



*Truth and
Truthfulness: An
Essay in Genealogy*

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Bernard Williams

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In the late twentieth century, the humanities were wracked by dissent about the status of truth. Relativists, postmodernists, and cynics called into question the very possibility of truth, arguing that power relations alone determine why we give one factual claim priority over

another. Traditionalists, especially in analytic philosophy, fiercely resisted this claim. Bernard Williams's *Truth and Truthfulness* had an immediate and therapeutic effect on the debate. Williams sided with the traditionalists in affirming the existence of truth, but argued more importantly that both sides missed a question of much greater significance to human life: What is the value of truth?

Williams's approach to the question, in the tradition of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, blends history and philosophy with a fictional account of why a concern for truth might have arisen. Without denying the contingency of much that we take for granted or mistake as true, he defends the virtues of accuracy and sincerity as central to the creation of good individual and social lives. When we lose sight of the value of truth, he wrote, "we shall certainly lose something, and may well lose everything."

The book is a masterpiece of style and substance and a fitting capstone to Williams's extraordinary career as one of the world's most influential moral philosophers. Sadly, he died just a year after its publication, but the book will endure as a landmark in philosophy and a testament to his humanistic achievement.