

Lying, Deceit, and the Commitment to Truth: On Ethics in Contemporary Public Life

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ABSTRACT: On the one hand, most of us would take honesty to be a key ethical virtue. Corporations and other organizations often include it in their codes of ethics, we legislate against various forms of dishonesty, we tend to be ashamed (or at least defensive) when we are caught not telling the truth, and honesty is often regarded as a key element in relationships. Yet on the other hand, dishonesty, that is, lying and deceit, seems to be commonplace in contemporary public life even amongst those leading figures in our society whom we might otherwise take to be the exemplars of public virtue. So is the emphasis on truth and honesty just a sham? Does the fact of our actual practice mean that truth and honesty matter only rhetorically, and, if so, does that mean that whatever it is we mean by 'ethics', truth and honesty are not a part of it? What I will suggest is that truth is indeed central to ethical practice, and not only to ethical practice, but also to a properly democratic politics, and that the apparent breakdown in the commitment to truth in public life is indicative of a deeper ethical, as well as political, breakdown.

KEYWORDS: Truth, Deceit, Lying, Democracy, Ethics, Politics

I. Truth and deceit in public life has, in countries such as Australia, Britain and the United States, become a major issue over recent years. Concern about deceit on the part of leading political figures was especially prominent in relation to the invasion of Iraq and the events that followed from it. But in Australia, for instance, similar levels of deceit seem to have been evident in relation to many other matters from questions of immigration to the internal politics of the Australian Liberal Party. The public focus on issues of truth and deceit has not, moreover, been restricted to the words and actions of political figures alone. Financial scandals such as that which involved Enron, in the United States, or HIH and OneTel, in Australia, have not only concerned the failure of CEOs, company directors, managers, auditors and accountants to abide by their regulatory obligations, but typically also involve a willingness on their part to deceive, to dissemble and to falsify.

The fact that there is so much public controversy over these matters suggests we still regard truth and truthfulness as somehow important. Such a view would seem supported, not only by the fact that truthfulness is typically one of the first ethical lessons we try to teach to our children, but also by the prevalence of a commitment to honesty and integrity in organisational codes of ethics and value

statements across the country, and by the fact that most of us continue to regard lying or deceit in our personal relationships as extremely hurtful to those relationships. It is also supported by the evident reluctance, indeed the refusal, of public figures to admit to having lied or having deceived, and the personal and professional harm that would likely accrue from such an admission (although whether the refusal to make such an admission in the face of clear evidence to the contrary is more or less damaging than an open admission of wrong-doing is an interesting question).

Yet at the same time, there is a contrary view that holds that our commitment to truth is itself something of a lie – that it covers over the prevalence of deceit in public life, as well as in the everyday lives of ordinary people.¹ For after all, absolute honesty would be intolerable – and social life itself would seem to be built precisely on not telling those around us absolutely everything we think, feel or do. Truthfulness, it might be said, is an honourable ideal, but the realities of life require a more pragmatic approach, and then we must accept the necessity of the lie, the half-truth, the obfuscation, and the omission. To paraphrase a view most famously associated with the Australian politician and ex-Senator Graham Richardson, a leading figure in Australia's Hawke-Keating Government during the 1980s and 1990s, whether one tells the truth is not, for the most part, what really matters, but whether one gets the job done, and in that respect, one simply has to do 'whatever it takes', and if that involves an element of deceit or misdirection, then so be it.²

What is at issue here is not something merely peripheral to our lives. The question concerning the role and significance of truth and truth-telling lies at the heart of our understanding of ourselves – how we think about truth makes a huge difference to the sort of life we understand ourselves as living, the sort of society we take ourselves to be part of, the sort of relationship we have to the world. The controversies that have arisen in Australian, British and American public life over recent years have brought issues of truth and deceit in public life very much to the fore. In this essay I want to set out some reasons why we should take truth, and the

commitment to truth, should rest at the very heart of ethical practice, and not only that, but at the heart of the practice of democracy also.

II. One reason for thinking that increased levels of dishonesty and deceit in public life are problematic is that they would appear to be associated with a widespread decline in trust and confidence in public institutions.³ In her 2002 Reith Lectures, however, while acknowledging the supposed decline of trust as a widely recognised phenomenon, Onora O'Neill casts doubt on the evidence at issue in this matter, suggesting that it shows, not that we do trust less, but that we are more inclined to say that we trust less. O'Neill is here pointing to a simple fact about the reality of social life, namely, that social life is unavoidably grounded in a high degree of trust in others, and that this remains so in spite of what we may say about our trust and confidence in general.⁴ When people talk about a loss of trust in public figures and institutions, then, what they may actually be taken to mean is that they no longer perceive the commitment to truth and truthfulness to be a core element in the behaviour of the individuals and institutions concerned. Of course, it may be argued that truth and truthfulness alone are not the core ideas at issue in any loss of trust. For in many cases, what concerns us most in relation to public affairs and public institutions is whether matters are dealt with in a fair and proper way, whether appropriate ethical and legal considerations are observed, and whether promises are kept and commitments maintained. I would suggest, however, that commitment to truth and truthfulness actually underlies all of this, and that this can be seen to be so in at least two respects.

The first concerns the fact that there is an important sense of truth according to which it does not attach only to utterances or statements, but to persons, actions or decisions just inasmuch as those actions or decisions possess a certain authenticity or genuineness. Thus we talk of someone acting in a way that is true to the commitments or the principles that are supposed to lie behind the action. This sense of truth is not independent of the more familiar sense of truth as attaching to statements, since in both cases what is at issue is a matter of the

integrity or consistency of what is presented with what it presents and purports to present. So the true statement presents itself as showing us something about the world, and does just that, while the person who acts in a way that is true to the duties and obligations of their office not only presents themselves as acting in that way, but does so act. Commitment to truth and to truthfulness can thus be seen to encompass, as Bernard Williams has pointed out, both accuracy, most obviously applicable in the case of the truth of statements, and sincerity, applicable in the case of actions understood more broadly.⁵

The second respect in which truth can be seen to be at issue here relates to the fact that it is not merely the failure to ensure propriety or fairness of process, not only the failure to keep a promise or the breaking of a commitment, that serves to undermine our confidence or trust, but added to that, the attempt to cover over such a failure, to hide the breakdown, to present, in other words, a false picture of what has really happened. Thus it is not merely the fact that things can and do go awry that is corrosive of trust and confidence, but the falsification and deceit that aims to maintain a pretence of propriety, or fairness, of commitment. Indeed, if we reflect on some of the cases concerning apparent breakdowns in proper process that have aroused public concern over recent years in Australia – and some of the cases concerning the handling of immigration matters come immediately to mind – then it has been not only the breakdown as such that has been of concern, but also the attempt to obscure that breakdown or to underplay the seriousness of what actually occurred. Of course, the way in which breakdowns in propriety, fairness or commitment become all the more problematic when connected with attempts to cover up such breakdowns can itself be seen to demonstrate the way in which commitment to truth and truthfulness encompasses commitment to both accuracy and sincerity – to being true in both speech and action.

The apparent decline in trust in government within contemporary democracies such as Australia or the United States – and regardless of whether we understand this to imply a real decline in trust as such or merely a decline in our willingness to say that we trust – seems to be accompanied by another widespread

phenomenon to which it is surely related, namely, the widespread tendency to regard truth itself as a suspect notion.⁶ Suspicion about truth is evident in many ways. Perhaps the most common is the notion that truth is essentially relativistic – that what counts as true is a matter of personal commitment, for instance, or societal agreement, and so what is true for you need not be true for me – but it is also evident in an attitude towards truth that takes it to be simply irrelevant. It is the latter view that seems to underlie the Richardson philosophy of ‘whatever it takes’ – what matters is not truth, but ‘results’, getting the ‘job’ done.

Whether taken to involve a view of truth as relativistic or irrelevant, suspicion about truth is often seen to have its most famous philosophical expression in Friedrich Nietzsche’s proclamation of truth itself as nothing other than ‘a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which became poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage, seem to a nation fixed, canonical and binding; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions’.⁷ On this account, there is little more to truth than mere opinion backed to a greater or lesser degree by persuasion, cajolery or simple force, and so, as one writer puts it, ‘the only way in which we can understand “truth” and “untruth” is to see them as rhetoric, as concepts used primarily for persuasion. They are political words, weapons for use in competition for power’.⁸

If we do hold truth to be a suspect notion, however, then it is hard to see how we can avoid treating ethics in much the same way. One reason for this, quite aside from the connection between truth and ethics that we have already observed in the brief discussion of trust earlier, is that what holds for truth in general must also hold for truth in any more specific sense. If truth in general is held to be relativistically determined or pragmatically irrelevant, then so must truths about ethics, or about any other domain, be held to be similarly relativistic or irrelevant also. But why should this be a problem? In fact, relativisation and irrelevance turn out to be problematic in slightly different ways, and they need to be dealt with separately. Let me consider the problem of relativisation first.

It might be thought obviously true that ethical commitment does indeed vary from person to person, or society to society, and that such variation is just what we would expect. Ethics is a matter of our own evaluative commitments and, the values to which we are committed need not, indeed, cannot, be the same for everyone. The difficulty with this view is that, precisely because of the way it allows that ethical commitments may vary, it cannot provide any basis for the idea of ethics as something that enjoins us to certain actions and ways of acting over and above our individual, or even collective, preferences, dispositions or conventions. It is just this conception of ethics that allows us to be critical of other individuals, groups and even societies even though their actions are in accord with their own preferences and desires; it is just this conception of ethics that enables us to take a stand against the dishonesty of a fellow citizen, against the cruelty of a foreign government, or, indeed, against the corruption of our own leaders; it is also this conception of ethics that enables us to be critical of our own actions, and even of our own desires and dispositions. This fact is just what makes the idea of a relativised ethics problematic – there is always the possibility that what is required ethically may go beyond any individual or collective preference, habit or disposition. There is still the problem, of course, of how to make sense of ethical commitment across cultural and societal difference, and we should not underestimate this problem, but the crucial point for the moment is that if we are to retain a notion of the ethical at all, then we need to retain a core conception of ethics as non-relativistic. Exactly how this might be done is something about which I will have more to say shortly.

If the idea of a relativised ethics creates difficulty for the very concept of ethics, then something similar also holds for the idea of relativised truth. Just as ethics enjoins certain actions upon us independently of our own preferences or dispositions, so the idea of truth is of that which requires our assent independently of our own attitudes or expectations. It is thus that truth is distinguished from belief – indeed, belief is itself parasitic on the concept of truth, since to believe something is to just hold something to be true. The concept of truth plays an indispensable

role, in this respect, in allowing us to adjust our beliefs in the face of evidence. Without a concept of truth as something distinct from belief, we have no way of making sense of the idea of error in belief, and so no reason to correct beliefs, but neither can we really be said to have any grasp of the concept of belief as such.⁹ This point can be put in terms that relate it directly to the passage from Nietzsche that I quoted earlier. Truths, says Nietzsche, 'are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions.' Yet the very idea of truth as an illusion itself depends upon our having the notion of truth in the first place – for the idea of an illusion is the idea of that which is other than as it appears; whose truth is other than its appearance. We can turn this same point back onto the earlier discussion of the attempted relativisation of ethics: without the idea of an ethical requirement that goes beyond personal preference or societal convention, we can have no real conception of such preferences or conventions as specific to the personal or the social or as being limited to just the particular person or the particular society. It is the idea of ethics that enables us to make sense of the limits that might apply to both personal preference and to societal convention. In this respect, it is the idea of ethics and of truth as going beyond the particularities of our personal or social situatedness that makes possible the engagement with others who may not share in that situatedness.

There seems good reason to abandon the idea of the relativisation of truth as well as of ethics, but what then of the possibility that both are simply irrelevant, that they have no real significance in themselves? Such a position is not affected by any loss of the distinction between truth and belief, or between ethical obligation and personal desire, since to say that truth and ethics are irrelevant here is to reject the very significance of such distinctions. We may continue to use the language of truth and of ethics, if we wish, but there is no compulsion to do so beyond the compulsion of the purely pragmatic. This is, indeed, the position that is often associated with Nietzsche – a position in which truth is replaced by will, and the power to enact what is willed. It is also a position to which the contemporary suspicion of truth, including the relativisation of truth and ethics, may be thought inevitably to lead. In that case, the real issue is not whether truth and ethics can be

understood relativistically, but whether truth can indeed be abandoned as irrelevant.

It may already be evident from what I have said so far that my own answer to this question is that truth is not irrelevant, but is indeed central to the possibility of a human life. The fact that human lives are essentially lives lived in inevitable relation to others, that trust plays an indispensable role in such lives, and that truth and truthfulness are also thereby inextricably implicated, means that truth cannot be disregarded. One of the most powerful explorations of the centrality of truth, however, is contained in a work that also demonstrates the centrality of truth to a properly democratic life: George Orwell's brilliant analysis of freedom and totalitarianism in his 1948 novel, 1984. Orwell is instructive, not only for what he tells us about the importance of truth, but also for the insight he gives us into the nature of deceit, and so into the real difference of deceit from truth. Indeed, to understand the indispensability of truth, we also need to understand the problematic character of deceit.

Orwell's main character in 1984, Winston, writes of freedom that it is 'the freedom to say that two plus two equals four'; the essence of totalitarianism, as we discover in the horrifying sequences towards the end of the book, is to be able to say that two plus two equals five – or whatever the Party says it equals. In an essay written in 1943, looking back on the events of the Spanish Civil War, and with reference to the blatant propagandism of the German and Italian press of the time, Orwell writes:

This kind of thing is frightening to me, because it often gives me the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world... Nazi theory indeed specifically denies that such a thing as 'the truth' exists. There is, for instance, no such thing as 'Science'. There is only 'German Science', 'Jewish Science' etc. The implied objective of this line of thought is a nightmare world in which the Leader, or some ruling clique, controls not only the future but the past. If the Leader says of such and such an event, 'It never happened' – well, it never happened. If he says that two plus two equals five – well, two and two are five.¹⁰

It is the concept of truth, a concept of truth as that which goes beyond any individual or collective assertion of the truth, is what essentially sets limits to individual or collective authority. This is not to suggest that the sort of breakdown in the commitment to truth that seems to have been evident in Australia recent years is the inevitable precursor to the nightmare of fascism or totalitarianism, but rather to demonstrate the centrality of the concept of truth to any way of life that is not totalitarian, that remains committed to a democratic, and more importantly perhaps, ethical ideal.

Moreover, the concern Orwell raises about the way in which the past itself may be falsified, altered according to the will of whoever has the power to do so, also directs our attention to another feature of deceit – deceit as deception about the very act of deception as such. Orwell's worry that the concept of objective truth may be fading out is a worry about the way in which both truth and deceit can be covered over, hidden, erased. I discussed earlier the way in which a breakdown in the propriety of action and decision-making – a breakdown in sincerity and authenticity – is itself a form of breakdown in the commitment to truth, but what I want to draw to your attention here is the way in which the breakdown in commitment to truth and truthfulness does not only involve deceit about some particular subject matter, but also involves deceit about the very act of deceit. This is an essential element in deceit as such: that it deceives about its own character as deception.

It may seem as if this latter point is an obvious and trivial one, but it is actually quite important, since it is what marks out deceit as such from mere fiction or pretence. When we read a novel or watch a movie, we are not usually deceived by the author or the director (although our senses may often be fooled by the special effects which a director may employ). We know what we read and see is not real, but we 'suspend our disbelief', as Coleridge put.¹¹ When we are deceived, however, it is not merely that things are presented other than as they are, but that the duplicitous nature of the presentation is itself hidden, or attempted to be hidden. Such deception about deceit is a feature of every case of deceit both private and public,

and it is what often leads to further attempts to cover up the initial act of deception. Not only is deception about the act of deception a necessary element in all deceit, but typically all deceit carries with it an element of self-deception. One is able to deceive because, after all, things could have been as we claim them to be, and who is to say, in any case, whether one description, perhaps the one that is more favourable to us, is any less true than another? Almost all deception involves to a greater or less a degree a willingness on the part of the deceiver to be themselves a party to the deceit – to allow themselves to be deceived – because, for the most part, the deceit actually gives us a version of the facts that we would prefer to be true, and once we begin the act of deception, who is to say what is really the truth anyway? It is precisely this element of self-deception that makes it all the harder for deceit to be acknowledged and all the more likely that it will produce further deceit in an attempt to conceal the deception.

Deceit, as a form of concealment, is a deliberate attempt to cut people off from the truth, and as it does this, so it makes it harder for those people to engage in reflection on their own situation or that of others. Moreover, if deceit always brings self-deception in its train, then this will also be true of those who practice deceit – they too run the risk of cutting themselves off from the truth and from being able to critically examine their own situation. It is not only that they are less able to take account of aspects of their situation that may run contrary to the false picture they themselves have promoted, but they will also be less able to engage openly with others in discussions about that situation (moreover, if deceit is uncovered or admitted, it will often make undermine any future engagement). This shows us something of why deceit is so problematic – it not only makes us more vulnerable to error, but it also makes it harder for us to recognise error or to cope with it when it arises.

Commitment to truth and to truthfulness is thus not based on some unrealistic idealism, but rather on an appreciation of the real dynamics of human action and interaction. The idea that truth can be abandoned as an irrelevant notion, and that what matters is what people can be brought to believe, not what is

true, depends on an incomplete picture of the relation between truth and belief, truth and error, truth and deception. Truth can neither be relativised nor disregarded, and in this respect, the suspicion that seems so widespread with respect to the notion of truth is essentially misplaced. Moreover, if it is the case that there is a loss of commitment to truth and truthfulness in contemporary political life, then such a loss of commitment is a real cause for concern. Not only does it indicate an ethical failure, not only does it represent a threat to democratic practice, but it also constitutes a breakdown in effective engagement with the world, as well as with others.

III. Just as one of the factors contributing to the apparent decline in public trust is the fact of public deceitfulness, so too does such deceitfulness contribute to the further undermining of the commitment to truth. The situation is only worsened by the way in which actions of deceit, concealment, and self-promotion are often accompanied by the language of truth and ethical commitment.¹² Deceit, lack of sincerity, and the suspicion of truth that these engender, are thus deeply corrosive of ethical practice as such. At the same time, however, an important additional factor that underpins the widespread suspicion of truth is actually to be found in certain confusions and misunderstandings about what it means to talk about truth – confusions and misunderstandings about what a commitment to truth entails. Having arrived at the conclusion that the commitment to truth and truthfulness cannot be dispensed with, it remains to say a little more about exactly how this commitment should be understood.

The idea of truth at issue in my discussion here does not consist in some list of supposedly self-evident truths beginning with ‘two plus two equals four’ nor does it entail any commitment to being able to compile some such list (indeed, the very idea of such a list is incoherent, since truths properly attach to uttered sentences, and such sentences exist in a way that is contingent on the existence of those who utter them). For the most part whether some statement is true depends, not only on whether the world is a certain way, but also on what the words of that statement

actually mean. If truth sometimes seems obscure, that is not only because the world itself can sometimes hide its real nature, but also because it is often hard to reach agreement on what it is that is being claimed. Moreover, while we may disagree on many things, still it is the very possibility of such disagreement as disagreement over the truth, rather than being some arbitrary and contingent clash of wills or of preferences, that underpins and reinforces our commitment to the idea of truth as such. If we are to retain a commitment to truth and to truthfulness, then this will not be a matter of retaining a commitment to some particular set of supposed truths (though neither does it mean we should abandon them), instead it consists in a commitment to recognising the ever-present possibility of our being wrong, to admitting our mistakes, to correcting our errors and also, of course, to questioning our own beliefs and opinions as well as those of others.

In this respect, the commitment to truth is a commitment to the practice of engagement with ourselves, and with others, in the light of the world in which we find ourselves, and with respect to which we must act and coordinate our actions. While it may be our statements that are true and false, in the sense of the accuracy of those statements, truth also resides in our willingness to participate, to negotiate, to engage, and to do so in a spirit of sincerity and genuineness. Here the connection between truth and ethics is reinforced, since ethics is itself fundamentally about just this sort of participation, negotiation and engagement – and connected with this a willingness to recognise our own fallibility.

The lesson here is thus to understand that truth, as well as deceit, and so also ethics, arise only in the context of our relations with others. It is the negotiation and maintenance of those relationships – including our relation with ourselves – that is the central task of ethics. In this respect, just as truth does not consist in any single, finite set of enumerable true propositions, neither does ethics consist in some single, finite set of enumerable ethical prescriptions or proscriptions. The commitment to ethics lies in our commitment to ongoing engagement with others, and to maintaining and developing our relations with others, as well as with the wider world. Maintaining those relationships requires that we attend to the

differences as well as commonalities that lie between us, and so an important part of ethics is negotiating between what may at first appear to be points of ethical difference.

It is important to recognise here that not every difference in evaluation is a difference in ethical commitment. Our fundamental ethical commitments may thus be the same – predicated on attending to and maintaining our relations with ourselves, with others and with the world – and yet the way those commitments work out in a particular socio-cultural setting may give rise to quite different evaluative commitments in terms of the actual details of our lives. Those differences are a product of our different modes of socialisation, and not of fundamental different ethical commitments. The key point, then, is to recognise that ethical commitment concerns the fundamental structures that make socialisation possible, rather than the details of our socialisation as such.

The relationships that are at issue in discussions of the ethical involve our own complex interconnection with ourselves, with others and with the world, but those relationships are themselves interconnected. For this reason, the deception we practice on others invariably tends towards self-deception, and in tending in this way, it also gives tends towards an alienation of ourselves from those around us, from the world, and even from ourselves. We become bound up in web of deceit of our own making that cuts us off from the wider world in which we nonetheless remain. This alone is reason enough for taking truth to be central to ethics, but it also enables us to see why it must be central to democracy.

At the heart of democracy is the idea of the truth as something that is open to contestation, yet it is not the contestation of mere opposition. Instead, it is the contestation that arises from the participation of different voices in a single conversation, each addressing the same matter. It is such contestation that totalitarian politics has always aimed to eliminate. Similarly, the idea of the liberal market-based economy can be seen, by a reversal of the usual way of approaching these matters, as itself based in the idea of allowing for the open participation of multiple economic ‘voices’ within a single contested space. The irony, of course, is

that the drive towards monopoly capitalism that is to be found in many areas of contemporary economic life can be seen, in this respect, to be the analogue of totalitarianism in politics.

Deception is not something that can ever be removed from human affairs. But deception can only be recognised as deception where we retain a sense of truth. Moreover, where we lose that sense of truth, or a commitment to it, then we lose our engagement with ourselves, others and the world, and we lose, not only our sense of ethics, but we lose a sense of ourselves, of others, of the world. Deception becomes, not merely self-deception, but self-destructive. For this reason, it is instructive to find that even such a political animal as Richardson, for whom deception is sometimes a necessary element in politics, nevertheless also tells us that the most important political lesson he learnt from his father was ‘the inestimable value of admitting errors quickly, something almost totally absent in today’s politicians.’¹³ Admitting your errors means being willing to engage in a process of examination and correction – it means also being able and willing to open oneself, to some extent or other, to criticism. That is especially important, and perhaps especially difficult, for those in leadership and managerial roles, whether in government or in business. But if societies, corporations, governments are to operate in ways that are both sensitive to the truth and sensitive to the demands of ethics, then they must also learn to open themselves to criticism, to respond to criticism, even to encourage it.

Commitment to truth, that is to a recognition of the fallibility of our beliefs and the need to revise them in negotiation with ourselves, others and the world, is the very basis of ethical, and not merely democratic, life, and so it is the very heart of a human life also. The disregard for truth that seems to have been so prevalent of late – whether in Australia, Britain or the United States – along with the widespread perception of the fact of such disregard, thus constitutes more than just a personal or institutional failing; it is indicative of a more serious breakdown in our understanding of who and what we are, a breakdown in our democratic and ethical, which is to say, human, commitments. One of the real challenges for the future is to rebuild the commitment to democracy, to the ethical, and to the human, as an

integral part of our political and public life – and doing that must also require rebuilding a commitment to truth.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ See, for instance, David Nyberg, The Varnished Truth. Truth Telling and Deceiving in Ordinary Life (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1993); F.G. Bailey, The Prevalence of Deceit (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).
- ² Graham Richardson, Whatever it Takes (Sydney: Bantam, 1994).
- ³ See, for instance, Marc J. Hetherington, Why Trust Matters: Declining Political Trust and the Demise of American Liberalism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Joseph Cooper, Congress and the Decline of Public Trust (Westview Press, 1999); J. Nye, P. Zelikow and D. King (eds.), Why People Don't Trust Government (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1997); Papadakis, E., 'Constituents of confidence and mistrust in Australian institutions', Australian Journal of Political Science 34 (1999), pp.75-93.
- ⁴ For the original version of the lectures see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2002/>; see also A Question of Trust (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- ⁵ See Bernard Williams, Truth and Truthfulness (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp.84-148. It should be noted that when we make a statement – that is, we say utter something that has a content capable of being true or false – and so state something that purports to be true in the sense of accurate, we are also performing an action which purports to be true in the sense of being sincere. When we perform some action that does not involve any such statement, it is sincerity alone that is at issue. There is, of course, an important history behind the notion of sincerity, and the connected notion of authenticity. Williams discusses this in some detail in Truth and Truthfulness, also noting the ambiguity that can attach to these notions.
- ⁶ Something like this same duality is noted by Bernard Williams when he observes that '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... 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...' – Williams, Truth and Truthfulness, p.1. The demand for truthfulness to which Williams refers seems, however, to be a slightly

different phenomenon from that which appears evident in the supposed decline of trust. It is a demand for a certain sort of truthfulness, one that is, we might say, 'unconditional' or even 'metaphysical'. Nevertheless, the general idea that we can discern in contemporary society both a demand for truthfulness that is often unsatisfied (for whatever reason) and a suspicion about truth as such is common to both my account and that of Williams.

- ⁷ On Truth and Falsity in their Ultra-Moral Sense', in Nietzsche, Complete Works, II, ed. Oscar Levy (London and Edinburgh: George Allen and Unwin, 1911), p.180. Although the interpretation of Nietzsche's thinking about truth is a controversial matter, there is good reason to suppose that the view of truth expressed here is actually one that Nietzsche abandoned as his thinking developed further.
- ⁸ F.G.Bailey, The Prevalence of Deceit (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p.128. As a British Ministry of Information memo from 1939 has it: 'What is truth? We must adopt a pragmatic definition – it is what is believed to be the truth. A lie that is put across therefore becomes the truth and may, therefore, be justified' – internal memorandum of the British Ministry of Information, 1939, quoted in J. Green, The Cynic's Lexicon (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).
- ⁹ This account of the relation between truth and belief is indebted to the work of Donald Davidson – see, for instance, 'Thought and Talk', Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002). See also the essays in Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).
- ¹⁰ 'Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War', in Homage to Catalonia (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1966), pp.235-6.
- ¹¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Biographia Literaria', in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. by H.J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.314..
- ¹² A similar point of tension can be seen in the demands on the part of politicians for ever-increasing 'accountability' and 'transparency' in those areas of public life that have traditionally had some degree of independence from governmental control – education being a particularly salient example – and the resistance by those same politicians to closer scrutiny or criticism of important aspects of governmental activity or political process. This is something to which Onora O'Neill also draws attention in her Reith Lectures. Part of her point, however, is that the commitment to truth is not the same as a commitment to complete transparency. The point is a good one: the commitment to truth is a commitment to being attentive to the truth, but it need not commit us to full or absolute truthfulness on every occasion. Such a commitment would be absurd and impractical.
- ¹³ Graham Richardson, Whatever it Takes, p.14-15.