‘A Sense of Reality’: Foreword to the Princeton Classics Edition (2025)

Bernard Williams’ philosophy was consistently and self-consciously guided by a vivid sense of what is real in life—ethically, politically, intellectually. This forceful sense of the real manifested itself in an inexhaustible sceptical energy, targeted at a family of moral philosophical ideas that he found to be objectivist fantasies. These objectivist ideas, in his view, fabricated a moralised conception of ethical life that exerted a seriously distorting influence on both our theoretical activity and our lived ethical consciousness. He described them (to recall an indelible formulation from the close of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*) as ‘philosophical errors [that] are only the most abstract expressions of a deeply rooted and still powerful misconception of life’.[i] One might identify the two progenitor commitments to this lineage of objectivist moral thought as, first, an idea of ethical reasons as transcending motivational facts about the individual; and second, an immunity to luck in determining which, among all the things that we do, are actions for which we are responsible. From these parent commitments we might trace other important family members that are scrutinised at different moments in Williams’ philosophy: a conception of moral obligation as exerting an absolute or categorical authority; a ‘deepened’ idea of the agent’s will, conceived as free in virtue of transcending the luck inherent in the causal flux; and an idea of moral value as objective, its authority conceived as independent from the contingencies of human cultural history. It is a powerful family, and Williams roundly rejected its authority over our ethical lives, though he never underestimated its systematic beauty, or indeed its cultural hold over us.

This body of broadly critical work might all be understood as in the service of truthfulness about the nature of the ethical—a sustained, sometimes intricate philosophical effort to dispel moralistic fantasy from our ethical thinking. But later phases of his career saw a different kind of philosophical flourishing. His 1993 book, *Shame and Necessity*, unveiled a portrait of the Homeric ethical outlook, viewed in relation to the different countenance of modern moral consciousness.[ii] In this study Williams argued that the organising ethical responses of ancient shame and modern guilt were importantly different, but decidedly not in the manner depicted by the standard progressivist story that figures guilt as the more psychologically reflexive and culturally mature ethical emotion. In one way this was a new departure for

Williams, in that it was a distinctively literary ancient philosophical project. Yet in another sense, none of the rich bodies of ideas that Williams ever produced could be described as a wholly new philosophical departure for *him*. He was the sort of thinker whose philosophy did not so much develop and change over time as realise itself in phases, with each phase showing a detail of an area of a larger picture that was more or less there from the start. The 'start', I am inclined to imagine as the moment when he pitched up to analytic philosophy having imbibed a historically minded philosophical sensibility from an Oxford undergraduate training in 'greats'. In particular, the broadly Homeric ethical outlook, with its distinctive ideas of the voluntary, the centrality of shame, and the unavoidability of luck, was never to leave him. It surely powered much of his engagement with the shibboleths of modern moral philosophy, and his vivid sense of their post-Christian peculiarity and historical contingency. I speculate of course. At any rate, we may observe that after *Shame and Necessity* came *Truth and Truthfulness*, in which the historical contingency of our ethical outlook was brought into explanatory relation with the minimal basic necessities of human social nature. In this next major project, he would craft a hybrid philosophical method that would enable him to squarely address, in wholly positive spirit, the nature and origins of the style of commitment to truthfulness that had always motivated him in philosophy. The result was a book of extraordinary synthetic ambition, and an innovative historical-philosophical methodology that brings an abundant culminating expression to Williams' sense of the real.

Truth and Truthfulness is a marvellously integrated work of naturalistic explanation and historical exploration. It concentrates first on truth—a concept that has no history since, as a precondition of language, it is 'always and everywhere the same' (p. 61); and second on truthfulness—a compound virtue that may take indefinitely different historically contingent forms, though always with the simple dispositions of Accuracy and Sincerity at its core. These core features are revealed in the thought experiment of the State of Nature as two simple dispositions without which society could not share information, and so could not function. The need is basic, so that these simple dispositions combine to form the a priori roots of truthfulness, with the contingent developments of history cultivating it above ground into many and various cultural formations. Whereas the State of Nature is an atemporal fiction, what happens in real historical time is that Accuracy and Sincerity accrue further content as they are culturally

realized as virtues of truth in this or that historical moment. This contingent content is generated by the changing relations of Accuracy and Sincerity to other concepts that may be culturally in play at a given time and place. Williams' illustrative discussions of this phenomenon embrace an extraordinary breadth of scholarly reference. He presents us, for example, with the development of a specific conception of accuracy about the past on the back of the invention of historical time by Thucydides in the fifth century BC, and, more ambivalently, the emergence of contrasting conceptions of sincerity in eighteenth-century France, with each conception mirroring contrasting ideals of authenticity, as represented in the writings of Rousseau and Diderot.

A work of creative philosophical brilliance, *Truth and Truthfulness* is also a narrative of unnerving prescience. Over two decades since its first publication, the present-day reader is immediately struck by its diagnostic cultural relevance. Its opening paragraphs describe 'The Problem' in terms of two currents of ideas in modern thought and culture: 'the devotion to truthfulness and the suspicion directed to the idea of truth' (p. 1). These are of course connected, in that the suspicion of the very idea of truth is an unfortunate expression of the instinct against being fooled by deception. What instantly strikes today's reader is that our present historical moment requires society to operate in an especially acute iteration of exactly this problematic.

Williams explicitly framed the book as a response to two sorts of pressure that were threatening truthfulness in the humanities in the late 1990s. One concerned the new managerialism that was already taking a firm hand to UK academia, of which the subsequent two decades have witnessed a normalizing entrenchment through evolving evidential regimes of measurable 'outputs' and narratives of social efficacy. He saw even the beginnings of such developments as tending to undermine the integrity of the humanities, alerting us to the risk of 'sliding from professional seriousness, through professionalization, to a finally disenchanted careerism' (p. 3). The other sort of threat that explicitly concerned him was more widespread, because it emanated not from any particular institutional context but rather from something internal to the humanities themselves. This was the threat posed by the intellectual sway of various forms of 'denialism' about truth. Acknowledging different idioms, whether accented in relativist, nihilist, pragmatist, or deconstructionist terms, he characterized denialism as typically expressing itself in an urbane evasiveness, and sometimes even a 'smug nod that registers a

deconstructive job neatly done' (p. 18). Notably prevalent at the time, Rorty's style of pragmatism was in Williams' sights, but equally the medley of postmodernist intellectual currents whose collective undertow threatened to sweep away the authority of our ideas of truth and truthfulness altogether. These intellectual currents are no longer the force they once were; but perhaps this is partly because they have been replaced by something of a far larger significance.

Since its publication in 2002, arguably the most irreversible development concerning the pressures on truth and truthfulness has been the immense global digital challenge to what Williams labels 'plain truths'—truths which (even while they may be complex, and technologically mediated) are epistemically manifest, and so not a locus of any real dispute. They can be taken for granted by all who may be concerned to argue about how best to make sense of them, or what to do about them. The unprecedented global force for falsehood attending the algorithms that control our economy of attention and information has, at least in the political domain, dramatically compromised our collective relation to plain truth. Since disagreement must be *about* something commonly conceived, the more the new informational economy erodes our common ground of plain truths, the less hope we have of achieving proper disagreement—our differences become undebatable. This, as many observe, has led us increasingly into forms of epistemic isolation and political polarisation. The new powers that recent digital developments have afforded some of our oldest vices lend Williams' arguments for the intrinsic value of truthfulness a contemporary significance that not even he could have anticipated. *Truth and Truthfulness* emphasizes the permanent need to stick up for plain truths and the everyday truthfulness that depends upon them. It explains the necessity yet fragility of virtues of truth, and the need to safeguard their authority by constructing truthfulness as an intrinsic value. He was surely right about this; and never has there been more at stake in doing so than there is today.

The philosophical form of Williams' concern with truthfulness is essentially and explicitly Nietzschean: 'Perhaps nobody yet has been truthful enough about what "truthfulness" is'.[iii] Williams' treatment might be read as a complex response to this Nietzschean prompt, a book that also delivers its readers an ultimate synthesis of the opposing intellectual currents that energized Williams' philosophy as a whole: naturalism, and yet also historicism. But Nietzsche is

not the only major protagonist here, for this work is a junction of opposing intellectual energies, and the other is Hume. Their respective constructive and deconstructive currents are controlled by Williams into a remarkable philosophical synergy. Hume, I tend to think, was the positively charged anode to Williams' treatment; and Nietzsche the negatively charged cathode. Together these opposite philosophical poles supply Williams with the push and the pull of *vindicatory* and *debunking* forms of genealogical explanation, equipping him to generate the extraordinary hybrid method that is the project of the book, and the culminating invention of his philosophical career: *State of Nature Genealogy*.

This methodological invention conjoins two things normally kept separate. It takes the State of Nature style of thought experiment, long used in various philosophical justifications of the State, and puts it in strange combination with the method of genealogy which came (from Nietzsche through Foucault) to signify an unendingly historicist and problematizing spirit. The hybrid method is therefore—by either set of normally opposed methodological lights—a quite fantastical creature, a methodological Centaur whose upper- and lower-body might not seem to belong together at all. Its lower-body a rump of self-consciously mythical construction of 'original' ethical functions, carefully derived from a hypothesis regarding the fundamental needs of human society, is fabulously conjoined with the front-facing head and torso of human ethical culture in all its contingency and social art, representing that aspect of human nature which Hume so aptly captures in his characterization of human-kind as 'the inventive species'.[iv]

The contrary Humean and Nietzschean energies at work in Williams' hybrid method reflect his complex philosophical temperament. Williams believed in the revelatory potential of a priori thinking, but he believed, more passionately perhaps, in the importance of knowing its limits, and in particular of inhabiting the fertile borderlands it shares with history—'history' being, for Williams, the watchword for all things contingent and substantive, with which philosophy needs to mix itself. He believed, then, in the importance of 'impure' philosophizing, and *Truth and Truthfulness* is a work of impure philosophy of the highest order. In it, as the metaphor of cathode and anode is intended to convey, the positive and negative charges of Humean naturalism and Nietzschean historicism are transformed into something utterly new. But we should resist defaulting into a lazy association of the former with a blithe confidence that

things are generally as they seem, as contrasted with the latter as expressing a savvy suspicion of appearances. On the contrary, *both* Hume and Nietzsche exhibited a voracious sceptical habit. They simply tended to direct their scepticism at different sorts of object, and in different styles. Hume denied, or at least questioned, the existence of a number of things he found to be artefacts of deep human associative habits of mind, such as induction, the self, and the necessary connection between cause and effect. Nietzsche challenged the appearance of a certain objective moral authority, aiming to expose it as the punishing expression of a sublimated will to power. It is interesting to reflect that Williams, in his own way, exhibited *both* sceptical styles. He was a consistently 'non-objectivist', frankly anti-objectivist, thinker who argued that many things we might imagine exist do not in fact exist (such as objective moral values, or external reasons); and he was, at the same time, a historicist debunker of many ideas he considered to be fraudulent postures of objective moral authority or moral law.

In temper and substance, there is a great deal in this book that is Humean; but, importantly, the motivating *question* is decidedly *not* a Humean one. Hume, though an opponent of rationalism, did not find much in moral experience itself on which to practice his sceptic's vanishing trick. He did not regard our common moral experience as requiring any subterfuge in order to retain its authority for us. Unlike the error theorists he was to inspire centuries later, Hume largely treated moral experience in itself as a non-self-deceiving natural and social phenomenon, which could be stably explained by reference to human sentiment and the social interest.[v] This being so, in order to identify the source for the essentially troubled problematic that motivates Williams' *Truth and Truthfulness*—that is, the presumed immense *difficulty* concerning the truthful confrontation with the origins of our values—we must look instead to the negatively charged philosophical presence in his thinking: 'The problems that concern this book were discovered, effectively, by Nietzsche' (p. 12).

The motivating philosophical question of *Truth and Truthfulness*, then, is explicitly Nietzsche's and debunking in spirit, even while the first part of the answer delivered by Williams—the State of Nature scenario establishing the necessity of truthful dispositions—is clearly Humean and vindicatory. Such an a priori naturalistic constructive project is a kind of genealogy that Nietzsche most certainly did *not* have in mind as a kindred methodology, and which Foucault and other adherents of strictly historical and critical genealogy generally find

misguided, ludicrous even, and (in Nietzsche's scheme of things) typical of the *English*.[vi] Its purpose is not to discredit, but rather to *vindicate*. The importance of a vindicatory story about a cardinal value such as truthfulness is that it brings stability under reflection to our conviction that truthfulness is intrinsically valuable. As Williams at one point elaborates: 'Another way of putting it is that in a genealogy the value [in question] can be represented as arising from more primitive needs and desires, and that when we reflect on that story, we can find the value intelligible without at the same time losing our hold on it' (p. 92).

The question whether or not we can tell ourselves a truthful story about our convictions and our society without destabilizing them is, however, not only relevant to our ethical lives but crucially also to our politics. Williams' concern with how we should live was always as much a political question as an ethical one. He addressed both domains substantively, as raising practical questions for us that demanded answers—truthful answers we can live with, and live with collectively through socially available forms of reasonable persuasion. In the last two chapters of *Truth and Truthfulness*, Williams turns to address the squarely political issues of truthfulness and critique in liberal democracy, and to the nature of our cultural task of 'making sense' of the practices and structures that constitute our polity. 'Making sense' is the *métier* of the 'passionate and intelligent study' (p. 10) that is the humanities; and philosophy has its own essential role in that enterprise. We try, through our careful abstractions, to make sense of the human condition, of our historical moment, and of ourselves.

The resounding message of Williams' philosophy in this regard is a combination of pessimism and hope. It is a powerful message. In *Truth and Truthfulness*, Williams emphasizes in equal measure the need and impulse for truthfulness on the one hand, and the ever-presence of tendencies to forms of deception and wishful thinking on the other. These opposing forces operate at many levels to shape both the lives of individuals and the myths with which liberal democracies have so often propped themselves up. The overarching question that *Truth and Truthfulness* leaves us with is one that, as ever, sharply focuses our attention on the contingency of whether we succeed, at any given cultural moment, in sustaining practices and institutions that are capable of nurturing and protecting truthfulness about ourselves, who we are, and how we got here:

> It is not foolish to believe that any social and political order which effectively uses power, and which sustains a culture that means something to the people who live in it, must involve opacity, mystification, and large-scale deception. Reasonable people can believe, contrary to the ideals of liberalism, that human beings cannot live together effectively, at least on any culturally ambitious scale, if they understand fully what they are doing. It is not necessarily foolish to believe these things, but they may not be true, and we can still live in the hope…that they are not (p. 232).

In this book, however, Williams gives us far more than hope. He philosophically scaffolds the stance of hopeful pessimism with an explanatory framework that shows us which of our practices of truth we may be robustly confident of, and which modes of truthfulness stand in need of concerted intellectual and institutional protection. In giving us this enduring, luminous work of historically self-conscious philosophy, Williams also delivers a message of special contemporary urgency.

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[i] Williams *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana Press, 1985) p. 196.
[ii] Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
[iii] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* Trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966) p. 177. Quoted by Williams p. 14.
[iv] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1969) p. 536.
[v] See, most notably, J. L. Mackie *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).
[vi] '[T]he back-to-front and perverse kind of genealogical hypotheses, actually the *English* kind…' (Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson; trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) Preface p. 5.