

on video (issued by Philips). Some of its inventions are gratuitous, but for the most part it embodies extremely sensitive responses to the drama.

12. As Adorno pointed out (*In Search of Wagner*, p. 28), the idea that Wagner was a ‘dilettante’ goes back to Nietzsche’s essay ‘Richard Wagner in Bayreuth’, written at the time of the first festival in 1876.

13. In the essay ‘Über die Benennung “Musikdrama”’ (1872).

14. *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (Leipzig, 1889), ‘Wo ich Einwände mache’.

15. In Andrew Porter’s translation, ‘Goodness and truth dwell but in the waters.’ See Richard Wagner, *The Ring of the Nibelung* (London, 1977).

16. Trans. Walter D. Morris (New York, 1983).

17. The presence of this among other cultural legacies in Nazi discourse, and above all in Hitler’s own speeches, is the subject of J. P. Stern’s fascinating book *Hitler: The Führer and the People* (London, 1975).

18. See Lucy Beckett, *Richard Wagner: ‘Parsifal’* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 52–3.

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## Why Philosophy Needs History

‘Lack of a historical sense is the hereditary defect of philosophers . . . So what is needed from now on is *historical philosophising*, and with it the virtue of modesty.’ Nietzsche wrote this in 1878, but it still very much needs to be said today. Indeed, a lot of philosophy is more blankly non-historical now than it has ever been. In the so-called analytic tradition in particular this takes the form of trying to make philosophy sound like an extension of science. Most scientists, though they may find the history of science interesting, do not think that it is of much use for their science, which they reasonably see as a progressive activity that has lost its past errors and incorporated its past discoveries into textbooks and current theory. The American philosopher who stuck on his office door the notice ‘Just say NO to the history of philosophy’ was probably riding on the idea that the same could be said of philosophy.

The fact that philosophy is often neglectful of its own history is not, however, the most important point. Many philosophers do have some respect for the history of philosophy: what matters more is their neglect of another history—the history of the concepts which philosophy is trying

to understand. The starting point of philosophy is that we do not understand ourselves well enough. We do not understand ourselves well enough ethically (how or why we should be concerned, positively or negatively, with some human dispositions and practices rather than others); we do not fully understand our political ideals; and we do not understand how we come to have ideas and experiences, and seem moreover to know quite a lot about the world. Philosophy's methods of helping us to understand ourselves involve reflecting on the concepts we use, the modes in which we think about these various things; and sometimes it proposes better ways of doing this. So much is (relatively) uncontentious.

In any area of philosophy, the concern that gets reflection going, the failure to understand ourselves, must start from where we are. Who 'we' are, who else is part of 'us', may very well be disputed, above all in ethical and political cases. But reflection must start with us in the narrowest sense—the people who are asking the question and the people to whom we are talking—and it starts from now. The concepts that give rise to the question are ours. But there is a story behind those concepts: a history of how people have come to think like this. In the case of some ideas, such as political equality or democratic legitimacy, or the virtues of sincerity and honesty, the history will be dense and distinctive of our own culture, as contrasted with the cultures of past times and also, perhaps, with those of other existing societies. So much, again, is uncontentious. The standard assumption, however, is that a philosophical inquiry does not need to bother much with that history: the distinctive business of philosophers is reflection, and reflection, roughly speaking, will see them through. The basic point of Nietzsche's remark is that, in ethical and political cases at least, that assumption is wrong.

It is not wrong in every case. A scientific concept—'atom', for instance—can certainly be said to have a history, but typically (for much the same reason that the history of science is not part of science) its history makes little contribution to what may puzzle us about that concept now. Another way of putting it might be to say that the modern idea of an atom, understood in terms of quantum mechanics, is not the same as the one that entered human understanding under (very roughly) that name in the fifth century BC, though it is recognisably a descendant of it. But this is a case where it does not matter much (for our understanding of either the concepts or the history) whether the same or a different concept is employed by different societies or cultures: it is never going to be a highly determinate matter and there are many instances, of which 'atom' is one, where it would be arrant scholasticism to go on about it. There are, however, some very important occasions when we need to say *both* that there is significant historical variation between an idea or concept as used by two different groups, *and* that these are in some sense

variant forms of the same concept. We need to say this particularly with value concepts such as freedom and justice, where there can be significant conflicts between interpretations of the value at different times or between different groups: between freedom as a disciplined life within an independent republic, for instance, and freedom on Eighth Avenue. Trying to understand the problems that we have with the idea of freedom, we need to describe and understand these differences, and we need to say that in some sense they represent different interpretations of the same thing: simply giving different names to these conflicting values would significantly miss the point of the conflict.

In such cases, it is helpful to think in terms of a common core shared by the conflicting values, which is developed or expressed by them in different ways. It is this kind of structure, of central core and historical variation, that I try to explain in *Truth and Truthfulness*<sup>1</sup> in the case of what I call the ‘virtues of truth’: basically, ‘accuracy’, the qualities involved in getting one’s beliefs right, and ‘sincerity’, which is involved in honestly expressing them to other people. We have various problems with such notions in our culture now. Why are we concerned with the truth? No doubt, in part, because having true beliefs is useful. But having false beliefs is also useful: from the point of view of usefulness, the value of truth, if positive, will be so only on balance. But most of us, at least some of the time, recognise a value of truth which is not just that—for instance, when we recognise that self-deceit is in itself not the best of states.

Again, our ideas of truthfulness are under a great deal of strain at present. On the one hand, we tend to be pervasively suspicious, anxious not to be fooled, eager to see through appearances to the real motives and structures that underlie them. On the other hand, there is an equally powerful suspicion about truth itself—whether there is such a thing (really), and, if there is, whether it can be other than relative or subjective or something of that sort. (Some, such as Richard Rorty, say that ‘truth’ is not really the object of our inquiries or our concerns at all: what we should aim at is rather something like solidarity.) The first of these impulses of course fuels the second: the demand for honesty and truthfulness turns against truth itself. But the impulses are certainly in conflict. If you do not believe in the existence or significance of truth, what is the passion for truthfulness a passion for? In pursuing truthfulness, what are you being true to? That second question arises, too, in relation to authenticity, itself a variant of truthfulness, and a characteristic modern ideal. If one has an idea of some way of life, or set of ambitions, or allegiance that will be true to or express one’s real self, what reality must it answer to, and how?

These questions arise from our present ideas of such qualities or ideals as honesty, truthfulness, sincerity and realism. They are appropriate to philosophy, in that they involve a recognition that we do not adequately

understand ourselves. It is obvious that our ways of conceiving these qualities have not been everybody's, and that there is a historical story to be told about the way they came to be ours. Can we understand these concepts and so face the problems that they generate for us without understanding something of that story? How is it, for example, that we have a special ideal of personal authenticity? I think that philosophy can get a real hold on its task only with the help of history; or, rather, as Nietzsche put it, philosophising in such a case must itself be historical.

Philosophy can start on the task without history. Mere reflection on the conditions and demands of communication between human beings can tell us something at the most basic level about the 'virtues of truth'. Every society involves a division of labour in finding things out, if only to the minimal extent that some people observe things at one place or time, and others at another, and they need to inform one another. Merely reflecting on this, one can see that there need to be, in some form, qualities of accuracy and sincerity; people need to be reliable observers, and other people need to be able to trust what they say. These basic functional needs, and some of their consequences, can be laid out in a stripped-down and explicitly fictional account of an elementary society which, in the traditional phrase from political philosophy, I call the 'State of Nature'. But the State of Nature story itself already implies that there must be a further, real and historically dense story to be told. No society could work simply on the basis that its members saw that telling the truth a lot of the time was useful. Individuals and family groups have many reasons for not telling the truth to others (the basis of Voltaire's remark about men having language in order to conceal their thoughts). So, institutions of trust, which every society needs in some form, demand that there should be some dispositions to think that telling the truth (to the right people, on the right occasions) is in itself a good thing. What form those dispositions will take in different societies at different times is a matter of real history. In this sense, real history *fills in* the merely schematic picture offered by the State of Nature story. If you stop at the schematic picture, you may be left with the idea that truthfulness is a merely functional quality, and then be puzzled by the fact that it manifestly is not. Perhaps you will move to the general idea that it is a functional quality that needs to be understood as not merely functional. Philosophy without history will not get you much further than that: you will have little insight into how this might be possible, and none into the various conflicts that surround the virtue of truthfulness—is there, for instance, something specially bad about lying as distinct from other forms of misleading speech? More insight will come from seeing something of how we came to be where we are.

Moreover, real history does more than fill in the schematic story. In the dimension of accuracy, cultural developments can *raise the demands* of what it is to tell particular kinds of truth. The invention of writing

made it unavoidable for people to distinguish among stories about the remoter past those that purported to be true (even if it was not known whether they were true), and those that were myths or legends. With that distinction, there came a new notion of historical truth and indeed a new, determinate, concept of historical time. Philosophical analysis without history encourages us to think that these concepts, so central to our thought, must always have existed, and that to the extent that members of oral cultures did not recognise the distinctions, they were in a muddle. They were not. The invention of historical time was an intellectual advance, but it did not consist in refuting error: like many other inventions, it enabled people to do things they could not conceive of doing before it happened. Together with that, we must hold on to the point that it was indeed an advance—as we naturally say, a discovery. A few modern critics, in deconstructive or relativist spirit, have tried to undo this advance, claiming that the whole idea of sequential time in history is a Western hegemonic imposition. Unsurprisingly they have failed, both to undo the advance and to make sense of their own undertaking. As the historian Richard J. Evans has pointed out, the critic who wrote that ‘historical time is a thing of the past’ needs to consider her position.

There are other dimensions in which real history has gone even further beyond the abstract structural necessities of the State of Nature story. Values of sincerity and accuracy—for example, the demand for truth for its own sake—have taken on a cultural life of their own, and have issued in such self-conscious ideals as intellectual honesty. Like personal authenticity, which emerged as an ideal towards, very roughly, the end of the 18th century, it was the product of a complex history which involved such vast contingencies as Christianity. None of this could be foreseen on the basis of the structural demands of human communication, which is what philosophy in the narrowest sense might work out, but it has formed our world and our problems, and must be taken into account by our philosophy. Without an understanding of history, the connections of some of these values with truthfulness may be overlooked altogether, and our actual concept of truthfulness will seem at best an arbitrary assemblage of ideas.

A method that combines the representation of universal requirements through the fiction of a State of Nature with an account of real historical development, I call ‘genealogy’. It is Nietzsche’s term, and an inquiry of this kind is supposed to meet some of the demands that Nietzsche associated with it. Where the genealogy of truthfulness is concerned, it was Nietzsche himself who first clearly identified the tensions in our culture which the inquiry aims to confront. However, there is another implication of ‘genealogy’ in Nietzsche’s own use of the term, as also, for the most part, in Foucault’s: that it is disobliging, uncovers shameful origins, and shows the phenomenon that is explained in this way in a

bad light. This is not necessarily entailed in the method. It is so in some cases, including Nietzsche's own prime example, which is morality in a narrow, pure and law-driven sense, but it does not have to be. There can be a 'vindicatory' genealogy, such as Hume gave of justice. One may not accept Hume's account of the 'origin' of justice, but if one does, it need not make one feel less respect for justice: indeed, the account may make one feel more respect for it, if one comes to see it for the first time as intelligibly related to human needs and sentiments rather than as a moral or metaphysical revelation. I think one can give a vindicatory genealogy in this sense of the virtues of truth in some of the forms that concern us now.

Some philosophers deny that any historical story could vindicate (or fail to vindicate) our values. They see any such idea as an instance of the 'genetic fallacy': it is reasons or justifications that count, not origins. But this overlooks the possibility that the value in question may understand itself and present itself and claim authority for itself in terms which the genealogical story can undermine. The 'morality' that Nietzsche's genealogy damaged claimed to be the expression of a spirit that was higher, purer and more closely associated with reason, as well as transcending negative passions such as resentment, and if Nietzsche's account of it, in its functional and its historical aspects, were true, it would emerge as self-deceived in that respect. Similarly, when it is argued that the values of contemporary liberalism cannot possibly be criticised in terms of their history, this will be so only to the extent that those values can be separated from the claim—one which is often made for them—that they have emerged from the spread of reason and represent a cognitive achievement. There is a real question here: if liberal values represent the true moral order of the world, why should they have revealed themselves only in certain places and only in the past three centuries or so? A similar question can of course be asked about physical theories or molecular biology, but in those cases it gets an answer. Does the history of liberalism share enough with those cases for the claims which are made for it to be true? That is a question of historical interpretation. To the extent that the question gets a negative answer, there is no vindicatory genealogy of liberalism *in that form*. But if it is stripped of its false self-understanding, important parts of what remains may indeed have a vindicatory genealogy, in the sense that we can understand it and at the same time respect it, support it and live within it. We can also urge it against alternative creeds whose own self-understandings (as divine revelations, for instance) are themselves not going to survive a genealogical inquiry.

In *Truth and Truthfulness*, my own genealogical account of the virtues of truth, I systematically argue against 'deniers', as I call them: those who claim that the concept of truth does nothing for us in our inquiries

or in our conceptions of freedom and other values, and who hold, consequently, that either truthfulness should not be one of our values, or that it has nothing to do with truth. These sceptics, who have been very influential in the humanities, have a point, or several different points, about the status of history, and of psychological and narrative understandings; and those philosophers and others who have, rightly, argued against the deniers have too often supposed that if one gets rid of their muddles about truth and language, it will be business as usual, a business that sometimes seems to be identified with a stupid positivism, a faith in the power of the unaided truth to make sense of things. Truthfulness is a vital virtue, and it is essentially connected with the truth, but it has many more demanding tasks than simply assembling truths.

Some think that what is needed to supplement abstract philosophical reflection and to show us why we have the ideas we have is not history but science. At the moment there is a clamorous strain of opinion to the effect that questions such as these can be answered by evolutionary psychology. Genealogy itself is not an application of evolutionary theory; the State of Nature is not intended to represent some early hominid environment, and evolutionary theory could not offer what genealogy claims to offer. The State of Nature sets out in a professedly abstract form certain functional demands on human communication, which can be arrived at by reflection. Nobody knows very much at present about early hominid environments, and theories about their selective effects on human cognition cannot be formed without taking these and other such functional requirements for granted. There is nothing wrong with this, and evolutionary theorists will have to go on doing it even if they come to know more than they do about early hominid development. The actual story about early communicative practices will then be another piece of the genealogy, a lot less dense and doubtless a lot more speculative than the one based on more recent developments.

Some evolutionary theorists think that subsequent cultural developments are themselves to be explained in terms of natural selection. They do not mean that cultural changes express genetic mutations: rather, that cultural change is strongly influenced by specific psychological characteristics selected for in *Homo sapiens* in those early environments. It is a platitude that human beings have whatever psychological peculiarities emerged during their evolution; among these peculiarities must be those that underlie the overwhelmingly significant and successful innovation represented by this species: the capacity to live under culture and so to benefit from a vast elaboration of non-genetic learning. All this is true, but there is nothing in it to indicate how far differences between cultures, or their changes over time, are themselves determined by these peculiarities. Manifestly, not all the way: plausibly, not very far. Evolutionary

science may eventually show why human beings everywhere make and enjoy music, but it is not going to explain Beethoven's op. III. The basic point is that only interpretation of the historical (and anthropological) record could answer such questions, and show how far traits identified by evolutionary science will explain differences in culture. That interpretation cannot be done by evolutionary science itself.

Genealogy applied to the virtues of truth has reason to be critical of the 'deniers', but, here and more generally, it has even more reason to be opposed to the more reductive ambitions of evolutionary psychology. Deconstructionist deniers may not always read books very well, but at least they may encourage people to read books, and to understand the history from which those books came. Science that takes on reductive ambitions does not encourage anyone to understand history at all. Like the more historically impoverished styles of philosophy, and, still more, in alliance with them, it stands in the way of our understanding who we are, what our concepts are, what we are up to, since there is no way of our understanding these things without a hold on our history.

## Notes

1. *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* was the last book Bernard Williams wrote. It was published by Princeton University Press in 2002.