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Bernard Williams: Truth and Truthfulness

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THE PROBLEM

1. *Truthfulness and Truth*

Two currents of ideas are very prominent in modern thought and culture. On the one hand, there is an intense commitment to truthfulness—or, at any rate, a pervasive suspiciousness, a readiness against being fooled, an eagerness to see through appearances to the real structures and motives that lie behind them. Always familiar in politics, it stretches to historical understanding, to the social sciences, and even to interpretations of discoveries and research in the natural sciences.

Together with this demand for truthfulness, however, or (to put it less positively) this reflex against deceptiveness, there is an equally pervasive suspicion about truth itself: whether there is such a thing; if there is, whether it can be more than relative or subjective or something of that kind; altogether, whether we should bother about it, in carrying on our activities or in giving an account of them. These two things, the devotion to truthfulness and the suspicion directed to the idea of truth, are connected to one other. The desire for truthfulness drives a process of criticism which weakens the assurance that there is any secure or unqualifiedly stateable truth. Suspicion fastens, for instance, on history. Accounts which have been offered as telling the truth about the past often turn out to be biassed, ideological, or self-serving. But attempts to replace these distortions with “the truth” may once more encounter the same kind of objection, and then the question arises, whether any historical account can aim to be, simply, true: whether objective truth, or truth

at all, can honestly (or, as we naturally put it, truthfully) be regarded as the aim of our inquiries into the past. Similar arguments, if not quite the same, have run their course in other fields. But if truth cannot be the aim of our inquiries, then it must surely be more honest or truthful to stop pretending that it is, and to accept that . . . : and then there follows some description of our situation which does without the idea of truth, such as that we are engaged in a battle of rhetorics.

We can see how the demand for truthfulness and the rejection of truth can go together. However, this does not mean that they can happily co-exist or that the situation is stable. 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? This is not an abstract difficulty or just a paradox. It has consequences for real politics, and it signals a danger that our intellectual activities, particularly in the humanities, may tear themselves to pieces.

The tension between the pursuit of truthfulness and the doubt that there is (really) any truth to be found comes out in a significant difficulty, that the attack on some specific form of truth, such as the case I have mentioned, historical truth, itself depends on some claims or other which themselves have to be taken to be true.¹ Indeed, in the case of history, those other claims will be claims *of the same sort*. Those who say that all historical accounts are ideological constructs (which is one version of the idea that there is really no historical truth) rely on some story which must itself claim historical truth. They show that supposedly “objective” historians have tentatively told their stories from some particular perspective; they describe, for example, the biases that have gone into constructing various histories of the United States.² Such an account, as a particular piece of history, may very well be true, but truth is a virtue that is embarrassingly unhelpful to a critic who wants not just to unmask past historians of America but to tell us that at the end of the line there is no historical truth. It is remarkable how complacent some “deconstructive” histories are about the status of the history that they deploy themselves. A further turn is to be found in some “unmasking” accounts of natural science, which aim to show that its

pretensions to deliver the truth are unfounded, because of social forces that control its activities. Unlike the case of history, these do not use truths of the same kind; they do not apply science to the criticism of science. They apply the social sciences, and typically depend on the remarkable assumption that the sociology of knowledge is in a better position to deliver truth about science than science is to deliver truth about the world.³

The point that the undermining of some history needs other history is correct and not to be forgotten, but it cannot by itself remove the tensions and put an end to the problem. Such arguments may merely be added to the problem and, as has often happened in recent years, accelerate a deconstructive vortex. Of course all such discussions have their time, and the intense criticism in this spirit that was for a while directed to such things as literary interpretation and the possibility of objective history may now, to some extent, be passing. But this does not mean that the real problems have gone away. Indeed, the real problems have been there, as Nietzsche understood, before the label of “post-modernism” made them a matter of public debate, and they remain there now. Moreover, there is a danger that the decline of the more dramatic confrontations may do no more than register an inert cynicism, the kind of calm that in personal relations can follow a series of hysterical rows. If the passion for truthfulness is merely controlled and stilled without being satisfied, it will kill the activities it is supposed to support. This may be one of the reasons why, at the present time, the study of the humanities runs a risk of sliding from professional seriousness, through professionalization, to a finally disenchanting careerism.

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.

The tensions in our present culture that are generated by this problem, the tensions (as I summarily put it) between truth and truthfulness, break out in several styles of conflict. One is that between two views of the Enlightenment. It is a familiar theme of contemporary criticism, one that has been inherited from some

members of the Frankfurt School,⁴ that the Enlightenment has generated unprecedented systems of oppression, because of its belief in an externalized, objective, truth about individuals and society. This represents the Enlightenment in terms of the tyranny of theory, where theory is in turn identified with the external “panoptical” view of everything, including ourselves. Now there is in any case a question whether the Enlightenment’s models of scientific understanding do lead to the denial of political freedom and, if they do, by what social and intellectual routes. I shall argue that there are, equally, positive relations between the concepts of scientific truth and political freedom. But, even apart from that question, there is another current in the Enlightenment, which is that of critique, a critique that has indeed been a main expression of the spirit of political and social truthfulness. It is in this respect, I believe, that the Enlightenment has been a particular associate of liberalism. In the course of the book, I shall try to explore some associations between liberal critique, on the one hand, and truthfulness on the other—truthfulness, moreover, in its association with truth. Some writers have tried to detach the spirit of liberal critique from the concept of truth, but I shall claim that this is a fundamental mistake. An influential figure in this company is Richard Rorty,⁵ and I shall refer to his formulations in various connections. The position he calls “liberal irony” has particularly attracted attention by not wanting to affirm its own truth, but that is not the most important issue it raises. The most significant question is not about the truth-status of political or moral outlooks themselves. It is about the importance that those outlooks attach to other kinds of truth, and to truthfulness.

The tensions in our culture between truth and truthfulness are also expressed in a familiar contrast between two different ways of doing philosophy. I do not mean by this the supposed distinction between “analytic” and “continental” styles in philosophy: besides being, on any showing, dramatically misnamed, this does not represent any one contrast at all. On the questions that concern me here, there is a different distinction. On one side, there is a style of thought that extravagantly, challengingly, or—as its opponents would say—irresponsibly denies the possibility of truth altogether, waves its importance aside, or claims that all truth is “relative” or

suffers from some other such disadvantage. To help the argument along, I need a general term to pick out those who adopt this kind of outlook. The term will necessarily be vague: several different views fall within the outlook, and some writers who have the outlook do not distinguish too carefully the particular view they hold. In earlier drafts of this book I called them sceptics about truth, but that was misleading, because “scepticism” brings with it from the philosophical tradition too heavy a suggestion that the problems concern our *knowledge* of the truth, where it is agreed that there is something that we can know or fail to know; whereas the people in question here are more disposed to dismiss the idea of truth as the object of our inquiries altogether, or to suggest that if truth is supposed to be the object of inquiry, then there is no such thing and that what passes itself off as inquiry is really something else. They might be called “subverters,” but this has the disadvantage that it is what many of them would be too pleased to call themselves. I shall call them simply “deniers,” where that means that they deny something about truth (for instance, at the limit, its existence) which is usually taken to be significant in our lives. What exactly various of them deny will be a central question in the book.

On the other hand, against the deniers, we get reminders from the philosophy of language, particularly in the “analytic” mode, that these reckless claims are plainly false and are not believed by the people who make them, who know perfectly well, for instance, that it is true that it is Tuesday night and that they are in the United States. Moreover, the claims could not be true, since no-one can learn or speak a language unless a large class of statements in that language is recognized to be true. These lines of argument are quite correct, so far as they go, and they will play a part in my discussion. But how far do they get us? This second party—call it the party of common sense—having rehabilitated truth in some of its everyday roles, usually assumes that there is not much to be said about the rest of the deniers’ critique. But there may well be much of the critique that the reply leaves untouched: the suspicions about historical narrative, about social representations, about self-understanding, about psychological and political interpretation—all of this may remain as worrying as the deniers suggest.

The commonsense party's attitude to the deniers is based on a misunderstanding. It thinks that since the notion of truth is indeed fundamental, the fact that the deniers are muddled about elementary applications of that notion undermines what they say about everything else. Some deniers have indeed been attached to confused formulations in the philosophy of language, in part derived from a mangling of Saussure, to the general effect that language consists of "arbitrary signs" which "get their meaning" from their relations to other signs, and since this is so, it cannot relate to a non-linguistic world. This is a tissue of mistakes. If *dog* is an "arbitrary" sign for a dog, it is at any rate a sign for a dog, and that must mean that it can refer to a dog: and a dog is a dog, not a word. I shall not go on about this kind of thing. There are more interesting ideas to consider among the deniers' materials. Deniers do not get their views just from simple mistakes about language and truth. Rather, they believe that there is something to worry about in important areas of our thought and in traditional interpretations of those areas; they sense that it has something to do with truth; and (no doubt driven by the familiar desire to say something at once hugely general, deeply important, and reassuringly simple) they extend their worry to the notion of truth itself.

The collective result of these various misunderstandings is that the deniers and the party of common sense, with their respective styles of philosophy, pass each other by.⁶ We need to understand that there is indeed an essential role for the notion of truth in our understanding of language and of each other. We need to ask how that role may be related to larger structures of thought which are essential to our personal, social, and political self-understanding. How far are the narratives that support our understandings of ourselves and of each other, and of the societies in which we live, capable of truth? Is truth what they need to have? Or can they be truthful without being true? In facing these questions, we had better be open to the idea that these larger structures can be the object of serious suspicion.

I shall be concerned throughout with what may summarily be called "the value of truth." In a very strict sense, to speak of "the value of truth" is no doubt a category mistake: truth, as a property of propositions or sentences, is not the sort of thing that can have a

value. The commonsense party will deny that there is a value of truth in this strict sense, and this is easily accepted. The phrase “the value of truth” should be taken as shorthand for the value of various states and activities associated with the truth. Much of the discussion will be directed to the value of what I shall call the “virtues of truth,” qualities of people that are displayed in wanting to know the truth, in finding it out, and in telling it to other people.⁷ The deniers, on the other hand, claim that in this deeper sense there is no value of truth: they think that the value of these states or activities, if they have any, is not to be explained in terms of the truth, and it is this I reject. For instance, they may say that even if some people think it very important in itself to find out the truth, there is not really any value in having true beliefs beyond the pragmatic value of having beliefs that lead one toward the helpful and away from the dangerous. Some who hold just this much may be very moderate deniers; so far as the everyday concept of truth is concerned, they may even belong to the commonsense party. But I shall claim that they as much as the more radical deniers need to take seriously the idea that to the extent that we lose a sense of the value of truth, we shall certainly lose something and may well lose everything.

2. *Authority*

The tensions that break out if one surrenders serious conceptions of truth and truthfulness are also expressed in the conflicts, familiar in the past two decades, about authority in the academy. They were well illustrated in David Mamet’s play *Oleanna*.⁸ The play has mainly been understood as a piece about sexual harassment and gender relations, and it was in that connection that it created a commotion when it was first staged. But it is also about something else, closely related but importantly different. A complaint constantly made by the female character is that she made sacrifices to come to college, in order to learn something, to be told things that she did not know, but that she has been offered only a feeble permissiveness. She complains that her teacher (whose subject seems to be something like the sociology of education) does not control or direct her enough: he does not tell

her what to believe, or even, perhaps, what to ask. He does not exercise authority. At the same time, she complains that he exercises power over her. This might seem to be a muddle on her part, or the playwright's, but it is not. The male character has power over her (he can decide what grade she gets), but just because he lacks authority, this power is mere power, in part gender power. His decision to change her grade is not the sexual harassment that she and her new-found feminist companions later make it out to be, but he has left a space in which almost anything could be understood in that way.

There are some very reductive criticisms of traditional academic authority that do seem to leave us in this position. If the canon of works or writers or philosophies to be studied, and the methods of interpreting them, and the historical narratives that explain those things, are all equally and simultaneously denounced as ideological impositions, we are indeed left with a space structured only by power. This is bad news from several points of view. One is that it leaves the critics themselves with no authority, since they need to tell a tale (a lot of detailed tales, in fact) to justify *that* tale: this is the point that, for instance, the denunciation of history needs history. They also need a tale to explain why they are in a position to tell it. Even if they fall back, rather pitifully, on a claim to authority just from minority status, a tale is needed to explain the relevance of that.

But if no authority, then only power. And—a second piece of bad news—the utterly reductive story will not leave the critics themselves with enough, or any, power. It is always a mistake for a minority or the disadvantaged party to reduce things to the bottom line, for on the bottom line they are simply a minority. Or at least that is so if their reduction of things to the bottom line is actually taken seriously, as in academia it rarely is. (The hard-pressed chairman of an English department once confessed to me that, faced with a group of faculty accusing him of being an agent of the hegemonic power structure, he would have liked to say, “You’re right, and you’re fired.”) Even if they can gather enough power (significantly helped by those who do not think it just a matter of power but feel guilty, uneasy, old-fashioned, and so on) to have wide influence on humanities departments, they do not have enough power to sustain humanities departments when it is felt by a wider world that the

humanities are boring, tiresome, and useless. Even if they had enough power to win over some academies, they would not have enough power to sustain that sort of academy. Real power is political, economic, social power, and while it is crucially influenced by ideas, it will be so only if those ideas have some authority.

A third piece of bad news is that the extremity of the entirely reductive or nihilist position (or, rather, the impression that this is the position, since hardly anyone holds it) serves to suppress discussion, not only of how much there may be in the criticisms, but of how we can think about intellectual authority. Here it is worth mentioning a very ancient device of deflationary rhetoric—it goes back certainly to the Greek sophists—which is stock-in-trade with this kind of denier. It consists in taking some respected distinctions between the “higher” and the “lower,” such as those between reason and persuasion, argument and force, truthfulness and manipulation, and denying the higher element while affirming the lower: everything, including argument and truthfulness, is force, persuasion, and manipulation (really). This trope has its uses. It can perhaps persuade people to take a more realistic view of the “higher” elements; it may help them to detect misleading idealizations of them. But, besides the fact that it soon becomes immensely boring, it has the disadvantage that it does not help one to understand those idealizations, or, still less, to resituate the original opposition in a new space, so that the real differences can emerge between the force which is argument and the force which is not—differences such as that between listening and being hit, a contrast that may vanish in the seminar but which reappears sharply when you are hit.

Everyone should agree with the commonsense party (indeed everyone to this extent does really agree with them) that there are many everyday truths. This is a very vague notion for now; a more detailed account of ideas related to it will come later.⁹ They include not merely statements about limited arrays of what J. L. Austin called “middle-sized dry goods,” but many psychological statements—for instance, about what someone is doing—and many statements about the past. (In these connections there is the important notion of a mini-narrative, which may itself express knowledge of what someone is doing.) Everyday truths stand in contrast

to such things as interpretative historical narratives and complex psychological interpretations (it is significant, as we shall see, how styles of such interpretation themselves have a history).

In referring to “everyday truths” I do not mean (and this point is central to the philosophical construction that I attempt in later chapters) that they are picked out by being certain or incontestable. When someone claims that a proposition of this kind is true, there are well-known ways of contesting the claim, for instance, by explaining how the person could have come to believe the proposition without its being true: the material of these resources itself to a considerable extent consists of everyday truths. What is incontestable is that on very many occasions propositions of these kinds are true and can be known to be true. Everyday truths can readily and reasonably be counted as facts, and when Nietzsche said, in contradiction to many other things he said, “[F]acts are precisely what there are not, only interpretations,” he was wrong.¹⁰

Everyday truths are important, and their importance should be stressed, for several reasons. One is a central concern of this book: their role in an account of truth and meaning, and in constructing a philosophical anthropology. Second, everyone knows that there are everyday truths, and what many of them are. Philosophy here, on lines variously laid down by Hume, Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, needs to recall us to the everyday. All these writers, however, want to recall us to the everyday from the personal alienation of a fantastic philosophical scepticism which claims to doubt that there is an external world, or past time, or other minds. For our present concerns, the recall to the everyday (to the kinds of everyday truths that everyone recognizes) is from a politicized state of denial which is not so much an alienation from the shared world as a condition of sharing in an alienated world.

That state of denial, and the politics that goes with it, offer a real risk of the humanities’ being alienated from the rest of society, at least if the humanities are supposed to be regarded as a passionate and intelligent study. (There is no lack of interest in kitsch or heritage humanities, which of course makes the threat more serious.) Busy people can reasonably become impatient with the humanities, as compared with the natural and applied sciences. This is not be-

cause of a false prestige of those sciences, or a naive view that they consist entirely of everyday truths. It is rather that everyone knows that there are a lot of everyday truths around in the areas of those sciences, as that some telescopes work and some do not, that some bridges fall down and others do not, and the presence and relevance of those everyday truths give these sciences a claim to seriousness that the humanities can easily lose. The impression of frivolity is enhanced when the humanities adopt a rhetoric of political urgency which represents only the café politics of émigrés from the world of real power, the Secret Agents of literature departments. This suffers the disadvantage of being rightly despised both by those who take liberal politics seriously and by those who do not.

Truthfulness implies a respect for the truth. This relates to both of the virtues that, I shall claim in the following chapters, are the two basic virtues of truth, which I shall call Accuracy and Sincerity: you do the best you can to acquire true beliefs, and what you say reveals what you believe. The authority of academics must be rooted in their truthfulness in both these respects: they take care, and they do not lie. There are more refined virtues in the same direction. It is a good idea, for instance, that academics should resist the comforts of a knowing evasiveness. Much doubt has been cast on Carlos Castaneda's claims about shamanism. The writer of a book about Castaneda and the social sciences says, "It does not matter to me in the least whether any or all of the 'events' reported by Castaneda ever 'took place.'"¹¹ The declaration may be all right, but the scare quotes are not.

The virtues of truth are not conventional fetishes of academic theorizing. They can be concretely addressed to everyday truths and revealed in the way that one handles everyday truths. Moreover, there is a coherent account of how people's training, which is what helps to convey this authority, is related to what they do. Of course, authority is also displayed in the handling of theory and interpretation, but in the humanities and the sciences alike, one can have confidence in that only if one can respect the writer's dealings with everyday truths. There is a moving and rather bitter example of this in the history of the reputations of Sartre and Camus. For years, bien-pensants of the intellectual Left followed Sartre in his brutal margin-

alization of Camus, his contempt for what was depicted as Camus's fatuous humanism, subjective moralism, and incompetence in philosophy. Camus may have been a less professional philosopher than Sartre, but it is far from clear that he was a worse one. What is certainly true is that he was a more honest man, and his authority as an intellectual lay in that fact, as opposed to the deceitful constructions with which Sartre managed to mislead himself and his followers.

What must be emphasized, however, is that the basic cultivation of truthfulness in relation to everyday truths is only the beginning, not the whole story. There is no way of sticking to everyday truths and no more. Positivism—in the sense, roughly speaking, of thinking that not much more is needed than to establish the concrete facts and set them down—cannot be seen as a minimalist or default position. Any story is a story, and positivism (which is involved in many contemporary forms of conservatism in the humanities) implies the double falsehood that no interpretation is needed, and that it is not needed because the story which the positivist writer tells, such as it is, is obvious. The story he or she tells is usually a bad one, and its being obvious only means that it is familiar. As Roland Barthes said, those who do not re-read condemn themselves to reading the same story everywhere: “they recognize what they already think and know.”¹² To try to fall back on positivism and to avoid contestable interpretation, which may indeed run the risk of being ideologically corrupted: that is itself an offence against truthfulness. As Gabriel Josipovici has well said, “Trust will only come by unmasking suspicion, not by closing our eyes to it.”¹³ While truthfulness has to be grounded in, and revealed in, one's dealings with everyday truths, it must go beyond truth as displayed in everyday truths. That itself is a truth, and academic authority will not survive if it does not acknowledge it.

3. *Nietzsche*

The problems that concern this book were discovered, effectively, by Nietzsche. It is not a book, obviously enough, in any of Nietzsche's styles (for anyone other than Nietzsche to try to write

such a book would be a very bad idea). Nor is it a book about Nietzsche, but it uses a method for which I have borrowed a name from him, *genealogy*, and I intend the association to be taken seriously. The deniers, as I have called them, often claim the inheritance of Nietzsche, and some of their more dramatically extreme positions have taken the form of an interpretation of him that yields a “new Nietzsche.”¹⁴ Just because little of this book directly discusses him, something should be said here about Nietzsche’s problem and his own relation to it, if we are to avoid some of the rubble left from recent cultural wars.

One of Nietzsche’s most striking qualities is the obstinacy with which he held to an ideal of truthfulness that would not allow us to falsify or forget the horrors of the world, the fact that their existence has been necessary to everything that we value, or the further fact summarized in the slogan “God is dead”—that the traditional metaphysical conceptions which have helped us to make sense of the world, and in particular to bear its horrors, have terminally broken down. He often calls on honesty and intellectual conscience, and he prizes those who have to have an argument against the sceptic inside themselves—“the great self-dissatisfied people.” In *The Anti-Christ*, he wrote:

Truth has had to be fought for every step of the way, almost everything else dear to our hearts, on which our love and our trust in life depend, has had to be sacrificed to it. Greatness of soul is needed for it, the service of truth is the hardest service.—For what does it mean to be *honest* in intellectual things? That one is stern towards one’s heart, that one despises “fine feelings”, that one makes every Yes and No a question of conscience!¹⁵

(Those deniers who take Nietzsche’s message to be that we should give up on the value of truth altogether need to consider that this was written at the very end of his active life.) The value of truthfulness embraces the need to find out the truth, to hold on to it, and to tell it—in particular, to oneself. But Nietzsche’s own dedication to this value, he saw, immediately raised the question of what it is. We have taken it for granted, he thinks, and we have seriously mis-

understood it: as he says in *Beyond Good and Evil*, “Perhaps nobody yet has been truthful enough about what ‘truthfulness’ is.”

One of his most illuminating statements of this question occurs in *The Gay Science*:

This unconditional will to truth—what is it? Is it the will not to let oneself be deceived? Is it the will *not to deceive*? For the will to truth could be interpreted in this second way, too—if “I do not want to deceive *myself*” is included as a special case under the generalization “I do not want to deceive”. But why not deceive? But why not allow oneself to be deceived?¹⁶

The reasons for not wanting to be deceived, he goes on to say, are prudential; seen in that light, wanting to get things right in our intellectual studies and in practical life will be a matter of utility. But those considerations cannot possibly sustain an *unconditional* value for truth: much of the time it is more useful to believe falsehoods. Our belief in the unconditional will to truth

must have originated *in spite of* the fact that the disutility and dangerousness of “the will to truth” or “truth at any price” is proved to it constantly. “At any price”: we understand this well enough once we have offered and slaughtered one faith after another on this altar!

Consequently, “will to truth” does *not* mean “I do not want to let myself be deceived” but—there is no alternative—“I will not deceive, not even myself”; *and with that we stand on moral ground*.

. . . you will have gathered what I am getting at, namely, that it is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests—that even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take *our* fire, too, from the flame lit by the thousand-year-old faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato’s faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine.

The title of the section is “In What Way We, Too, Are Still Pious.” The idea is developed further in Book 3 of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, where the “ascetic ideal” which has received an unflattering genealogical explanation is discovered to lie at the root of the will to truth, which powered the need to discover that very explana-

tion. But that does not overthrow the will to truth: “I have every respect for the ascetic ideal *in so far as it is honest!*”¹⁷

The “unconditional will to truth” does not mean that we want to believe any and every truth. It does mean that we want to understand who we are, to correct error, to avoid deceiving ourselves, to get beyond comfortable falsehood. The value of truthfulness, so understood, cannot lie just in its consequences. Various beliefs may be necessary for our life, but that does not show them to be true: “life is not an argument.”¹⁸ Already in *Human, All Too Human* he had noted, “*Fundamental Insight*: There is no pre-established harmony between the furthering of truth and the well-being of humanity.” When he stresses the historical, indeed the continuing, importance of various false conceptions that have regulated people’s thoughts and provided intellectual security, he *contrasts* them with the truth and wonders what will emerge from a battle between them and a growing awareness of the truth: “To what extent can truth stand to be incorporated?”¹⁹

While he holds on to the values of truthfulness, he is very clear that the truth may be not just unhelpful but destructive. In particular the truths of Nietzsche’s own philosophy, which discredit the metaphysical world, may join the forces of a destructive nihilism if they come to be accepted. In the Nachlass there is a revealing note, which mentions the way in which the idea of truthfulness has turned against the morality that fostered it, and which ends with the remark: “This antagonism—*not* to esteem what we know, and not to be *allowed* any longer to esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves—results in a process of dissolution.”²⁰ In what ways are we “not allowed” to esteem these lies? To some degree, Nietzsche thought that this was already in his time a historical or social necessity: that, at least among thoughtful people, these beliefs simply could not stand up much longer or have much life to them. It is a good question whether this was right, particularly when we recall the secularized, political, forms that are taken, as Nietzsche supposed, by the same illusions. What is certainly true is that Nietzsche took it to be an *ethical* necessity, for himself and anyone he was disposed to respect, not to esteem these illusions. It needed courage: “How much truth does a mind endure, how much does it *dare*? More

and more that became for me the measure of value. Error (faith in the ideal) is not blindness. Error is *cowardice*.”²¹

There continue to be complex debates about what Nietzsche understood truth to be. Quite certainly, he did not think, in pragmatist spirit, that beliefs are true if they serve our interests or welfare: we have just seen some of his repeated denials of this idea. The more recently fashionable view is that he was the first of the deniers, thinking that there is no such thing as truth, or that truth is what anyone thinks it is, or that it is a boring category that we can do without. This is also wrong, and more deeply so. Nietzsche did not think that the ideal of truthfulness went into retirement when its metaphysical origins were discovered, and he did not suppose, either, that truthfulness could be detached from a concern for the truth. Truthfulness as an ideal retains its power, and so far from his seeing truth as dispensable or malleable, his main question is how it can be made bearable. Repeatedly Nietzsche—the “old philologist,” as he called himself—reminds us that, quite apart from any question about philosophical interpretations, including his own, there are facts to be respected. He praises the ancient world for having invented “the incomparable art of reading well, the prerequisite for all systematic knowledge,” and with that “the *sense for facts*, the last-developed and most valuable of all the senses.”²² At the beginning of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, he tells us that “the English psychologists” should not be dismissed as old, cold, boring frogs; rather, they are brave animals, “who have been taught to sacrifice desirability to truth, every truth, even a plain, bitter, ugly, foul, unchristian, immoral truth . . . Because there are such truths—”

In his earliest writings about truth and error, Nietzsche sometimes spoke as though we could compare the entire structure of our thought to the “real” nature of things and find our thought defective. The deniers’ interpretations tend to rely heavily on writings in this style, in particular on a very early essay, *Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense*, in which he wrote:

What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred and embel-

lished, and which, after long usage, seem to people to be fixed, canonical and binding. Truths are illusions we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.²³

On the account that he sketched in this essay, it is as though the business of using any concepts at all falsified a reality which in itself is—what? Formless, perhaps, or chaotic, or utterly unstructured. Later, he rightly rejected this picture,²⁴ with its implication that we can somehow look round the edge of all our concepts at the world to which we are applying them and grasp its nature as entirely unaffected by any descriptions (including, we would be forced to admit, the descriptions “formless,” “chaotic,” and so on). In *Truth and Lies* he suggests that nothing is really “identical” or “the same,” that all identity is a fiction.²⁵ To some degree, this idea shares in the suspect metaphysical conception. To take an example: the concept “snake” allows us to classify various individual things as “the same animal,” and to recognize one individual thing as “the same snake.” It is trivially true that “snake” is a human concept, a cultural product. But it is a much murkier proposition that its use somehow *falsifies* reality—that “in itself” the world does not contain snakes, or indeed anything else you might mention.

I agree with those who think that Nietzsche overcame the confused formulations of *Truth and Lies*, and that he came to see that there was no standpoint from which our representations as a whole could be measured against the world as (in this sense) it really is. As a remark in the Nachlass puts it: “The antithesis of the apparent world and the true world is reduced to the antithesis ‘world’ and ‘nothing’.”²⁶ This idea of the world “in itself,” in this sense, was precisely a relic of the kind of metaphysics that Nietzsche wanted to overcome. We must say “in this sense,” because there are other contrasts between the world “in itself” (or “as it really is”) and “the world as it appears to us,” which, as opposed to this picture, leave it with some properties that it really has: on some philosophical theories, the world really possesses certain properties ascribed to it by natural science, but its appearance as coloured, for instance, is

merely relative to us or other perceivers.²⁷ Such theories may equally be incoherent, but if so, it is not for the reasons at issue here.

Although Nietzsche was keenly alive to what concerns the deniers, he was an opponent of them. The indifference to truthfulness which they encourage would be for him merely an aspect of nihilism. When he discovered that the values of truth and truthfulness, such as the resistance to self-deception and to comforting mythologies, were not self-justifying and not given simply with the concept of truth—unless the concept of truth is itself inflated into providing some metaphysical teleology of human existence, of the kind that he rejected in Platonism—he did not settle for a demure civic conversation in the style of Richard Rorty’s ironist, or saunter off with the smug nod that registers a deconstructive job neatly done. He was aware that his own criticisms and exposures owed both their motivation and their effect to the spirit of truthfulness. His aim was to see how far the values of truth could be revalued, how they might be understood in a perspective quite different from the Platonic and Christian metaphysics which had provided their principal source in the West up to now.

In this book I try to contribute to this project, and I use a method which I call “genealogy.” It is a descendant of one of Nietzsche’s own methods, but only one kind of descendant among others. Nietzsche himself was fully aware that the critique which he directed against old illusions might call in question some of what he said himself. He tried to make sure, by various stylistic inventions, that his writing should not be taken for standard philosophy or standard scholarship, or—and here he was sometimes less successful—for aphorism in a traditional manner. But, however significant his inventions, in the end he not only defends the idea of there being truths but also gives every sign of thinking that he has uttered some. The name “genealogy” can be appropriated to styles of writing which also descend from Nietzsche, but which, in contrast to him, try to avoid that commitment. To a greater extent than his texts, they are obsessively concerned with their own status, and they hope, in particular, systematically to efface the marks of a writer asserting something to a reader. Alasdair MacIntyre has used the word to apply to such a project and has also brilliantly expressed its

difficulties, spelling out the awkwardness that inescapably catches up with the writer, however quick on the turn he may be, who holds up before the reader's lens a sign saying that something is true or plausible or worth considering, and then tries to vacate the spot before the shutter clicks.²⁸

My genealogical project does not need these escape and evasion tactics. Some of the story I shall tell, in ways to be explained in the next chapter, will explicitly be fiction; but this carries a claim that the fiction is helpful. Some of it claims to be history, accurate (I hope) in its facts and plausible in its interpretations. Quite a lot of it is philosophy (philosophy, that is to say, before it turns into history), which carries with it whatever claims are appropriate to philosophy, of being reasonable, convincing, or illuminating. I do not have the problem that some deniers have, of pecking into dust the only tree that will support them, because my genealogical story aims to give a decent pedigree to truth and truthfulness. Some of it aims to be, quite simply, true. As a whole, it hopes to make sense of our most basic commitments to truth and truthfulness. Whether, if it were to succeed in doing that, it could as a whole properly be called "true" is doubtful, but unimportant. It is certainly less important than that the story as a whole should be truthful.