pretend-philosophers, who enjoyed creating a fog around themselves. It was good to try to dispel that fog, but I had other things to worry about!

**ComCiência: Do you think reactionarisms may find comfortable shelter in the "relativistic" view of truth, just as much as in the "absolutism"? In other terms: does a relativistic stance warrant tolerance, comprehension and non-authoritarian thought?**

**Blackburn:** Part of the problem with a 'relativistic' stance is that it offers no guidance: it is a mistake to think that its practical consequences lie in any particular place in the right-left spectrum. Since in effect it says 'there is no truth: only your truth, my truth, his truth', when things get hot and opinions differ all the relativist can do is stand on the sidelines as it were. He cannot assert anything, either right or left, since to assert is to put forward as true, for agreement, some position. Denying truth, the relativist denies the right to assert anything. That is why he is a nuisance, standing always on the sidelines, but never playing the game.

**ComCiência: Do you think that contemporary radical relativism, in the age of multiculturalism, just might be ripping apart cultures and points-of-view, instead of making them accessible, comprehensible and more tolerable to each other?**

**Blackburn:** I am not sure it is important enough to do that. Relativism must not be confused with toleration, which is a genuine moral position, and often a good one. However, there are limits to toleration, even for a liberal (as John Stuart Mill

explored). Some aspects of some cultures are pretty horrible, and we must be prepared to judge them as such.

**ComCiência: About half a century ago, Paul Feyerabend wrote about how it is "inevitable for people's discourses to remain completely disconnected", while Thomas Kuhn theorized about the scientific paradigms incommensurability. Today, it's not hard to find people in the academy who thinks the science about climate change has two completely disconnected, incommensurable rival paradigms. Can you comment on the radical appropriation and (some) misreading of these (another) philosophers affecting such a decisive scientific question?**

**Blackburn:** Let me first of all say that I do not take the climate science wars to be very good examples of Kuhn and Feyerabend's views about paradigms. For in practice people are good old fashioned empiricists about temperature. Although global temperature is hard to measure, and can mean many things, most people, I believe, take it to be a fact that it will rise, or a fact that it will not. There is not much appetite for a relativistic position which would say that if you look through one 'paradigm' or set of spectacles it rises, and if you look through another it does not. In other words, the problem we face is epistemological: uncertainty about what makes for authoritative prediction or 'who to listen to'. It is not ontological, or concerned with the existence of fact in the case.

The epistemological problem is first that there are direct vested interests. Some people have career and financial interests in talking up the disaster facing us, and others have such interests in talking it down. In this situation, truth is very hard to find and to judge. I do fear that the global warming fanatics have done their cause a lot of harm. As I understand it the science is much less certain than they have claimed, with a lot of it dependent on some doubtful extrapolations from some rather flimsy data points. Still, the risk is not zero, and in any event it is an excellent thing if the world can become less carbon dependent. However, I doubt whether it will do so, since I do not see the politics as soluble. It is a multi-person prisoners' dilemma, and there will always be states that will not cooperate, sometimes for quite understandable reasons. For instance, it is hard to expect a poor, underdeveloped country with no decent electricity supplies but lots of coal not to use it, when we have done so for over a century.

**ComCiência: Do you see, looming in a near future of philosophy, some kind of shifting towards an effort to translate and connect different world views, partial or local truths, or the main antagonism between relativists and absolutists is going to continue as a dominant discussion?**

**Blackburn:** Well, I wish that one would not dominate discussion! That's why I wrote my book. But it is always hard to predict the course of philosophy, because it is responsive to surrounding social and political forces, which are themselves hard to predict.