

Bernard Williams

Deutschland und Wahrheit



Bernard Williams is a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, and Deutsch Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley. From 1990 to 1996 he was White's Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford. He held chairs previously in London and in Cambridge, and from 1979 to 1987 he was Provost of King's College, Cambridge. He has held visiting appointments at Harvard, Princeton and elsewhere. He is a Fellow of the British Academy and a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His principal contributions to philosophy have been in ethics, but he has also written on personal identity, on the theory of knowledge, and in the history of philosophy. He has served on several government committees, including the Royal Commission on Gambling, and (as chairman) the Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship, which reported in 1979. For many years he was a member of the Board of English National Opera. His publications include *Morality*, *Problems of the Self*, *Descartes: the Project of Pure Inquiry*, *Moral Luck*, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, *Shame and Necessity* (the Sather Classical Lectures, 1989), and *Making Sense of Humanity*. — Address: All Souls College, GB-Oxford OX1 4AL.

My stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg was unfortunately shorter than most people's — shorter, indeed, than I had hoped at one time — but with characteristic efficiency, the Administration coped with the difficulties my arrangements must have caused them, and this, together with the friendliness of the other Fellows, helped me to feel very much part of the group.

One result of that efficiency was that the difficulties were entirely concealed from me, and I now realise, at the end of my stay, that this is typical. Part of the grace of this institution is that its officers are so spontaneously and individually helpful that the average Fellow largely forgets that there is a world behind the scenes, a world in which — surely — tempers must sometimes fray, passions explode, personalities collide. In this respect, it is rather like a restaurant of the highest class, in which

luxe, calme et volupté surround the guests, who can only guess at the creative disorder which breaks out in the kitchen.

Doubtless spurred by the sense that time was short, I got a lot done. I was continuing work on a book about the relations between truth and the virtues of truthfulness. The aim of it is to help in understanding the value that we set on truth. If we understood better the ways in which we can value truth, then some helpful things might follow: we could determine more exactly the powerful legacy of Nietzsche, and perhaps make better sense of the prospects for the humanities, whose confidence in what they are doing has suffered badly in recent years from street fighting between parties variously claiming and denying that the idea of objective truth has been overthrown.

The project has an historical as well as an analytical part, and I spent most of my time in Berlin working on history, particularly on the question "Did Thucydides invent historical time?" (the title of a lecture which I gave in the Wissenschaftskolleg and which appears, in a shorter version, in this book.) Thinking about the many ways in which the institution contributed to this work, I find that I owe a special debt to Gesine Bottomley and her colleagues in the Library; they work a continuous magic of producing real books, in no time at all, from a vast collection that does not really exist and has no catalogue of its own, a *musée imaginaire* of research materials.

One aspect of my stay which had results quite different from what I expected was my encounter with the German language. I had retained a few bits and pieces from school work half a century ago; I had occasionally trudged through scholarly papers with a dictionary; my knowledge of German philosophy had come mainly from translations (which, with the exception of Nietzsche, may not have been altogether a bad thing.) So I came to Berlin with some pathetic fragments of knowledge, a strong sense of shame, and a resolution to improve.

With the patient help of Eva Hund, I did improve — a bit. I was a lazy student, and I still cannot discuss the simplest matter in reliable German. But what I grasped for the first time was the beauty and the power of the language. I went to a performance of von Hofmannsthal's *Der Turm*, which was five percent intelligible and a hundred percent overwhelming. Above all, I became powerfully attracted to Goethe. Finding my way through his lyrics, reading the remarkable biography by Nicholas Boyle which is in the Fellows' collection, going for two marvellous days to Weimar, I got for the first time, late in my life (though not all that late by Goethe's own standards), the feeling of being in some way close to him. I know that it is a feeling which many other people, very different from me, have had, but this does not alter it at all:

Und du bist meinem Geist
was er sich selbst ist...

All this must surely bring me back to Germany, and I owe it, as much else, to the Wissenschaftskolleg.