



Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy

By Bernard Williams

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What does it mean to be truthful? What role does truth play in our lives? What do we lose if we reject truthfulness? No philosopher is better suited to answer these questions than Bernard Williams. Writing with his characteristic combination of passion and elegant simplicity, he explores the value of truth and finds it to be both less and more than we might imagine.

Modern culture exhibits two attitudes toward truth: suspicion of being deceived (no one wants to be fooled) and skepticism that objective truth exists at all (no one wants to be naive). This tension between a demand for truthfulness and the doubt that there is any truth to be found is not an abstract paradox. It has political consequences and signals a danger that our intellectual activities, particularly in the humanities, may tear themselves to pieces.

Williams's approach, in the tradition of Nietzsche's genealogy, blends philosophy, history, and a fictional account of how the human concern with truth might have arisen. Without denying that we should worry about the contingency of much that we take for granted, he defends truth as an intellectual objective and a cultural value. He identifies two basic virtues of truth, Accuracy and Sincerity, the first of which aims at finding out the truth and the second at telling it. He describes different psychological and social forms that these virtues have taken and asks what ideas can make best sense of them today.

Truth and Truthfulness presents a powerful challenge to the fashionable belief that truth has no value, but equally to the traditional faith that its value guarantees itself. Bernard Williams shows us that when we lose a sense of the value of truth, we lose a lot both politically and personally, and may well lose everything.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Williams examines the modern tension between valuing and demanding truthfulness vs. doubting that there is truth or regarding it as relative or subjective. His philosophical analysis, which includes both real history and fictional "state of nature" narrative, aims at specifying basic human needs, powers, and limitations so as to account for truthfulness and its value. He regards accuracy and sincerity as the two basic virtues of truth and therefore discusses their relationships to belief, education, authenticity, historical truth, political liberalism (liberty and distributive justice), etc., and also analyzes trustworthiness and deceit in terms of Gricean conversational implicatures. Williams also has some strictures against Rortian pragmatism. Regrettably, his seven-page endnote chapter is sprinkled with untranslated ancient Greek. Otherwise, the book is a model of clarity and discernment.

Robert Hoffman, York Coll. of CUNY

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Review

**Honorable Mention for the 2002 Award for Best Professional/Scholarly Book in Philosophy,
Association of American Publishers**

"[Truth and Truthfulness] shows all Williams's characteristic virtues. He is always a pleasure to read, and as it has often done before, his deft, sparkling intelligence newly illuminates an old philosophical subject, scattering light into many surprising corners as it does so. . . . He is consistently amusing, but at absolutely no cost to the depth of the enterprise. And what a wonderful life it would be if even a small proportion of philosophers could write so well."--**Simon Blackburn, *Times Literary Supplement***

"Its virtuoso blend of analytic philosophy, classical scholarship, historical consciousness, and uninhibited curiosity marks Truth and Truthfulness unmistakably as a work by Bernard Williams. He responds to Rousseau and Diderot; Thucydides, Herodotus, and Homer; Nietzsche, Hume, Plato, and Kant; Rorty, Habermas, and Hayden White."--**Thomas Nagel, *New Republic***

"Anyone who wants to understand the relations between the relatively arcane issues concerning truth debated by philosophy professors, and the larger question of what self-image we human beings should have, would do well to read Williams's new book. It is a major work."--**Richard Rorty, *London Review of Books***

"Many colleagues consider Williams the most influential voice in contemporary moral philosophy. . . . [This book] may well have a noteworthy impact. It is Williams' reflection on the moral cost of the intellectual vogue for dispensing with the concept of truth. . . . The patient reader will enjoy the rare experience of watching philosophical and historical scaffolding installed, or revealed, beneath everyday expectations and practices of honesty, trust, doubt, deceit and wishful thinking."--**Kenneth Baker, *The San Francisco Chronicle***

"A model of clarity and discernment."--**Library Journal**

"[A] brilliant and disturbing book. . . . This is a fascinating and riveting work, and it shows, in a way which no other recent work of philosophy has done, that the subject can be both important and comprehensible--and that is a very considerable achievement indeed."--**Alasdair Palmer, *Sunday Telegraph***

"The book is never dull or nerdy. It is suffused by a sly Oxonian humor and a keen feeling for pleasures and philosophical argument. . . . Yet this playfulness does not detract from its underlying seriousness of purpose: this is a defense of the value of truth against those modern skeptics who deny its existence. . . . [I]t offers the rare pleasure of a first-rate philosophical mind at work."--**Edward Skidelsky, *New Statesmen***

"A new book by Bernard Williams is a big event, and it is not difficult to see why. He writes on important and fundamental issues that are of interest not only to philosophers but also to anyone who wants to understand contemporary culture and society. . . . And above all, he writes with the kind of eloquence, elegance and wit that used to characterize the work of our greatest minds but that has now all but disappeared from academic life. What he writes, people want to read, and what he says, people want to hear."--**Ray Monk, *Times Higher Education Supplement***

"Deftly, and with a certain relish, [Williams] explores the barefaced lying and the many subtler forms of deception and self-deception we practice. . . . The array of arguments he marshals to cast light on the problem leaves little doubt: If you wish to develop your talents, earn the love of another, or pursue justice, then cultivate the virtues of truth."--**Peter Berkowitz, *Washington Post Book World***

"*Truth and Truthfulness* is the book which has meant the most to me this year. . . . This vigorous, crystalline book is an intellectual landmark."--**Richard Sennett, *Times Literary Supplement***

"*Truth and Truthfulness* is an ambitious work, and its journeys into history give it a breadth unusual in these days of increased academic specialization. . . . William's book combines real history and fictional constructs to tell a revealing story that makes us reconsider the meaning of familiar concepts."--**Julian Baggini, *The Philosophers' Magazine***

"Elegance and subtlety are the hallmarks of Bernard Williams's philosophical style, both in the quality of his thought and the manner of his prose. His contributions have enriched philosophical debate for decades, and as this absorbing book about the truth and the vocations of truth shows, they continue to do so. . . . Williams's careful, eloquent and searching analysis . . . makes a valuable contribution to philosophy."--**A. C. Grayling, *Literary Review***

"Bernard Williams has been a distinctive presence on the intellectual scene for more than three decades. . . . His writings do not offer the dubious exhilaration of grand philosophical theory, in which messy reality is tamed and caged, but the thrill of seeing pretension punctured by a kind of high-voltage common sense (backed up by impressive erudition). . . . There is no one in philosophy quite like him."--**Colin McGinn, *New York Review of Books***

"Williams observes that unsettling questions about truth have been on the table at least since Nietzsche. . . . *Truth and Truthfulness* addresses these questions in a clear and cogent . . . manner."--**Thomas Hibbs, *The Weekly Standard***

"Elegance and subtlety are the hallmarks of Bernard Williams's philosophical style, both in the quality of his thought and the manner of his prose. His contributions have enriched philosophical debate for decades, and as this absorbing book about truth and the vocations of truth shows, they continue to do so. . . . [E]ven those who disagree with aspects of Williams's careful, eloquent and searching analysis will acknowledge that it makes a valuable contribution to philosophy."--**Literary Review**

"If philosophers ever became kings, they would all be like Mr. Williams. His books were clear, funny, dramatic and readable, like great novels. . . . His final book, *Truth and Truthfulness*, has come along at

exactly the right moment. It both describes our current crisis of truth and offers hope for a resolution."--

Doug Saunders, *Toronto Globe and Mail*

"Bernard Williams' last book is the most interesting set of reflections on the values of truth and truth-telling in living memory. His grasp of philosophical arguments is astonishing. . . . The book manages to be both learned and passionate without being pretentious. And of course witty; . . . 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 civilisations 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."--**Ian Hacking, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy***

From the Inside Flap

"In this exceptionally brilliant book, ranging effortlessly from Herodotus and Thucydides to Diderot and Nietzsche, Bernard Williams daringly asks--and still more daringly answers--one of the central questions of philosophy: what is the point of telling the truth? Lucid, penetrating, and profound, Williams' reflections are vitally important not for philosophers alone but for anyone interested in human thought and creativity."--

Stephen Greenblatt, Cogan University Professor of the Humanities, Harvard University

"This is a major, wide-ranging, and comprehensive book. A philosophical investigation that is also a literary and historical study, *Truth and Truthfulness* asks how and why we have come to think of accuracy, sincerity, and authenticity as virtues. Bernard Williams' account of their emergence is as detailed and imaginative as his defense of their importance is spirited and provocative. Williams asks hard questions, and gives them straightforward and controversial answers. His book does not simply describe and advocate these virtues of truthfulness; it manifests them."--Alexander Nehamas, author of *Virtues of Authenticity*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Linda Musselwhite:

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Patricia Briggs:

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