



## Book Review

*Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, by Bernard Williams

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account, and to consider what sorts of experiments might yield confirming or disconfirming results.

*The Things We Mean* is not an easy read and relies at key points on controversial assumptions, while neglecting empirical issues that are relevant to its central claims. In the end, it is very difficult to know what to make of the major claims of the book, because it is unclear what principled grounds we might have to accept them. I suspect that Schiffer's handling of these issues will receive considerable discussion, which perhaps will help reveal the support for the book's central theses.

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***Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, by Bernard Williams.** Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002, 344 pp., £11.95.

Bernard Williams seeks in this brilliant and wide-ranging book to demonstrate the central place that truth and truthfulness have in our lives. He does so by exhibiting their pervasive reach into many different aspects of human activity and their indispensability for the satisfaction of fundamental human needs. Along the way he says many thought-provoking and valuable things about a huge variety of topics, all connected in some way to the notions of truth or truthfulness. The ten chapters of the book first mount a fairly unified philosophical 'genealogy' of the values associated with truth, and then branch out to consider specific manifestations of those values in different contexts.

Chapter 1, rather misleadingly called 'The Problem,' does not in fact present a tightly formulated philosophical problem which it will be the aim of the book to solve. Rather, it situates Williams' inquiry in our present cultural climate — one in which demands for truthfulness (or suspicions of deception) are ever more insistent, while scepticism that there is any such thing as truth is also growing. Williams also flags his great debt to Nietzsche, both for the latter's fierce devo-

tion to truthfulness and for his genealogical method, which Williams himself adopts here.

Before launching into his own genealogy in Chapter 3, Williams offers some reflections on genealogy as a philosophical method in Chapter 2. A genealogy, Williams tells us, 'is a narrative that tries to explain a cultural phenomenon by describing a way in which it came about, or could have come about, or might be imagined to have come about' (p. 20). Williams will use this genealogical method in order to 'explain the basis of truthfulness as a value' (p. 20), although one might wonder how a genealogy could explain a *normative* fact such as that truthfulness is a value. (We will return to this issue.) The genealogical method is naturalist in spirit: naturalism seeks always to explain phenomena in terms of what is (relative to the phenomenon in question) the *rest* of nature, and Williams stresses that the aim of a genealogy is indeed explanation, not reduction. The present genealogical aim is to explain ethical phenomena in terms of the rest of human psychology, in particular by showing that they are functional in relation to very basic human needs. In contrast to Nietzsche's most famous genealogy, Williams intends his genealogy of the values associated with truth to be *vindictory*: we should be able to give these values just as much respect after being presented with his proposed genealogical explanation as we did before. (Note that Williams is concerned throughout, not with 'the value of truth' strictly so called, but with the value of certain human attitudes and practices directed at or involving the truth. See pp. 6–7, 60–61, 65–66.)

In Chapter 3 Williams presents a fictional State of Nature which allows us to see why certain dispositions associated with truth and truthfulness would have emerged as values given certain very basic human needs. In Williams' State of Nature, some people live together in a society, sharing a common language. That is to say that they use language for certain basic human purposes, such as *communication*, which centrally includes telling other people things they do not know. Because some people enjoy what Williams calls a 'purely positional advantage' with respect to certain pieces of information — e.g., they (unlike others) were present when the event in question took place — those people can transfer to a common *pool* of information items which would not otherwise be represented there, and which the community needs to know. Given these facts, people will naturally be encouraged to be *good* contributors to this common pool of information, and in particular to develop and to manifest two broad kinds of

disposition: a disposition to acquire correct beliefs, and a disposition to say what one believes. These correspond to Williams' two cardinal 'virtues of truth,' Accuracy and Sincerity. (The capital letters emphasize that these are terms of art.) We can thus already see why these are useful qualities, i.e. why they have instrumental value; Williams will take up the question of their *intrinsic* value in later chapters.

Chapter 4 examines and defends the idea that assertion, belief, and truth are interconnected notions. Williams begins with the intuition that assertion aims at truth, or is subject to a norm of truth. The interesting question he poses and explores is what exactly this can mean. For beliefs, too, 'aim at the truth,' but in this case there is a clearer sense to attach to that slogan. Falsehood is (as Williams puts it) a *fatal* objection to a belief: someone who comes to think that one of his beliefs is false thereby loses that belief. There is no comparable sense in which falsehood is a fatal objection to an assertion. Williams tries to reconstruct some sense in which it is at least *an* objection by offering an account of 'what assertion centrally is' (p. 74). His definition (p. 74) links assertion to belief, and thus indirectly to truth: 'a speaker's intention to inform the hearer about the truth, and to inform him about the speaker's beliefs, fit naturally together — they are two sides of the same intention' (p. 75).

Chapters 5 and 6 offer in-depth discussion of Sincerity and Accuracy, the two cardinal virtues of truth, and the sense in which they are intrinsically valuable. Williams begins (pp. 84–88; see also pp. 105–106) by emphasizing that the demonstration in ch. 4 of the internal relations among assertion, belief, and truth did *not* establish the intrinsic value of the virtues of truth. For those relations cannot tell us why, if I *question* whether on this occasion I should continue to 'work the system' formed by those concepts, I should indeed (for example) be Sincere. Once that has become a question, citing these constitutive relations will not help to answer it. We shall therefore have to ground the intrinsic value of Sincerity in a different way; and this involves a return to the genealogical method.

Trust, Williams notes, is a necessary condition for cooperative activity such as we have imagined going on in the State of Nature. Trust in turn requires assurance that the other party will act cooperatively rather than defect. *If* it is common knowledge that the parties have an 'internalized disposition' (p. 89) to opt for the cooperative outcome, i.e., that they are (as a matter of disposition) *trustworthy*, then such assurance is at hand. And we can have such common knowl-

edge if trustworthiness is generally regarded as *intrinsically* good. Sincerity, Williams proposes, is trustworthiness in speech (p. 94), so its establishment as intrinsically valuable is simply a special case of the above argument. (Further, if our assertions are to be trustworthy, it is also important that we take reasonable care to arrive at the truth on the matters about which we speak. This fact is the basis for the virtue of Accuracy, discussed in Chapter 6, which enjoins us to resist wish and fantasy in the formation of our beliefs and to invest an appropriate amount of time and energy in ascertaining the truth before pronouncing on it.)

To return to Williams' genealogy, we might pause at this point to ask what exactly it has established. What has been explained, it seems, is — at most — why people might have *come to treat* trustworthiness or Sincerity as an intrinsic value; or why it is useful so to treat it. But people's *regarding* trustworthiness as intrinsically valuable is not, it seems, the same as its actually *being* intrinsically valuable. One might therefore object that we have not been offered any explanation or vindication of its genuinely being of intrinsic value. Williams defuses this objection in an innovative way, by proposing what seems to me to be a distinctively naturalistic account of what it is for something to possess intrinsic value:

I suggest that it is in fact a sufficient condition for something (for instance, trustworthiness) to have an intrinsic value that, first, it is necessary (or nearly necessary) for basic human purposes and needs that human beings should treat it as an intrinsic good; and, second, they can coherently treat it as an intrinsic good (p. 92).

The second condition requires that those who treat trustworthiness as an intrinsic good be able 'to relate trustworthiness to other things that they value' (pp. 91–92), as is of course the case for trustworthiness in general and Sincerity in particular if Williams' genealogy is plausible.

Chapter 5 continues with an incisive and highly entertaining discussion of what, as it were, the virtue of Sincerity *needs to be* in order for it to constitute the requisite kind of trustworthiness in speech. Williams is very convincing that Sincerity must extend beyond merely not lying (that is, not making assertions that one believes to be false, with intent to deceive). For when others rely on what I say, they inevitably rely on more than just what I *say* (p. 100): they also rely (for instance) on the 'conversational implicatures' of my utterances. This means — as Wil-

Williams argues in the truly delightful section 5 of Chapter 5 — that we should not ‘fetishize assertion’ by drawing, as a long and distinguished tradition has, ‘an overall moral distinction... between lying and other forms of deliberately deceitful speech’ (p. 102). I agree that such a conclusion follows from the way Williams approaches the question: in terms, that is, of what Sincerity ‘needs to be’ in order to secure important human needs and interests. No doubt the distinguished moralists on the other side had a different conception of what establishes the moral truths in this domain, as I am sure Williams would acknowledge. One advantage of his approach, however, is that it can explain (as the other tradition has difficulty doing) why it can be morally acceptable to lie, for example, to a murderer (pp. 114 ff.).

The remaining four chapters bring out some culturally, temporally, or contextually modulated variations of Sincerity and Accuracy. Chapter 7 takes up a transition — fascinating in itself, although in my view somewhat tenuously related to truth — effectuated by Thucydides in the fifth century BC. Thucydides subjected even events in the remote past to the tests of truth, thus sharply distinguishing (as Herodotus had not) the modes of *history* and *myth*. He can therefore be credited with having invented historical time, thereby changing what constitutes Accuracy in history. Chapter 8 considers two competing conceptions of Sincerity which coexisted in the eighteenth century. Williams sides with Diderot over Rousseau: sincerity or truthfulness does not, as Rousseau imagined, consist in disclosing to others an unchanging True Self. Rather, it consists in *constructing* relatively ‘steady’ beliefs and attitudes — and thus constituting our very selves — in society, as people who need to be able to rely on what I have said encourage me to stand behind the beliefs and desires I have expressed.

Chapter 9 takes up the roles of truth and truthfulness in politics, asking in particular what role(s) truthfulness plays in the ‘liberal’ package (summarized on p. 264) which Williams believes to be our best existing defence against tyranny. On the one hand, demands for truthfulness can run counter to certain elements of the liberal complex. For there is a tension, Williams says, between the search for truth, which typically proceeds best when speech is regulated and ordered in various ways (p. 217), and democratic legitimacy and participation, which argue for the inclusion of even disorderly or disruptive speech in public debate. On the other hand, demands for truthfulness can also be a powerful *instrument* of liberalism, by making possible a certain type of

critique of injustice in non-liberal societies and institutions. What Williams calls the Critical Theory Test rejects beliefs as unjustified if they came to be held only because of coercion; the type of reflection it suggests (outlined at pp. 227–230) can undermine acceptance by the disadvantaged of hierarchical models of society which claim to legitimate their own disadvantage.

Chapter 10 is about the degree to which truth functions as an aim or constraint on narratives in general and history in particular. (Historical) narratives aim to *make sense* of the events or outcomes which are their subjects; the question is ‘to what extent is this, again, a matter of truth and truthfulness?’ (p. 244) Williams makes surprisingly modest claims for the relevance of truth and truthfulness in this context: when it comes to historical interpretations, ‘truth is not their ultimate virtue (though they need to be truthful)’ (p. 262). That is, truth constrains history, but at a certain point truth runs out as a criterion which can distinguish among historical narratives. Truth and truthfulness constrain historical narratives in that i) such narratives use truths about past events as their materials; ii) the *explanations* such narratives propose can in principle be discredited as untrue (p. 253, with reference to Marx); and iii) the historian has an obligation to be Sincere, that is truthful, in his communications with his audience. He ought not, for instance, leave out truths that he believes to be relevant simply because they damage his case. But these constraints take us only so far. There can be different, indeed conflicting, ways of making sense of a given happening, all of which observe the above conditions. In such cases we should accept that none of these competing narratives is *false*. Williams calls this position ‘relativism’ about historical interpretation. ‘What is relative,’ he says, ‘is the interest that selectively forms a narrative and puts some part of the past into shape’ (p. 259); and those interests are ‘matters of the needs of the various parties’ (p. 260). What makes sense to us may thus not make sense to them, and rightly so.

The book closes with an Endnote which examines vocabulary expressive of or relevant to the concepts of truth and truthfulness in archaic Greece. Williams points out that all these terms ‘carry overtones or resonances all of which are clearly related to the basic demands on human communication outlined in the State of Nature story’ (p. 276).

*Truth and Truthfulness* is a work of sparkling intelligence, quick wit, and truly humbling range and erudition. (The present summary has of

necessity passed over many of the lines of argument and reflection which make the book so rich in food for thought.) Williams is impressive in demonstrating the pervasiveness of truth and truthfulness across a wide variety of human activities. That pervasiveness indeed powerfully suggests that these notions are fundamental and indispensable, although it also results in a book which is diffuse and wide-ranging rather than tightly organised and focused. But Williams, master of an exceedingly broad array of humane studies, shines in such a context. Do not read this book in order to find out Williams' response to an antecedently well-known, well-formulated, and well-understood philosophical problem. Rather, read it in order to join a highly original thinker in a series of reflections that are incisive and thought-provoking, expressive of an absolutely distinctive philosophical personality, and unified around a theme of central importance. It is a very great pity that we shall not have any more books like this from the pen of Bernard Williams.

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