

Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2002, 328 pp.

## I

Somerset Maugham's views on philosophy were free of the cant and pomposity that are the prerogatives of the professional. In *The Summing Up*, he admitted that he was unable to understand why some have insisted that the truth is valuable for its own sake:

[I]f truth is one of the ultimate values, it seems strange that no one seems quite to know what it is. Philosophers still quarrel about its meaning, and the upholders of rival doctrines say many sarcastic things of one another. (Maugham 1938, p. 194)

Bernard Williams' *Truth and Truthfulness* (henceforth TT) addresses the sort of perplexity Maugham felt—and it contains some choice remarks about “upholders of rival doctrines”. Let us take a closer look at its contents.

## II

A sound if paradoxical way to begin a summary of TT is to explain why it resists straightforward summary. There are, I think, at least four interconnected reasons why this is so, and attending to them will give potential readers some idea of what they can (and cannot) expect from a perusal of Williams' final, characteristically subtle book.

First, then, TT displays a level of erudition and scholarly breadth unheard of among analytic philosophers. Williams is conversant with recent debates in numerous disciplines outside of philosophy, including classics, philology, historiography, anthropology, sociobiology, law, and literary criticism. The range of allusions is staggeringly wide: figures from analytic philosophy (e.g., Frege, Tarski, Grice, Dummett, Davidson, Brandom) and Continental thought (Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre)

are examined, as are some of the usual suspects of postmodernism (e.g., Foucault, de Man, Hayden White, Rorty); illuminating contrasts between Herodotus and Thucydides, Rousseau and Diderot are developed and explored in detail; the views various classicists (including Marcel Detienne) have taken about the archaic Greek understanding of truth are weighed and scrutinized; and throughout there are many effective allusions to modern writers, ranging from Conrad and Orwell to Philip Roth and David Mamet. (There is even —mirabile dictu— a sympathetic reference to Clint Eastwood, whose film *Unforgiven* is insightfully discussed in a paragraph-length footnote (p. 290).) The book's interdisciplinary ambitions are admirable; but it is no mean feat to explain how Williams has contrived to gather such a vast and heterogeneous assemblage of guests under one billowing tent.

Secondly, the problems TT addresses are not of the “text-book” variety. Unlike the work of many professional philosophers, who take the questions for granted and whose answers are selected from an established menu of theoretical options, Williams' writings typically uncover new problems or transfigure our understanding of old ones.<sup>1</sup> Once again, this quality is undeniably admirable —it is a gift no outstanding philosopher has been without— but it means that a reviewer cannot tell the reader what positions Williams takes on a familiar set of prefabricated issues; instead, the issues pursued in TT must themselves be described and motivated (a task to which I shall return in section III). It also means that readers who take the title's references to truth and truthfulness at face value may be disappointed. Williams says little about substantive theories of truth (aside from a polemic against the correspondence theory, described below in section V); and his chapter on the morality of lying and deception is not an exercise in applied ethics or casuistry.<sup>2</sup> So we cannot convey what this book is “all about”

<sup>1</sup> This tendency is in evidence in all of Williams' original works. In addition Williams 1985, see the three volumes of his collected essays —Williams 1973, 1981, 1995— written over a span of almost forty years.

<sup>2</sup> As, for instance, in Bok 1978.

by gesturing lazily towards ready-made understandings of the topics mentioned in the title.

Thirdly, Williams' position is too nuanced to be translated into the slogans or quasi-catechetical formulae to which philosophers of diverse persuasions are addicted. Indeed, TT will not lend aid or comfort to adherents of any philosophical school or program, be it analytic or Continental. Admirers of the defences of objectivity mounted by Thomas Nagel and John Searle will agree with important parts of Williams' book,<sup>3</sup> but they will be vexed by other parts of it and may accuse Williams of conceding too much to *The Other Side*. On the other hand, rank and file postmodernists will applaud Williams' enthusiastic invocations of Nietzsche, his interest in genealogy, his concern with authenticity, and his repudiation of a broadly "Platonist" conception of philosophy as an ahistorical discipline after nothing but necessary and non-perspectival truths. Yet they too will find certain things in TT anathema, such as Williams' willingness to chop logic, his curt dismissal of some fashionable relativisms, and his partiality for the idea of an "absolute conception of reality". In short, those wanting to have their own philosophical prejudices confirmed have come to the wrong place; readers of TT should be prepared to be provoked and reassured by turns.

Finally, there is a cluster of issues about method, or the ways Williams approaches the topics of truth and truthfulness. Here two points demand emphasis. (a) First, there is Williams' turn towards genealogical and historical modes of understanding. The genealogical project pursued in TT will be familiar to those steeped in Nietzsche and Foucault, but some analytic philosophers may find it takes some getting used to.<sup>4</sup> (b) There is also the matter of philosophical style. Williams rarely begins by stating a thesis that he then defends; instead, he explores proposals, surveying them from different perspectives before passing swift and terrible judgment. Time and again,

<sup>3</sup> See Nagel 1997, and Searle 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Though Edward Craig (1990) employed something like it, as Williams points out. Williams has discussed the relation between philosophy and history in his 2000.

the reader of TT is introduced to a position, told why it *seems* promising and then —just when she wonders whether the position may prove defensible— is abruptly told why it is dead wrong. With its elegant, meditative exploration of alternatives, Williams' *modus operandi* is reminiscent of Descartes (about whom Williams has published a well-regarded study).<sup>5</sup> But it will not prove palatable to “people who want philosophy ladled out to them” (Peirce's contemptuous label for readers too dull or indolent to work through things for themselves).<sup>6</sup>

### III

Having explained why TT can't be summed up neatly —and having (or so I hope) given a vague inkling of its contents in the process— I shall now reconstruct the gist of the book's extended central argument.

Williams' formulation of the central problem of TT begins with a brief discussion of two ideas he thinks dominate the contemporary intellectual scene. The first of these is “an intense commitment to truthfulness” (p. 1), which fuels the sense that we must always beware we do not become credulous dupes, deceived by some would-be authority. The second idea is a “pervasive suspicion about truth itself” (p. 1); the suspicion, that is, that there may be no objective truths (or at least none in domains long regarded as containing such truths), so that the pursuit of truth as traditionally conceived is a quixotic enterprise.

How are these two ideas related? Williams points out that those in the grip of the first idea may soon accept the second, since a passion for truthfulness may initiate a process of critique that debunks the supposedly “objective” claims in some field

<sup>5</sup> See Williams 1978.

<sup>6</sup> I cannot resist citing the passage in full, since it will delight connoisseurs of spleen everywhere: “My book is meant for people who want to find out; and people who want philosophy ladled out to them can go elsewhere. There are philosophical soup shops at every corner, thank God!” (CP 1.11). It goes without saying that Williams' book, in which ladles are conspicuously absent, is no soup shop.

—history, say— exposing them as nothing but the products of ideology or hidden social forces. But what of the *logical* connections between the ideas of truthfulness and truth? Here, he notes, there is remarkable potential for tension. After all, why make a fetish of truthfulness if you think there is no truth worthy of the name and hence nothing to be true to? The threat of incoherence or instability troubles Williams, and he thinks it should trouble us as well:

My question is: how can we address this situation? Can the notions of truth and truthfulness be intellectually stabilized, in such a way that what we understand about truth and our chances of arriving at it can be made to fit with our need for truthfulness? I believe this to be a basic problem for present-day philosophy. (p. 3)

One partial expression of this tension is the contrast between two kinds of philosophers. On the one hand, there are the “deniers of truth”, so christened because they “deny something about truth (for instance, at the limit, its existence) which is usually taken to be significant in our lives” (p. 5). (Standard examples would include Rortyeen neo-pragmatists, Foucauldians, and Derridean deconstructionists.) On the other hand, there is the “party of commonsense” (p. 5), who zealously affirm the objectivity of truth and its centrality to our way of thinking. (This is where we find figures such as Searle and Nagel.) Williams sympathizes with the party of common sense; but he insists that their counterarguments, though fine as far as they go, don’t go far enough. Although their objections may show that wholesale denials of truth are absurd, they fail to engage the deeper concerns that exercise the deniers. These concerns involve well-founded worries about the status of claims outside the sphere of “plain” or “everyday” truths (pp. 45, 9) (e.g., “The cat is on the mat”) —claims such as those found in “interpretative historical narratives and complex psychological interpretations” (p. 10). Hence, unless we wish to hold that everyday truths are the only kind of truths there are —a crude and self-disqualifying form of positivism (p. 12)— we cannot assume that everything the deniers say is sound and fury signifying nothing. Indeed,

Williams thinks we need to take seriously some of what they say —especially their contention that the value of accepting and disseminating claims is to be explained, not in terms of their truth (p. 7), but in terms of something else (utility, for instance). It is at this point that Williams leaves the party of common sense behind and opts for a method associated with Nietzsche: that of genealogy.

#### IV

A genealogy, we are given to understand, 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). The cultural phenomenon Williams is concerned with is, of course, the value of truthfulness —or, more exactly, the dispositions to discover the truth and to communicate it to others. His proposed genealogy can be classified as fictional as opposed to historically true (inasmuch as it is an imagined story) and vindictory as opposed to reductive (inasmuch as it is supposed to strengthen our confidence in the outlook it explains and not debunk it).

After discussing a range of meta-philosophical questions about the viability of genealogical explanations, Williams asks us to imagine a “State of Nature” scenario in which there is a small, technologically unadvanced human society whose members speak the same language but cannot write. He sketches an argument we may reconstruct (roughly) as follows. Suppose (1) all members of the community in the State of Nature require information about the environment in order to satisfy their basic needs (e.g., to avoid danger, to secure food and shelter, etc.). Since, however, it is plain that (2) no one is in a position to acquire all the information she may need on her own, (3) members of the community must effectively pool or share information about how things actually are. That is, they must become good both at finding out how things are and at relaying or communicating such facts to others not in a position to observe those things for themselves. This means that (4) individuals in the State of Nature must be encouraged to develop

and cultivate two dispositions, or “virtues of truth” (p. 44): (i) that of acquiring true beliefs (“Accuracy”); and (ii) that of saying what one believes (“Sincerity”).

Is Williams’ genealogy vindicatory, as he intends, or merely reductive? It might be objected that the State of Nature story only shows that the virtues of truth have instrumental value (i.e., that they are good because they enable us to get what we want). Williams’ reply is to ask whether truthfulness could have even the instrumental value the deniers claim for it if we accepted the deniers’ view that it has no other kind of value (pp. 58–60). He suggests this cannot be the case; and, in a later section of TT, he builds on this idea by proposing an account of intrinsic value, according to which something has such value provided it satisfies the following two conditions: “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). Some may wonder, however, whether Williams does enough to defend this all-important proposal. (He certainly does not argue for it, or for its applicability to truthfulness, at great length.)

## V

Williams supplements this story about truthfulness with reflections on the two virtues of truth —viz., Accuracy and Sincerity— and on the concept of truth itself. Since I suspect his views on the latter topic will be of greater interest to many readers of this journal, let me list five theses about truth to which Williams subscribes:

- (a) There can be no history of the concept of truth, since that concept “is not culturally various, but always and everywhere the same” (p. 61; cf. p. 271). There can, of course, be histories of *philosophical theories* of truth; but that is obviously a different matter.
- (b) We should eschew all traditional philosophical theories of truth. However, this does not mean that nothing of

philosophical importance can be said about truth: we can still explore how the concept of truth is related to other concepts, such as meaning, reference, and belief. But we should not try to *analyze* or *define* truth in terms of these—or any other— notions.

- (c) A fortiori, we should not accept the correspondence theory of truth. Since we cannot identify or individuate facts—the worldly states of affairs that are supposed to make sentences true or false—in any systematic way, “there can be no interesting correspondence theory” (p. 65).
- (d) Minimalism or deflationism about truth does not imply that the value of truth is purely instrumental (pp. 65–66); it simply does not follow from the claim that there is no substantive theory of truth that the truth itself has no value.
- (e) Truth *is* a goal of inquiry: “the aim of our inquiries is to arrive at the truth” (p. 127). Rorty, a “denier”, contends this claim is vacuous: he thinks that since we cannot distinguish being in a position to say that *P* is true from being justified in believing that *P*, we should stop talking about truth as a goal of inquiry. But this Rortyeian “indistinguishability argument” (p. 128) is unpersuasive.

Williams’ position on truth has considerable appeal, but it is open to attack on several fronts. Let me mention just two problems in passing. First, although Williams notes that both Davidson and Brandom are much more sympathetic than he is to the so-called indistinguishability argument (pp. 294, 287), he does not explore this disagreement or explain where (in his view) they go wrong on this issue.<sup>7</sup> As a result, his case for thesis (e) seems underdeveloped. Second, his defence of theses (b) and (c) is derived from Davidson; accordingly, those dissatisfied with the latter’s arguments for (b) and (c) will find little

<sup>7</sup> For Davidson’s views on this question, see his 1999. I have discussed some of the differences between Davidson and Rorty in McDermid 2000.

in Williams to sway them. (Note that Williams, like Davidson, does not consider the possibility of a correspondence theory *sans* facts.)<sup>8</sup>

## VI

I shall conclude with a caveat and a prediction. First, the caveat: my survey of the basic position mapped out in TT is highly selective, and necessarily so; for there is, in Williams' complex and involved book, much worthwhile material which I have had to pass over in silence (e.g., his contributions to a history of conceptions of truthfulness, his project's implications for political philosophy, and his provocative meta-philosophical reflections). My prediction (and also my hope) is that TT will appeal to a significant number of non-philosophers, who will appreciate the book's lapidary style, its mixture of scholarly seriousness and sly wit, its interdisciplinary scope, and —last but not least— the fact that its central topics are not of merely academic interest. Maugham, for one, would have been impressed.

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<sup>8</sup> See Davidson 1990.

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En una época de la reflexión en la que las diferentes escuelas filosóficas parecen estar motivadas, en muchas ocasiones, por asuntos de moda y por un incesante cambio de temas y debates, permanecen, no obstante, varias discusiones de fondo que dan coherencia a trayectorias aparentemente dispersas. Y es, sin duda, la preocupación por el concepto de *experiencia* uno de los motivos más destacados en los diferentes ámbitos de la discusión filosófica actual. La experiencia hace posible un contacto de tipo cognitivo entre la mente y el mundo; por eso, una buena parte de la recuperación del empirismo se juega en la comprensión de este lazo cognitivo y, con ello, en el análisis del contenido y carácter de las experiencias. Me atrevería incluso