

Reviews

TRUTH AND TRUTHFULNESS: AN ESSAY IN GENEALOGY by Bernard Williams, *Princeton*, 328 pp, £19.95

At the present time, according to Bernard Williams, 'the study of the humanities runs a risk of sliding from professional seriousness, through professionalization, to a finally disenchanting careerism.' If you recognise theology in that description, you should read this book.

The cause of this sorry state of affairs, according to Williams, is scepticism. That the demand for truthfulness, the wish not to be deceived, results in the rejection of Truth, is a commonplace of contemporary life. And the commonplace is not always lamented — it has its champions. Williams calls them 'the deniers'. However: 'if you do not really believe in the existence of truth, what is the passion for truthfulness a passion for? Or — as we might also put it — in pursuing truthfulness, what are you supposedly being true to?'

To answer these questions, Williams uses a 'genealogy' — an explanatory narrative composed of both real-historical and fictional elements. This is the best method, he feels, for his exposition, because truthfulness as a value belongs to the 'State of Nature', and this state is not (whatever various scientists might think) fully described by real-historical narratives concerned with facts and natural laws alone.

Central to Williams' 'State of Nature' story is the supposed need for co-operation between human beings. Human beings negotiate situations of life; in that negotiation there has to be an epistemic division of labour. As we need to know how to deal with various situations before we encounter them fully, we need to co-operate, and co-operate truthfully. Truthfulness in this co-operation arises from two dispositions, the disposition to Accuracy, and the disposition to Sincerity. These Williams calls the two basic 'virtues of truth'

It is easy to describe the State of Nature in which Accuracy and Sincerity are values. However, what is more difficult to envisage is the State in which they are values generally and intrinsically. This is the absolute crux of Williams' book, and it is here that he tackles Richard Rorty as a prominent 'denier'. Accuracy is a value for others and oneself; but Sincerity is not so generally a value — it is most important for others, not oneself. That is, there are some truths which can be more valuable to you if you don't share them with others. Equally, whereas Accuracy and Sincerity can be well-described instrumentally, in terms of other goods, it is difficult to see how they are goods in themselves.

Of course, some of 'the deniers' are happy with such a situation. But precisely what shapes their instrumentalism undermines their argument.

'The reason why useful consequences have flowed from people's insistence that their beliefs should be true is surely, a lot of the time, that their insistence did not look just to those consequences but rather toward the truth: that it was bloody-minded rather than benefit-minded.' This sentence, knotty but appealing to commonsense, gives something of a flavour of Williams arguments.

In the same vein he tackles the famous "indistinguishability argument" of pragmatists. Briefly, this asserts the indistinguishability (in practice) between "It is true that P" and "being justified in believing that P", concluding that the latter sentence is as far as we need to go in search of Truth. The argument is intended to show, quite generally, that "truth" as it practically appears in everyday situations is not dependent upon correspondence with some extra-human reality of Truth, but upon social and psychological states of being justified in certain beliefs. Williams counters "indistinguishability" by pointing out that when we distinguish between, say, brainwashing and argument, we "have stories to tell about why those distinctions matter, to the effect that some methods are better than others in leading to the truth." That is, Williams is refusing Rorty's invitation to a general scepticism, preferring to believe in privileged methods. It will come as no surprise to the reader that, after careful consideration of possible methods, the privileged ones are those by which scientists precede.

The last four chapters of Williams book need not detain us here, although they are perhaps the most enjoyable in the book. This is where he turns to history, comparing Herodotus and Thucydides, Rousseau and Diderot, Habermas and Foucault; in the final chapter he brings his thoughts together on history and truth. The conclusion is moderate; although Williams hopes that the virtues of truth will survive in "courageous, intransigent and socially effective forms", "the hope can no longer be that the truth, enough truth, the whole truth, will itself set us free..."

Williams is an atheist, as that denial of John 8:32 implies, but there is much in this book with which the Christian theologian might sympathise. Williams is attempting to make his own way between extremes; in this case, extremes in the interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy. He does not agree with those, like Richard Rorty, who might see Nietzsche as a forerunner of modern pragmatism and minimalism on the question of truth. But equally, he does not disagree with those features of Nietzsche's philosophy which have led others to such a conclusion. He wholeheartedly concurs with the criticisms of Plato and Kant that Nietzsche made; nevertheless, he wishes, like Plato and Kant and (he believes) Nietzsche himself, to uphold an ideal of truthfulness. This is equivalent to the predicament of modern theology: how do we forsake notions of theism that tend to make God an object, without slipping into anti-realism and relativism.

That said, however, there are slim pickings here for theologians. For all its engagement with Nietzsche, Truth and Truthfulness is really a tract in the noble tradition of Enlightenment liberalism. In other words, this

book condemns everything that recent theology has found seductive, be it post-liberal, non-realist, deconstructionist or Radical Orthodox. Williams may accept the premises of postmodernism, but its various conclusions are specifically rejected. Even those theological works which display a knowledge of Williams' own field are unlikely, one suspects, to please him. Bruce Marshall's *Trinity and Truth* (2000) is the most sophisticated recent theological work on the subject of truth, aware of Tarski, Davidson, Rorty, et al, but it's doubtful that, in using the Christian experience of God as Holy Trinity as basic for the justification of belief, Marshall is employing one of Williams' preferred "methods" for drawing nearer to the truth.

If Williams offers comfort to anyone, it's likely to be the liberals. His ideal of truthfulness is "both/and" not "either/or": both questionable and robust; both confident of its value, and aware of its diversity. It's this sort of balance which liberal theologians have long recommended in approaching the truth. But if recently the liberal balance has been neglected, it's only because it no longer looks capable of doing justice to the kind of truth theology seeks; and that stands as a criticism for Williams' treatment of truth in general. The balance of care and passion required for Williams' "Truthfulness" seems impossible to achieve. When we're passionate for the truth, how can we stop to be careful? When we're careful with the truth, how can we communicate a passion for it? Williams says that we should resist any demand for a definition of truth, "principally because truth belongs to a ramifying set of connected notions..." But is that why Pilate's question to Jesus remained unanswered?

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LAW AND THEOLOGY IN THE MIDDLE AGES by G.R. Evans, *Routledge, London, 2002, Pp. viii + 259, pbk.*

This is a courageous book. The author sets out to examine the tension between church law and secular law in the Middle Ages. She tells the reader that she will be primarily concerned with the 12th and 13th centuries, but, in fact, she ranges much more widely than that, from Cicero and the Roman jurists, from Augustine and Boethius to Baldus in the 14th century. The span is so wide that it would be impossible even to attempt a summary of the argument of the book. It examines the tensions between ecclesiastical and secular authority in medieval Europe. It discusses the relationship between the legal and theological responses to concepts such as justice, mercy, fairness and sin.

Themes, such as the difference between virtue and keeping the law, and sin and breaking the law, are used to illustrate a wide range of practical and theoretical areas of dispute. How does one balance God's justice and God's mercy? Medieval thinkers saw law as needed for the protection of the common good. Yet, everywhere there is a tension between practice and the ideals of justice, equity and fairness. How