

Critical Notice

BERNARD WILLIAMS, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2002. Pp. xi + 328.

Bernard Williams' last book is the most interesting set of reflections on the values of truth and truth-telling in living memory. Its grasp of philosophical arguments is astonishing. In many cases it is rightly speedy: Three lines to set up an argument, two to demolish it, three to revive it, a total of perhaps thirty lines to set the whole matter to rights. The book manages to be both learned and passionate without being pretentious. And of course witty; some will mutter, 'too clever by half.' Laughter can usefully accompany the gravest matters, and sometimes an aphorism can express your thought better than a disquisition. One example with which Williams concurs: 'the famous and deep joke ascribed to Sydney Morganbesser: "Of course pragmatism is true; the trouble is that it does not work"' (285, n.14).

Williams' analytic expertise is combined with an acute sensibility to historical facts, or claims to fact, about the history of practices of telling the truth about the past, or about oneself. He writes about what Western civilizations do and have done in trying to find out and to tell the truth. The book presents what are argued to be human universals about the values of truth, as opposed to the historical circumstances in which particular ways of finding out come into being.

The book is both timeless and timely. It was prompted in part by the Western (largely but by no means exclusively American) malaise about truth itself, represented by the quite recent but now faded and jaded events called the culture wars. Williams begins with a contemporary tension involving *truth* and *truthfulness*. We have become sceptical about much of what we are told in our public lives, and in the histories that we

read. The more multicultural or post-colonial that we become, the more many of us query the confidence of an earlier era. There was too much outright lying, and even more distortion of the past to suit the ideologies of our parents (or our oppressors, depending on who 'we' are). We cry out for a truthfulness that we do not encounter. And then we doubt that there is such a thing as truth to be had. Hence a tension, for the first discomfort demands that there is truth out there, yet that very doubt has led to the wish that the concept of truth itself be dismantled — and that seems to undo the original complaint. Williams does not fall prey to the silly temptation to say that this movement in thought is self-refuting. But it is a tension.

He needs brief labels for two competing attitudes to truth that have squared off around this tension. There are intellectuals who reject the very notion of truth and who would fain avoid the words 'true' and 'false' in serious discourse. Williams calls them *deniers*. They deny that the idea of truth has any merit, or any merit in our enlightened days. The alternative attitude he labels *common-sense*. It proposes that all too obviously ideas of truth and falsehood are useful, have always been useful, and arguably are a necessary part of any coherent way of talking and thinking.

Williams goes so far as to say that these two types of position, denial and common-sense, represent the most important dichotomy in Western philosophical thought, at least in recent times: vastly more important than the ill-named contrast between analytic and continental philosophy. One of his themes is that neither attitude is to be dismissed out of hand by adherents to the other. Evidently he finds both simplistic. Contrary to superficial common sense, he takes for granted that deniers are no worse at telling the truth and discerning error than those who present themselves as common-sensical.

Truth and telling the truth will seem like two parts of a whole, in different categories, of course, but very much team-mates. Williams effects one radical separation between the two. The concept of truth is universal. It has no history. It must be deployed by any community whose members talk, believe, assert. But truthfulness has a history. It has become possible, in Western history, to tell the truth about new kinds of things, in new ways, and answering to new standards. Hence the third noun of the title, *genealogy*. This book is a genealogy of truthfulness. I shall return to the claimed universality at the end of this review.

The metaphor of genealogy is Nietzsche's. Its recent popularity owes much to Michel Foucault. Near the start of the book there is an excellent brief discussion of Nietzsche on truth, sketching the richness of the man's thoughts about it over the course of his lifetime. Shallow readers sometimes imagine that Nietzsche was some sort of nihilist about truth, urging that truth had no value and that the adjective 'true' no longer had

any use (aside from brevity, or insisting on what has just been said). Williams, leaping with agility and precision from text to text, makes plain how false that is. But he does not here attempt a positive analysis of the philosopher's mature understanding and application of truth-related concepts. Readers will expect that Williams left a good deal of fairly polished writing, but may not know that one of the topics about which he thought, and wrote, and indeed lectured a great deal, was Nietzsche's moral and metaphysical philosophy. It has not yet been decided which parts of the *Nachlass* will be published in the near future and which will be deposited in a British research library.

As for genealogy: this is a slippery metaphor, in part because it has been stamped by not one but two of the most profound philosophical geniuses of their respective eras, Nietzsche and Foucault. Williams himself engages in two entirely distinct activities, to which he applies the same metaphor. One is myth, a story about what could have (must have?) made talking and truth-telling internally related. There is no claim that we have any evidence that things did happen that way, only a push to think that they must have happened in something like that way. Later in the book two historical mutations in, or extensions of, the practice of truth-telling are presented. Before getting into these it may be useful to get a fix on two earlier uses of the idea of genealogy.

Michel Foucault never stuck long with a trope. He adapted words that he made quite famous, by shifting their sense so that they were neologisms in all but spelling, and then, just as his readers had a new tool, he would abandon it. In using the past to frame his analyses he first used the metaphor of archaeology, but turned to genealogy in his book on the prison. His genealogies are billed as historical, as grounded on accounts of what happened in the past, and brought about our present configuration of ideas and actions. Historians have amply demonstrated that he did not always get the facts straight or in quite the right order, but despite that, he brilliantly illuminated how the past structured our present ways of thinking. 'History of the present' — another of his temporary neologisms.

In his mind, the genealogy of a practice or of a system of thought was part of a struggle on behalf of all of us who think that the practice is natural or who find the thoughts inescapable. One could overcome this fatalistic sense of inevitability by exhibiting the ways in which practices and ideas came into being. One would no longer be trapped in (to switch famous philosophical metaphors) an invisible glass flybottle constraining thought and action, the device by which hegemonic power exacts its control, a device not imposed from above like ordinary power, but internal, exacted from within us, by what feel like *a priori* constraints. There is almost none of this liberatory doctrine in Williams, but the two

historical genealogies in this book, to be explained below, are histories of the present.¹

The relation between Nietzsche and history is more complex. Nietzsche had a vast nineteenth century philological and historical apparatus behind him that makes almost every scholar living today look like an ignoramus. But his genealogies — and other tales that function in a similar way — are an extraordinary blend of myth, just-so-story, transcendental argument, and historical or philological fact. Williams respects this genre but in no way tries to imitate it, nor should anyone else try to do so. Like the lives of the saints, Nietzsche is there for our admiration, not for our emulation.

Williams most emphatically did not write a genealogy of truth. ‘One thing I shall not consider, however, is the history of *the concept of truth*, because I do not believe there is any such history. The concept of truth itself — that is to say, the quite basic role that truth plays in relation to language, meaning and belief — is not culturally various, but always and everywhere the same’ (61).² I found that this is more asserted than argued. I shall return to the point, but what is clear is that this book is an ‘essay in genealogy’ of truthfulness, not of truth.

It begins with genealogy in the mode of myth, a myth that Williams calls the State of Nature. This is a respectable genre, of which the most famous twentieth century success was John Rawls’ original position. Numerous versions of the social contract myth precede it. At present evolutionary psychology redounds with conjectures of how various capacities ‘must’ have been present in early Man or Hominids, and what their survival value must have been. Many of these are what cynics call just-so stories. Williams’ myth is a just-so story with the advantage that it does not purport to guess what did happen, only to give a picture of what would have been good in the early days of human speech — and that in order to understand our present organiza-

1 Because some of my own work leans heavily on that of Michel Foucault, some readers may wish me to comment on this footnote:

Paul Veyne writes, “We agree with Michel Foucault: the history of ideas properly starts when one historicizes the philosophical idea of truth.” A great deal turns here on the force of “philosophical”. In fact, much of Foucault’s work addresses epistemological issues, or what at different times counts as establishing truth in different fields (300, n.31).

I agree with Williams’ gloss. However, if one historicizes the idea of truthfulness, as Williams does, but does not make exactly his sharp cut between truth and truthfulness, one may end by being quite comfortable with Paul Veyne’s statement.

2 Hence his objection to Veyne’s observation just quoted.

tion of ideas. It is a myth intended to convince us of the need for truth, and of the need to think of truth as worthwhile not only because it is useful, but in its own right.

In the State of Nature there is a small community of people who talk but cannot write. Their language is, aside from nuance, the sort of speech that we (or speakers of any language) can learn to interpret. The individuals in this community are and were in different places and situations from each other. They have been able to see and experience different things and events, as well as the same from different perspectives. Each has a personal store of information and memories. Some of the information possessed by one person will be useful to another or to everyone. Information can be conveyed in many ways, by gestures, by acting, by imitating, by irony, by jokes, and even by lying. But the straight path is to tell the truth. Moreover the very concept of information already embodies the idea of not merely asserting something, but of asserting something true. The important upshot is that there are two 'virtues of truth' that must be an integral part of the very idea of truth-telling from the start. These are sincerity and accuracy. You could even call them *prima facie* imperatives: in general, say what you think is true and try to be as accurate, as useful, as possible. As Williams is the first to say, many points of the discussion are reminiscent of Grice's conversational implicatures.

Familiar points are touched on. Popular but hopelessly idiotic doctrines are stated in their best possible form and then axed. (Language would collapse if people were insincere to the point that most people lied.) Undergraduates who hand in essays taken from the web would be better advised to lift them off Williams (It is always wrong to lie, even to protect an innocent life. Discuss.) At least the dishonest essay would actually be worth an A, which one can hardly say for most webtrash.

Williams' myth focuses on the sharing of information. One idea is that a group will be better off as a whole, if what one person knows from experience in one place, is truly passed on to the rest. This also applies in metaphor: the special standpoint need not be spatial or temporal, may be the result of different talents or different training. *Prima facie*, shared information, truly imparted, enables the group to fend off ill fortune and to profit from good luck. Many readers will find this quite compelling, but I do not. That may be more a matter of philosophical temperament than good reason. Although I am a Leibnizian master of the art of composing possible worlds I almost always find truth stranger than anyone's fiction. The contingencies of the past generate more *a priori* necessity in our thinking than is ever furnished by a transcendental argument. So I shall merely record scepticism, and leave internal debate for those to whom this mode of argument is congenial.

Analytic philosophers may be more comfortable with mythical Origi-
 gins than with the historical development of truth-telling. Hence I shall
 attempt a summary of some things that go on in the two principal
 histories sketched in chapters 7 and 8. First history itself. According to
 Williams, the very idea of history, as an account of what actually hap-
 pened in the past, at a specific time and specific place relative to us, had
 to be created. That creation happened at a definite moment, epitomized
 by the work of one man, in company with his readers or hearers. That
 man was Thucydides. The event was the invention in the West of
 historical time. An analogous notion probably existed earlier in the East;
 in any event historical time doubtless required the prior invention of
 writing.

It is not in itself news that Thucydides was the first real historian.
 Hume said as much. So have generations of scholars, each with their own
 explanation of what makes this moment in historiography something
 new. Williams' version is in terms of truthfulness: there was, 'most
 basically, a shift in conceptions of what it is to tell the truth about the
 past.' This is the fundamental move in Williams' style of historical
 genealogy, whose form is: *A shift in conceptions of what it is to tell the truth
 about X*. That sounds as if X is a given, a timeless given. Of course not.
 New ways to tell the truth about X change our conceptions of X itself.
 They do not change the past (a suggestion that taken literally makes no
 sense). They change how we think of the past, and what it is to tell the
 truth about it (so they change the past in the sense of that object of
 thought that we call the past).

Williams talks of a shift from 'a "local" to an "objective" view of the
 past' (163). 'Historical time provides a rigid and determinate structure
 for the past', which did not exist before — everything in the public world
 takes place at a definite time relative to other events, and relative to the
 time that a history is being told (162). 'Did the change bring with it an
 increase in explanatory power? Surely, yes; and this was so in terms of
anyone's conception of explanation' (170). 'Is that a matter of power? Yes'
 (170). And Williams goes on to remark that this does not exclude the
 'power of reason' — but no intellectual idealism, please. If there is to be
 a power of reason, it will among other things be an ordinary power that
 'will work through the ways in which some people affect other people's
 behaviour' (170).

This account offers a general moral. *Historicism in no way induces
 relativism*. The past (as a certain type of object of thought) came into being
 in a historical era, when there emerged techniques of telling the truth
 about a past anchored in a linear system of dates. That in no way implies
 that the truths so told are relative to anything. The thought that this does
 imply relativism often underlies those who deny the continued value of
 historical truth, but those who advocate common sense deal with the

phenomena just as poorly, unable to grasp that telling the truth has a history.³ Williams hopes — and I fear it is a wish that may not soon be fulfilled — that common-sense and philosophers of an analytic stripe will become convinced ‘of something that some find it hard to believe, that human beings can live without the idea of historical time. Equally [the invention of historical time] may persuade cultural relativists that there are reasons why such an idea should emerge’ (169).

In chapter 8, *X = oneself*: a shift in conceptions of what it is to tell the truth about oneself. Sincerity was a cardinal virtue of truth from the start. But here we move to something else, authenticity. Williams owns a debt of gratitude to a Lionel Trilling’s *Sincerity and Authenticity*.⁴ The idea is that of telling the truth to oneself about oneself, of knowing oneself, and acting according to that self-knowledge. We may be sceptical about this idea, but never be in doubt that this is among the family of meanings of the word ‘authenticity’ and ‘authentic.’ Beware: I was surprised to find that this sense of the words is not listed in the most recent electronic edition of the OED.

Where does this idea of authenticity come from? Some will say Delphi, while others point to the Romantics. Williams (in full accord with Trilling) proposes the French Enlightenment. Hence he starts with Rousseau, and chiefly but not solely the *Confessions*. Williams had a long battle with that man, of which there are clear traces here but no full development. In the end Rousseau, apostle of all the freedoms, is intolerably authoritarian about education, love, politics, and self-knowledge. His most truly observant and deeply reflective acquaintance was David Hume, who judged that Rousseau, so far from telling the truth and the whole truth about himself, was all too gifted at self-deception. Rousseau withdrew to the country, with no conversation with anyone (but ser-

3 Try other values for *X* in *A shift in conceptions of what it is to tell the truth about X*. Say *X* = spatial relations (geometry) with the legendary Thales replacing the historical Thucydides. The new method of finding out and telling the truth is proof. One can continue this line of analysis with the emergence of many methods of argumentation in the sciences. Common sense rejects the fact that they are historically emergent and bring into being whole new modes of truth-telling. Denial concludes that the sciences are all relative. Both are wrong. One may substitute e.g. ‘geometry’ for what Williams says about ‘historical time’ namely: ‘The invention of historical time [geometry and demonstration] was an intellectual advance, but not every intellectual advance consists of refuting error or uncovering confusion. Like many other inventions, it enabled people to do things they could not conceive of doing before it happened’ (171).

4 Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1972

vants) so that he was not tempted to lie. Diderot protested that the very move was false, for only in society is a person whole.

Nevertheless, says Williams, it is in the writings of Rousseau that we find the first perfect modelling of the idea of authenticity as an intrinsic value. The old regimens of confession, of telling the truth for a confessor, or to God directly, resolve into telling the truth to oneself about oneself, so that one may self-consciously fulfil who one is. And hence much quasi-mystical soul-searching of subsequent times, many near-saintly reflections (Simone Weil?), but also much psychobabble, many self-help books. Also identity politics — a topic that Williams gingerly addresses. But unlike the need for sincerity explained in his mythical State of Nature, Williams is dubious about any need for (or any possibility of, or any sense to) absolute authenticity.

He provides a marvellous counterweight to Rousseau (born 1712), namely his one-time friend, Diderot (b. 1713). Here the text is what seems the ultimate opposite to authenticity, *Rameau's Nephew*, a dialogue between *Me* (Diderot) and *Him* (the nephew of the composer Rameau). At first it seems that there is no *Him* there to be authentic. *He* is all mime, exaggeration, self-mockery. And yet he always tells truly who he is at the moment. It is not authenticity he lacks (you might say), but constancy. Yet was not authenticity directed at the true self, itself an underlying stable truth? Authenticity is tortured between these two extremes, and often Williams is for Diderot. The chapter tackles a wealth of issues, but is dominated by the fear of self-deception, and the difficulties that this mode of telling the truth has, in honouring the truth itself.

Authenticity, says Williams, is a dangerous enterprise. It can generate much pain for oneself and others. The seeker is more tempted, than in any other form of telling, by hidden temptations to be dishonest, temptations the more concealed because one is not aware of why one needs so much self-knowledge in the first place. Authenticity is beset by the paradoxes of layering, that at one layer truth-seekers do not know the truth at another layer, about why they are seeking truths. Truth about oneself is often attainable, Williams teaches, but its aims had better be modest, and always aware of the irony of Rameau's changeable nephew in the background.⁵

I said that Williams left a great deal of material. This includes political theory, or what could better perhaps be called the morality of the liberal state and its citizens. Some of this is a continuation of a battle with Rousseau on other fronts. The chapter dedicated to these matters is richly

5 One part of my essay 'Truthfulness' (to appear in *Common Knowledge*) elaborates on the literary dimensions of the Rousseau-Diderot couple.

suggestive, but Williams had to decide to finish this book. He began working on a whole new book on the themes broached here, and it is to be hoped that enough was finished, at the time of his death, for it to be published as a series of essays. Hence a proper understanding of this chapter may await the publication or availability of work that Williams did not live to polish up.

I shall conclude by returning to the idea that truth is a human universal. Suppose that the language of some community lacks a word roughly equivalent to our 'true.' This does not mean that it lacks,

the concept of truth — *our* concept of truth if one insists on putting it that way, though it is no more ours than it is theirs. It is everyone's concept of truth ... which ... they exercise in doing the things that every human group can and must do using language. (271)

That is from an 'Endnote' about expressions connected with truth and truth-telling in archaic Greek, mostly Homer. I am wholly unqualified to assess these five pages, but for the reader with no Greek they are fascinating. They are intended as evidence for the passage just quoted: at least one culture and language far removed from ours deploys truth-ideas in many phrases and settings. Which of course does not prove that every human group does. The claim to universality in Williams seems to be more of an assertion than an argued statement. The use of the truth idea in the State of Nature seems to be too much of myth, and certainly not to be a transcendental argument for the universality of truth-concepts.

Perhaps we are unwittingly seduced by a Quine-style reflection on radical translation. It is not that everyone as a matter of *fact* uses the concept of truth. Rather, in translating an alien language in which there is what we take to be debate, criticism, argument, disagreement in opinion, it should be rather natural to translate some interjections as 'Liar' 'You are wrong, stupid', 'She is altogether truthful' etc. It is our system of translation that siphons off, as Williams does from Homer, various expressions into the truth-related bucket.

This thought incidentally draws attention to a defect in the deflationary and minimalist theories of truth. Whatever be the relation between *p* and *it is true that p*, they are not synonyms, for the latter is about an assertion and the former is that assertion.⁶ The role of 'true' is not in the bald statement of facts but in debate and confrontation, in reaffirmation

6 J.L. Austin, 'Truth,' an Aristotelian Society Symposium of 1950, reprinted in J.L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1961), 85

and critique. F.P. Ramsey proposed the redundancy of 'true' only in a context of stating facts, and had, as a background vision of fact-stating, the model of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. His characteristically exact and correct proposal has since been over-generalized. (That is my opinion, not to be found in Williams' book.) Williams does, by the way, have a somewhat dutiful discussion of contemporary theories about truth, minimal, deflationist, disquotational, coherence, correspondence, and so forth. I suspect he regarded this by now extensive literature as ingenious but somewhat scholastic, nay sterile. In another context, but perhaps bearing on this, we are told that the fact that people 'have very different theories of truth just shows how much people's theories of truth misrepresent their grasp of the concept' (163).

If one is tempted by the Quinean radical-translation gloss on why we can find truth-talk in any language, then truth will appear to be a formal concept. This is also the import of what Tarski called the semantic theory of truth. Advocates of more substantive theories of truth often take Tarski to be on their side. And so they should, for as Tarski well knew, his condition T was a formal constraint on any possibly plausible substantive theory about truth. From this perspective, Williams' claim to the universality of truth may have less content than he intended. In particular, a purely formal account of truth carries no load of value whatsoever. And that cannot be right (even though some would like it to be right).

Williams knows that the virtues of sincerity and accuracy have instrumental value: one who is sincere and accurate conveys information more briefly and to great effect than one who is not. Certainly truth has instrumental value: it is useful to know the truth about anything that matters to one. (That is, unless other things are grossly unequal, as when good cheer is of more value than knowing the awful facts.) But he asserts that truth is an intrinsic value. He does not mean that it is a value independent of human interests. That is particularly obvious since 'true' applies primarily to what is said, to statements, and hence the concept of truth arises only in a human context, be it the State of Nature or something subsequent. *Intrinsic* does not mean that nothing more can be said about why truth is a value. It aims rather at guarding against the idea that when one mentions other, perhaps more primitive, values that it can serve, one is reducing truth to those other values.

Perhaps European cultures and languages have two truth-ideas and intrinsic values running side by side, too little distinguished. Moreover (in superficial disagreement with Williams) they may have roots in different languages, classical Greek and biblical Hebrew. Greek has a hard sentence that can be read as formal and Tarskian, or as expressing a correspondence theory. I mean Aristotle's, 'To say that that which is the case, *is the case*, and that which is not the case, *is not the case*, is to say

what is true.⁷ However where we read 'truth' in the Hebrew Bible, the word translated is closer to trust or trustworthiness. 'In the Old Testament truth is *emeth* or *emunah* ("stability" or "reliability" in contrast to "capriciousness").⁸ This I take to be the sense in which Isaiah speaks of 'the God of truth' (Isa. 65 : 16). A psalm says God's ways are 'mercy and truth' (Ps. 25 : 10).⁹ 'His truth shall be thy shield and buckler' (Ps. 91 : 4).¹⁰ Note that in the accounts given by Aristotle, Tarski and Austin, 'truth' is a predicate connected with speaking, with sentences or statements. This Hebrew 'truth' need not be; truth is a predicate connected with deeds, a person or God. It is closer to 'trust' than to 'truth.' Williams does have an important discussion of trust (Ch. 5, § 2), but rather as an ancillary for uptake of sincerity, rather than as another truth-idea in its own right, and with its own history, more Hebrew than Greek.

A core idea of trustworthy/reliable is, like truth-telling, of immense instrumental value. God's truth will help you stay unscathed! But, like Bernard Williams's conception of truth, it is also an intrinsic value. Or rather, as Williams says in connection with trust, it is important that the community should 'come to think that trustworthy behaviour, such as keeping one's word, has an *intrinsic value*' (90, original italics). That is tricky: what matters is not that it 'is' intrinsic, but that it should have that role in our lives (and then it *is* intrinsic!) Certainly the biblical quotations shows that truth in the Authorized Version of the Old Testament, and the words that it translates from the Hebrew Bible, had an unquestioned value for anyone in a culture that formed its children by recourse to those texts.

Should we say, then, that Aristotelian truth and Hebrew truth/trust/reliability are only intrinsic 'for us,' for 'we' whose civilization, for better or worse, has been moulded by Aristotle and the Bible? I do not believe that Williams's arguments refute this sceptical contention. But it may not matter. It is better to play down the 'intrinsic,' relating it

7 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Γ, 1011b25. In the translation by Christopher Kirwan, Oxford: Clarendon Aristotle Series, 23: 'To say that that which is is and that which is not is not, is true' In the translation by W.D. Ross: 'To say of what is that it is, and of what is not, that it is not, is true.'

8 Madeleine S. and J. Lane Miller, *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (New York: Harper and Brothers 1952), 786. Be on guard that this is a distinctly Protestant work, but it does have the protestant virtue of being down to earth.

9 That is the Authorized Version (King James). In the *Jerusalem Bible* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1966) we read 'Love and truth.'

10 The *Jerusalem Bible* here replaces truth by the idea of reliability: 'You yourself will remain unscathed with his faithfulness for shield and buckler.'

a needed role in our lives. Nevertheless, without nagging on about the intrinsic, we should tacitly and without further comment simply be aware that instrumental value is not a primary reason why we care about trustworthiness, reliability, sincerity, accuracy — or truth and truthfulness.

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