

Riportiamo qui di seguito la sintesi di Lord Krebs fatta al termine del Simposio Balzan tenuto a Lugano il 16-17 maggio 2008 sul tema *Truth in Science, the Humanities and Religion*.

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## **'Truth': Common Themes?**

*Lord John Krebs of Wytham*

I had been going to provide a grand and comprehensive overview under the title 'The Truth about Truth', but when I heard Keith Thomas this morning telling us that it was impossible to capture what had been said in these last two days, I gave up. It was impossible, partly because of the unreliability of memory, and partly because many of the important thoughts will have been private thoughts and conclusions that each of us have had. So instead, what I want to do in these few minutes, is try and look back over the two days and reflect on the fact that we've been very fortunate to hear excellent presentations across an unusually wide range of disciplines and perspectives. The question that was in my mind is this: as we've gone through the two days, has there been convergence or divergence of thought about what is meant by truth from these different perspectives?

So I'm going to talk first of all about *kinds of truth*. Simon Blackburn, in his keynote lecture, drew a distinction between absolute truth and relative truth – the idea of cultural relativism. And in setting up the argument, he drew a rough equation between absolute truth being associated with the natural sciences – natural scientists are discovering things that are absolutely true – and relative truth, being more characteristic of the humanities. But as the two days have proceeded, I think we've seen various ways in which that distinction has become slightly more textured. And particularly, I think, in this morning's session Quentin Skinner and Dominique Schnapper both modified the idea of *conceptual* relativism, in which there is absolutely no basis for distinguishing between different versions of opinions about the truth, and *contextual* relativism. In Quentin's talk he said the peasants of Languedoc may have had a rational basis for their beliefs on the basis of what they understood at that time. Dominique Schnapper summed this up in a very pithy sentence, "Don't judge the past by the present". But, also this morning, we heard from Lord May, echoing what Bengt Gustafsson had told us yesterday, that the notion of natural science being about a set of established facts you read in a textbook is completely wrong, because much of scientific knowledge is highly provisional, is evolving, is incomplete. Natural science is a way of knowing, rather than a set of established facts. So just as Dominique Schnapper said of history, "Don't judge the peasants of Languedoc of the past by the present", you could say of scientists, "Don't judge past scientists by present standards". Don't criticize Darwin because he knew nothing about the laws of genetics, even though they'd already been discovered by Gregor Mendel. So later in his life he couldn't get natural selection as a mechanism of evolution to work, because he thought inheritance was blending, and that we'd all end up identical, while Mendel of course discovered that inheritance is particulate. So there are some convergences there, and in one sense, science is contextually relative.

Moving on to my second brief point about *sources of truth*. Lord May introduced his talk by referring to, in his opinion, three kinds of truth, according to their sources. Natural scientific truth which is drawn from evidence – and we heard from Bengt Gustafsson what evidence implies: observation, accurate measurement, quantification, replication and challenge – and the sister of the natural sciences, mathematics, where truths are derived by reasoning. And those were contrasted with truth derived in the case of religion or beliefs or values which come from texts or authorities, or revealed

truths in Geza Vermes's term this afternoon, the 'gospel truth'. Now, having heard this afternoon's session, one could say that that distinction is still firmly there; that much of this afternoon's session drew on the authority of ancient texts to establish the truth. However, I think Keith Thomas made an important point this morning – although he didn't quite put it in these terms: today, scientists are the new priests. Most of you, and as Keith Thomas confessed himself, have not actually measured that the moon is a quarter of a million miles away. You accept that because a priest-like scientist has told you, and you have trust in the authority of the scientist. So the question that Keith posed about this issue of belief, or truth based on revealed truth, texts and authority is: "Whose authority do you trust?" And as he said, when there are competing authorities – perhaps the authority of the Bible or religious texts on the one hand and the authority of the scientist on the other – it is an interesting question for society as to which authority one follows.

My third comment, very briefly, is about the *location of truth*: is truth out there, or is truth in here? We natural scientists tend to accept and believe that we're discovering truths about the natural world that exist independently of us. However, as Jean-Pierre Changeux pointed out so beautifully in his talk, the brain does not act like a video camera simply filming the outside world in a passive way; the brain is an interpreter, a modeller, a creator of possible worlds. And in a sense that also brought in the question of imagination, because what Jean-Pierre Changeux said is that the brain, with its capacity for consciousness, is capable of imagination. I don't have to do the experiment of pouring this glass of water over Simon's head because I can imagine what would happen if I did – he'd stand up and punch me on the nose. So my imagination gave me the reality to put the glass back down. It gave me the truth. So, again, the distinction between truth out there and truth in here is not an absolute one, because our brains act as interpreters and predictors and modellers of the world around us.

My final point is about the *universality of truth*, and Professor Assmann, in his intervention this afternoon, made an interesting and important point which I don't think had been brought up before, and it's this: if, as a natural scientist you establish some fact about the world that fact is true wherever you measure it. The atomic weight of sodium is the same whether it's measured in Chile, in China or in Chad. There isn't a Jewish version of the atomic weight of sodium, there isn't a Christian version, there isn't a Buddhist version. It is a universal fact, a universal truth. As Professor Assmann pointed out, many religious truths don't have this property. They are particular. You have a different version of the truth if you're a Christian, and even within Christianity, if you're a Catholic or a Protestant you have a different version of the truth. So there is something about the universality of truth that distinguishes truths derived from the natural sciences and truths associated with religion.

But what about, and this is my final point, *truths associated with moral beliefs and values*? And here, I think, is a whole area of research which has emerged in the last decade or so which we haven't touched on today and which is extremely interesting. I'll just refer to one study, carried out by Marc Hauser at Harvard together with Peter Singer, in which they created on the web some moral dilemmas: moral choices that you and I could reflect on and come to a view about what is the ethically correct thing to do. They're about balancing harm and fairness, and I won't go into the details. But the crucial thing is this: that they've tested these moral dilemmas on more than 200,000 people from 120 different countries, including remote pre-civilization tribes in the Amazon jungle and the forests of Papua New Guinea, and to a first approximation, the moral dilemmas are answered in the same way by everybody, regardless of cultural background, regardless of whether they're modern civilizations or primitive civilizations, regardless of whether they're religious believers or atheists. So perhaps there are some moral universals, and in order to understand those, we need to look to Darwinian evolution. Those are my conclusions.

Lugano, May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008

**Truth  
in Science, the Humanities,  
and Religion**



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**Edited by  
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