

# BOOK SYMPOSIUM

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## Defending Genealogy as Conceptual Reverse-Engineering

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### 1. Introduction

I am grateful to my interlocutors for the generous attention they have given my book, *The Practical Origins of Ideas: Genealogy as Conceptual Reverse-Engineering*. While I shan't be able to address all of the many important issues they raise, I welcome this opportunity to expand on those that seem to me most central to the book. I have organized my responses by topic, but I indicate who I am responding to in each section.

### 2. Reverse-engineering, history and naturalism

Paul Roth detects a tension between the title and the subtitle of the book: while the title advertises a concern with 'origins', which suggests a retrospective and explanatory preoccupation with history, the subtitle announces a preoccupation with conceptual 'reverse-engineering', an activity that Roth interprets as manifesting a complete indifference to actual history. To reverse-engineer the point of a concept, on his reading, is not to go back to some historical situation of origin, but to look only at our present conceptual practice; moreover, it is to do so not out of historical interest, but solely with a view to improving the concept going forward; and finally, this progressive and prospective interest is to be satisfied by extracting, from the various historically accumulated characteristics of the concept, the respects in which the concept serves generic and persisting human needs – needs whose history can be safely ignored because they do not significantly change. In short, Roth takes reverse-engineering to be presentist in its focus, progressive and prospective in its interest, and ahistorical in its standards.

What Roth describes, however, is closer to what I would characterize as conceptual *engineering*. At most, it is a description of *non-genealogical* reverse-engineering, of the kind I associate in the book with Miranda Fricker's 'paradigm-based explanation' and with the method of 'reverse-engineering' as practised by Sinan Dogramaci and Michael Hannon.

Yet I understand *genealogical* reverse-engineering to be a very different enterprise. In contrast to what Roth's and to some extent also Cheryl Misak's remarks suggest, my characterization of the species of genealogy I have

called ‘pragmatic genealogy’ as a form of conceptual reverse-engineering is not meant to connote any inherent connection with progressive and prospective conceptual engineering. I take genealogical reverse-engineering to be fundamentally different from conceptual engineering; indeed, part of pragmatic genealogy’s attraction is that it is independently pursuable and worth pursuing, and would remain so even if engineering were thought to face insuperable hurdles.

Bernard Williams, for example, is a paradigmatic practitioner of conceptual reverse-engineering by my lights; but Williams is dismissive of progressive and prospective conceptual engineering. He accepts that genealogical inquiry can help us determine whether a set of concepts has helped us to live; that, where our own concepts are concerned, the verdict will in many respects be negative; and that, going forward, the question is whether some other set of concepts would help us to live. But he is adamant that this consideration could not properly serve as a *criterion* by which to *choose* between possible concepts going forward. For Williams, concept evaluation is best done in the rear-view mirror: ‘It is not a matter of choosing some concept or image on the ground that it will help us to live’, he insists. ‘It is a matter of whether it will indeed help us to live, and whether it will have done so is something that can only be recognized first in the sense that we are managing to live, and then later at a more reflective level, perhaps with the help of renewed genealogical explanation’ (2000: 161).<sup>1</sup> Though we can retrospectively understand why we ended up with the concepts we now have by reconstructing what functions they served, these functional insights cannot then simply be turned around to determine what concepts we should adopt to make things go better going forward, in Williams’s view. Only history can tell how we actually flesh out the *content* of the concepts whose functional outlines conceptual engineers think they can foresee, what *unintended uses* these concepts end up being put to and what *new needs and concerns* future conceptual developments make it possible to articulate. In all these respects, conceptual engineering cannot get ahead of life itself. Kierkegaard’s dictum that life can only be understood backwards, but must be lived forwards, takes on renewed significance in this connection, reminding us that life really is *lived*, not engineered, and that it must have been lived before it can be reverse-engineered.

Accordingly, the progressive and prospective ambition to *improve* our present concepts plays little role in the book: it is mainly a book about reverse-engineering *as opposed to* engineering. This retrospective orientation helps attenuate Alexander Prescott-Couch’s worry that the needs highlighted by

1 I touch on some of the reasons to be wary of forward-looking conceptual engineering in the book (2021: 209); for a detailed discussion of Williams’s reasons for his wariness (many of which Nietzsche was equally alive too), see [Queloz 2021a](#); for a more political critique of conceptual engineering’s ambition to prescribe better concepts, see [Queloz and Bieber 2022](#).

pragmatic genealogy leave the contents of the concepts needed underdetermined: the primary aim is not to specify the contents of concepts we do not yet use; it is to explain *why we have* anything like the concepts with the contents we do. Pragmatic genealogy is not offered as a *replacement* for the analysis of conceptual contents, but as an alternative starting point for philosophical reflection – one that begins with a pragmatic genealogical inquiry into the points of concepts that is informed by, and can in turn inform, the different and differently valuable business of conceptual analysis.

When conceptual engineering does come up in my account of pragmatic genealogy, it is merely to note that the work of Miranda Fricker can be read as illustrating the possibility of using genealogy to improve our conceptual repertoire: her genealogy underscores the fundamental importance, to our practice of information pooling, of promulgating the kinds of dispositions that allow one to neutralize the impact of prejudice on testimony. But this is offered as an indication of a further – and, among the genealogists I discuss, far from typical – use that genealogy can be put to. Moreover, the dispositions and evaluative attitudes in question are ones we, if only patchily, already possess and already have the conceptual wherewithal to make sense of. This is thus not a case of *de novo* conceptual engineering.

The claim I did emphasize was that *if* one was going to engage in conceptual engineering, pragmatic genealogy could help one do so *responsibly*, by giving one some sense of how one's conceptual apparatus works, which parts of it are still alive and which parts depend on which other parts. But the value of pragmatic genealogy to conceptual engineering should not occlude the philosophical and explanatory value it possesses in its own right.

What, then, is pragmatic genealogy's relation to history? In Roth's depiction, the method appears doubly ahistorical: once in focusing exclusively on the present, and a second time in drawing only on generic and persistent needs. Admittedly, there are many passages in the book whose emphases lend succour to such a reading, because I wrote the book against the backdrop of a literature whose conception of genealogy was dominated by a Foucauldian understanding of genealogy on which 'genealogy simply *is* history, correctly practiced' (Nehamas 1985: 246, n. 1). As a result, I was perhaps too preoccupied to move the discussion away from history, even though much of the explanatory power of pragmatic genealogy, as I envision its potential uses, still comes from the ability to move back into history after one has moved away from it by constructing an idealized starting point.

But there are, equally, many passages in the book that emphasize the importance of rising to 'Nietzsche's Challenge' by finding a way of thinking sufficiently historically when engaging in functional explanation: of acknowledging both the extent to which conceptual practices have been variously inflected, extended, elaborated, differentiated, and transformed by historical forces, so that we must take care to distinguish between the original form of a practice and the form it now actually takes; and the extent to which human

needs themselves change in the course of history so that both the needs that account for a practice's development and the most urgent needs it should now meet might be sociohistorically local needs.

If the book oscillates between an ahistorical emphasis on what is most constant across cultures and epochs and a historicizing emphasis on change over time, it is because the genealogies it seeks to make sense of combine both of these aspects in varying proportions. That is part of their philosophical interest, and is at the same time what renders them initially so puzzling. Recall that the book is animated, in the first instance, by a desire to make systematic methodological sense of a neglected tradition of superficially similar genealogical explanations. Instead of simply advancing a methodological manifesto in my own voice, I therefore treat my five case studies by five different genealogists as *data* and seek to articulate their commonalities and shared motivations while also accounting for their differences and their apparent oddities.

The difficulty of characterizing the pragmatic genealogical tradition in general terms thus goes hand in hand with what makes it inspiringly rich: different genealogists make different uses of their genealogical narratives. Hume and the early Nietzsche primarily want to explain, in naturalistic terms, why the virtues of justice and truthfulness first arose. Craig primarily wants to explain why we came to think in terms of anything like the concept of knowledge. Williams wants to vindicate the intrinsic value of truth against its pragmatist critics in terms that they share. And Fricker wants to recommend a way of thinking that history has only patchily realized.

Williams' elaborate hybrid of state-of-nature fiction and real history is the most perplexing among the five, and it is the desire to make sense of its methodological rationale that initially prompted me to write the book: what, I wondered, might lead the author of 'Why Philosophy Needs History', one of analytic philosophy's most prominent advocates of taking a genuinely historical perspective on philosophical questions, to begin his professed 'genealogy' of the value of truth in the ahistorical setting of a fictional state of nature highlighting timeless human needs? And why would he then abruptly switch into a historical register and discuss real developments in ancient Greece, eighteenth-century France and twentieth-century Europe?

What my book aims to achieve is not merely to make sense of state-of-nature genealogy and historical genealogy individually, but to recast them as *two phases of a single method*:<sup>2</sup> a method that neither consists in pure functional hypothesizing into the blue nor simply in deciphering the grey, hieroglyphic writing of documented history, but powerfully combines both aspects.

2 I am indebted to Matteo Santarelli (forthcoming) for this helpful way of putting it.

That ambition to recast two distinct genres of genealogy as two phases of a single method is reflected on the book's cover, which depicts wisps of metallic ink, not yet formed into words, that shade from blue to grey, from imagination to history. The blue part is sharp and distinct, since imagined origins have the virtue of being perspicuous, but still thin and unsettled, while the grey part is thicker and denser but also blurrier and harder to make out, with hieroglyphs, symbolizing the beginnings of written history, emerging on the back cover.

The cover thereby embodies not just the book's focus on elusive abstractions like *truth*, *knowledge* or *justice*, which Nietzsche called 'the last wisps of smoke at the evaporating end of reality' (Queloz 2021: 1), but also the book's contention that its genealogies move seamlessly from hypothesizing into the blue to deciphering the grey, hieroglyphic writing of the past (10). Pragmatic genealogies are interesting notably in demonstrating the power of starting with the imagined before moving into genuine history. They seek to fuse the explanatory power of abstract anthropological reflection on structural dynamics with the explanatory power of historical and sociological understanding.

One effect of synthesizing the seemingly disparate genres of state-of-nature genealogy and historical genealogy in this way is that it provides a role for sociohistorically local needs – either as a supplement to or as a substitute for, generic and persistent needs. The genealogists I consider tend to *start out* from fairly generic needs, and I have sought to reconstruct their motivations for doing so (see 9.2.2–9.4). But they do not *end* there. A significant upshot of the interpretation I offer is that pragmatic genealogy can be tailored to our specific situation by modelling even highly local problems arising from local needs. Even to think of our needs as *local* needs, be they ever so present, is already to think in sociohistorically situated terms about them, as one of many sets of needs that human beings can have and have had.

Furthermore, pragmatic genealogies do not even have to *start* from maximally generic and persistent needs: state-of-nature models can be given a more localizing interpretation, modelling problems and practical dynamics that, while illuminatingly understood as being broader than the specificities of a certain time and place, still only arise downstream of the advent of certain historically situated events or developments contrary to its history-transcending connotations, state-of-nature-based genealogy can thus help us make sense of our distinctive ways of thinking and valuing in terms of our own particular location in history and its differences to other locations.

It would accordingly be a mistake to understand pragmatic genealogy as a fiction (or a model, or an idealization) *as opposed to* a form of historical explanation. That would be to rely on precisely the stark dichotomy between idealization and history that I propose to call into question. Just as some historical explanations begin with a functional hypothesis arrived at through idealization as abstraction, some pragmatic genealogies embody an abstract form of historiography, stringing together, in a way that is loosely indexed to

certain times and places, the most salient needs responsible for giving a concept the contours it now has. Let me illustrate this rapprochement between history and pragmatic genealogy from both sides.

On the one hand, many *bona fide* historical explanations appeal to abstractly structural functional dynamics that are not necessarily specific to a particular time and place to capture the underlying functional logic of a situation before considering how this logic was variously embodied and elaborated in the course of history – Charles Beitz’s (2009) history of the concept of human rights, which Alexander Prescott-Couch invokes in his remarks, offers a good example: it takes the functional role of human rights in international discourse and practice as basic, treating it as constraining the relevant conception of a human right from the start of the inquiry into its historical elaboration; yet to generate and lend plausibility to such a general functional hypothesis, some fairly abstract reflection is required on why actors in a certain type of situation would need anything like a concept of human rights. In the genealogies I consider, that same task, with the same methodological rationale, is discharged by reflection on a state-of-nature model.

On the other hand, Williams’ genealogy, though highly abstract and tailored to a philosopher’s interests, is a form of historical explanation. Insofar as Williams, unlike Craig, de-idealizes his state-of-nature model of truthfulness by incorporating sociohistorically situated needs and developments, Williams does not offer a model *as opposed to* a history. He offers a schematic history, which professes to causally explain, at least in outline, why the prototypical form of truthfulness that any human society anywhere would have reason to cultivate was in fact elaborated into a more demanding ideal by the Greeks, the Romantics, and the twentieth-century critics of injustice and ideology.

Alternatively, consider Williams’ genealogy of liberty as a political elaboration of the notion of freedom, which I reconstruct as an example of a pragmatic genealogy that is self-consciously tied up with the history of liberalism and its characteristic demands (238–42). Williams writes: ‘We need a more generic construction or plan of freedom which helps us to place other conceptions of it in a philosophical and historical space’ (2005: 76) – registering not only the need to see particular conceptions of freedom as elaborations of a more general idea but also the ambition to situate those conceptions, however roughly, in history.

Accordingly, I agree with Alexander Prescott-Couch when he notes that pragmatic genealogies *can* be genuine historical explanations when ‘part of the historical explanation of how some practice arose is that the practice served the relevant needs’, for we can then ‘use the model to perspicaciously put on display historical-explanatory information of an abstract kind – roughly, that there was *some* process by which the fact that the practice served these needs led to the practice being developed or maintained’.

Just as pragmatic genealogy is not *inherently* opposed to historiography, however, it is not inherently historical either. In itself, it is just a narrative embodying a dynamic model – a model with a time-axis – of how a conceptual practice would emerge and develop in response to a series of needs. What *use* one makes of this model is a further question, left underdetermined by the characteristics of the model itself.<sup>3</sup> Such a model could be employed merely as a heuristic device by which to sharpen one’s eye for certain structural and instrumental connections – for example, how, given certain assumptions, certain needs *would* bring certain problems in their wake and call for certain kinds of conceptual solutions – while remaining completely non-committal as to whether any actual society, past or present, exhibited any of these features. In the book (16, n. 32), I cite a manuscript of Wittgenstein’s in which he writes: ‘One might illustrate an internal relation of a circle to an ellipse by gradually converting an ellipse into a circle; *but not in order to assert that a certain ellipse actually, historically, had originated from a circle* (evolutionary hypothesis) but only in order to sharpen our eye for a formal connection’. Similarly, instrumental connections between certain conditions and certain conceptual practices might be brought out by a pragmatic genealogy without undertaking any commitment as to how things actually developed, or even as to how they now are. Not every form of understanding consists in representing facts.

But equally, pragmatic genealogy can be used to elucidate the real, but distant and undocumented, origins of a conceptual practice. This is the use of pragmatic genealogy I discern in Hume and Nietzsche. Hume, finding that the virtue of justice is not something human beings are naturally predisposed to display and approve of, offers a pragmatic genealogy of the virtue by way of showing how and why human artifice might nevertheless have given rise to it. The early Nietzsche, wondering why human beings ever began to make such a fuss about the truth when all they have access to is a phenomenal world of anthropomorphized appearances, tells a genealogy that identifies rationales for valuing the truth that are immanent to the phenomenal world, grounded as they are in the individual and social needs served by valuing the truth. In both cases, ‘value to us in the present’ is, *pace* Roth, neither here nor there; these two pragmatic genealogists pursue a genuinely historical interest in the practical origins of certain conceptual practices, only not one that documented history could satisfy, since, if these conceptual practices are as fundamental to human societies as those genealogists’ hypotheses make them out to be, the origins of those practices are bound to lie beyond

3 For a more detailed elaboration of this point, see [Queloz 2020](#). Another application of pragmatic genealogy that I do not discuss in the book, but which I expand on in [Queloz 2023a](#), exploits pragmatic genealogy’s potential for making past thinkers speak to us by revealing how their ideas tie in with our concerns, in the sense of helping us to remedy practical problems we still face in some form.

recorded history. In both cases, the genealogical story answers a ‘Why ever?’-question about the distant and undocumented emergence of something in the past.

In deploying the dynamic models of pragmatic genealogy to elucidate distant origins, Hume and Nietzsche find a place in the natural world for specially exalted ideas without needing to draw on correspondingly special explanatory material. This ambition is not surprising, I argue, given Hume’s and Nietzsche’s opposition to ‘metaphysics’ and their commitment to ‘translating humanity back into nature’, in Nietzsche’s felicitous phrase, which implies that humanity had aggrandized itself in opposition to the rest of nature to the point of rendering unintelligible its relation to it.

Clearly, a certain form of ‘naturalism’ underpins Hume’s and Nietzsche’s genealogical explanations – and it can hardly be a coincidence that Craig and Williams also explicitly nail their flags to the mast of ‘naturalism’ in presenting their methods. In contrast to Roth, however, I do not propose to articulate that naturalism in terms of the eschewal of notions of analytic or a priori truths, or indeed in terms of any clear-cut doctrine or set of beliefs.

Instead, I find the naturalism that underpins these genealogies to be best described as a particular *stance*: the stance of trying to determine whether we can explain ideas that *seem* to call for extra explanatory material (such as Divine Commands, Platonic Forms, special faculties of moral intuition or innate sensitivities) in terms that are as far as possible antecedent to these ideas and the motives bound up with them, but not necessarily antecedent to other human motives, of the sort that an experienced and unoptimistic interpreter would discern (32). Later in the book, I further characterize this naturalistic stance as consisting of two epistemic-cum-evaluative attitudes, which I label *minimalism* and *realism* (108):

*Minimalism:*

Explain X as far as possible in terms used anyway elsewhere.

*Realism:*

Appeal first to terms that an experienced, scientifically informed, perceptive, truthful, and unoptimistic interpreter would use.

Instead of wheeling in bespoke explanatory material, pragmatic genealogists are minimalists in that they seek to explain exalted ideas in terms used anyway elsewhere, for the *rest* of nature. This is importantly different from using the same explanatory terms everywhere (those of fundamental physics, say). Instead, what counts as an *explanans* becomes a function of what the *explanandum* is. One explains X in terms of non-X: moral psychology in terms of non-moral psychology, the conscious in terms of the non-conscious and living things in terms of non-living things. A ‘realist’ attitude then offers some additional guidance as to what explanatory material one should look for by inviting one into a tradition which, impressed by the fact that human

self-conceptions tend to be self-aggrandizing, finds it best to resort first to what an experienced, scientifically informed, honest, but unoptimistic interpreter would look to: motives that are more mundane than elevated, more self-centred than selfless, and not so much a distinctive achievement of humankind as *all too* human.<sup>4</sup>

This is not a precise philosophical formula. But it captures Hume's ambition to draw his explanatory material (sense impressions, ideas, associations and habits) from the animal physiology of his time. It also captures Nietzsche's ambition to 'make sure that, from now on, humans will stand before humans just as they already stand before the *rest* of nature today, hardened by the discipline of science', and acknowledges his identification with the realism of Thucydides, Diderot and Stendhal that later prompted Ricœur to associate Nietzsche with 'the hermeneutics of suspicion'. Certainly, this understanding of naturalism fits Williams, whose scattered remarks on the "creeping barrage" conception of naturalism' (2002: 23), 'Nietzsche's minimalist moral psychology' (2006) and 'the need to be sceptical' (2014) serve as its principal inspiration.

### 3. *Standards, values and instrumentalism*

Cheryl Misak invites me to say more about the evaluative standards by which pragmatic genealogies find certain concepts to be worth having. As she shows, philosophers who agree that one should look, in a pragmatist spirit, at the effects or consequences of concepts nonetheless differ widely in how exactly they propose to evaluate these effects or consequences.

Prescott-Couch and Roth also raise this question. Prescott-Couch suggests that, on my rendering, the pragmatic genealogist appears committed to a 'stingy axiology', on which 'most of the things we care about matter only instrumentally, even if we need to think otherwise to prevent disaster'. Roth perceives a similarly stingy axiology, remarking that I write 'as if one contemplates choices [of concepts] from a position where no substantive normative concept has already been embraced', and relies for one's evaluation exclusively on the respects in which concepts are instrumentally necessitated by maximally generic and persistent human needs.

This cannot be the operative standard, however. For one thing, our conceptual apparatus would be left vastly underdetermined by maximally generic and persistent human needs. Secondly, such a standard would exclude appeals to local needs, which it is one of my main concerns to legitimate as input to pragmatic genealogies. Thirdly and most importantly, I actually

4 I expand on this tendency of genealogies to explain the higher in terms of the lower in [Queloz 2022](#), where I also show why they need not thereby *reduce* the higher to the lower, and discuss the connection with Diderot's Enlightenment conception of science.

agree with Roth that the aspiration to fully strip oneself of any reliance on substantive normative concepts before discerning transhistorical functional relations between concepts and human needs is fatuous: even the simplest ascription of functionality needs to draw on some ends that things can be functional for achieving, and such ends will only become intelligible to someone who deploys at least some substantive normative concepts. *A fortiori*, the evaluation of a concept's merits in light of the various functions it performs will require us to evaluate *from* a certain evaluative perspective. One cannot determine the merits of concepts from a perspective of complete indifference. And why should one want to?

One of the main traditional philosophical motivations for striving for a maximally neutral and independent evaluative perspective is the desire to argue the amoralist, originally embodied in Plato's *Gorgias* as the alarming figure of Callicles, into recognizing the authority of moral concepts. But as I note in my reconstruction of the genealogies of Hume and Williams, especially, this is not the addressee of those genealogies:

Hume's justification of justice can do no better than other attempts to justify the ethical: it must preach, as it were, to the choir. But this does not mean that it is useless. Rather, as Williams said of attempts to justify the ethical life, the 'aim is not to control the enemies of the community or its shirkers but, by giving reason to people already disposed to hear it, to help in continually creating a community held together by that same disposition' (2011, 31). Similarly, Hume's justification of justice is not meant to serve as an instrument of conversion. But it can promote self-understanding, and thereby strengthen the confidence of those who are already somewhat disposed to be just. (98–99)

The real people to whom Williams's genealogy is addressed already participate in a way of life in which the value of truth has a long and rich history, but their confidence in that value has been undermined by suspicions – that the value of truth cannot really be made sense of in naturalistic terms, perhaps, or that there is no point in valuing the truth when everything comes down to power. ... Williams's vindication of truthfulness is not addressed to the amoralist, and it does not attempt to vindicate truthfulness from some Archimedean point outside the ethical life. It is addressed to people who possess the resources to make sense of it as a value, and who are considering what reasons they have for continuing to value truthfulness. (182)

As comes out in these passages, the key to making sense of the evaluative standards appealed to by pragmatic genealogies is to consider their *addressees*, and think of the telling of a pragmatic genealogy as a *performative*: the genealogist invites the addressee to consider whether they do not share certain values, genealogically shows that those values entail a need to embrace

some further values, and thereby seeks to strengthen the addressee's confidence in those values. The genealogist is saying: 'Look, we value X, don't we; but valuing X engenders a need for valuing Y; therefore, if you value X, you have good reason to relax into valuing Y'. The 'we' here is the 'we' of invitation, which serves not to assert things about some antecedently designated set of people (e.g. 'all human beings'), but to invite the addressee into a perspective.<sup>5</sup> Even when this 'we' gestures towards a common humanity, it may do so not to advance a claim about a species so much as to *appeal* to the addressees to recognize themselves in a certain description. The extension of that 'we' is thus not independently given, but precisely what is to be negotiated through the performative telling of the genealogy.

We can sharpen this picture by thinking of genealogical explanations on a *triadic* model connecting (i) an *explanandum*, (ii) an *explanans* and (iii) an addressee for whom the *explanans* has a certain evaluative valence (or comes to be recognized as having one through the telling of the genealogical story). On this model, pragmatic genealogies are not inherently vindicatory or subversive. They are vindicatory or subversive *for someone*, and what their evaluative upshot is depends on whether the addressee wants to see the need purportedly served by the *explanandum* satisfied. A pragmatic genealogy's evaluative upshot takes a conditional form: *if you care about the explanans, then you should care about the explanandum*.<sup>6</sup>

The point is therefore not that the need acting as *explanans* in a pragmatic genealogy should be universally or incontestably recognized as important, but that it should be recognized as important by the addressee. That is where the addressee's *own values* come in – what they endorse or condemn, what they regard as a legitimate concern and what as a mere caprice. There is a normative division of labour between the genealogy and the addressee: the addressee furnishes the genealogist with a certain evaluative outlook, and the genealogy harnesses the evaluative force of what the addressee endorses to strengthen or weaken the addressee's confidence in the genealogy's *explanandum*. A vindicatory pragmatic genealogy thus derives, for the benefit of some addressee with a certain confidence distribution, a need for some item that the addressee is *less* confident in from some item that the addressee is *more* confident in. The genealogy thereby vindicates the continued cultivation of the item in question, demonstrating that it is neither an archaic holdover nor an irredeemable fetish, but a valuable social and cultural achievement that

5 The same rationale, I take it, underlies Williams' own unsparing use of 'we'. In an endnote to *Shame and Necessity*, he speaks of a 'we' that 'operates through invitation': 'It is not a matter of "I" telling "you" what I and others think, but of my asking you to consider to what extent you and I think some things and perhaps need to think others' (1993: 171, n. 7).

6 I elaborate on the triadic model presented in this paragraph and the next in [Queloz 2022](#). For an account of how this triadic model can elucidate the evaluative import of Foucault's genealogy of morality, see [Lichtenstein 2023](#).

is conducive to the satisfaction of a concern shared by the addressee. That concern need not in principle be widely shared. Nor need it be of the sort that would figure in a ‘stingy axiology’. It can be anything the addressee cares about, barring the concerns that are too closely tied up with the concept that is in the dock to serve as a sufficiently independent basis for its evaluation.

Yet even if the axiology by which a concept is evaluated is not stingy, but includes the whole panoply of values that the addressee is confident in, this still leaves the question of whether pragmatic genealogy commits us to taking a reductive instrumentalist view of the evaluated concept: does the Williamsian genealogy of the intrinsic value of truth, for example, not commit us to thinking that what ultimately matters about that intrinsic value is its utility or instrumental value? If so, the worry would be that the genealogist’s efforts to supply additional reasons by which to bolster confidence might end up weakening rather than strengthening confidence.

In addressing this worry, it is important to separate the relevant set of human dispositions – in this case, the dispositions to value the truth for its own sake – from the thing valued (in other examples, the corresponding distinction is between the set of dispositions in virtue of which someone possesses the *concept* of X and the concept’s *object*, namely X). A genealogy might reveal instrumental value in a set of dispositions to value X without thereby implying that the value of X consisted only, or even mainly, in its instrumental value. We should not confuse the value of happiness, say, with the value of the *concept* of happiness.

Accordingly, a pragmatic genealogy of the value or concept of X need not encourage taking an instrumentalizing attitude towards X. Similarly, an instrumental explanation of why the value or concept of X matters is not the same as an instrumental explanation of why X matters. Indeed, one of the key findings of the book is that self-effacingly functional values and concepts cannot, on pain of losing their functionality, allow these two forms of explanations to coincide: if valuing the truth is to be instrumentally valuable to us at all, we have to be able to say more about why the truth matters than merely that it is instrumentally valuable to us.

One might still worry that if pragmatic genealogies only ever offer instrumental explanations of why certain ways of thinking and valuing matter non-instrumentally, and if we genealogized all our intrinsic values and our concepts of what matters, we would arrive at a view on which everything only mattered in virtue of its instrumental value. Prescott-Couch certainly seems to think that the instrumental reasons highlighted by genealogy threaten to crowd out the intrinsic reasons, and that invoking the distinction between explanation and justification will not be enough to prevent it. This leads Prescott-Couch to conclude that the method of pragmatic genealogy tends to erode what he calls ‘the humanistic sensibility’ that prides itself on its sensitivity to a diverse range of considerations and forms of intrinsic importance. Rather as indirect utilitarianism is pulled towards the view that,

with the exception of utility itself, everything that has value has it in virtue of its utility-increasing consequences, pragmatic genealogy threatens to pull us towards the view that all our different ways of thinking and valuing ultimately derive their value from how their effects conduce to the satisfaction of human needs.

But while the axiologies of some of the genealogists I discuss may be sufficiently indeterminate to leave room for this sort of reading – Hume, after all, was among the authors who first drove Jeremy Bentham towards utilitarianism, and readings of Nietzsche on which he indirectly reduces everything to one master value, such as will to power, abound – this is certainly not how I prefer to understand the evaluative framework within which pragmatic genealogy operates.

Drawing on more recent work, I would now want to make two distinctions here. One is that between inner and instrumental needs: the former are needs we have categorically, in virtue of the kinds of creatures and persons we have become (A simply needs X); the latter are needs we have only insofar as we want to see certain concerns realized (A needs X if A is to realize concern Y) (see [Queloz 2023b](#)). And while pragmatic genealogy is committed to tracing concepts to the needs they answer to, it is not committed to those needs being inner needs. Rather, those needs can reflect concerns as rich and various as one's conception of human beings and what they can intelligibly care about permits. Far from bottoming out in a single currency of value, the method of pragmatic genealogy thus in principle allows the ends one needs concepts *for* to cover the full spectrum of human preoccupations.

The other distinction is that between the first-order reasons we respond to when making engaged use of a concept and the second-order reasons we have for using that concept and heeding the reasons it adverts to.<sup>7</sup> Let us say that the concept *F* adverts to some first-order reason *R* as a reason to  $\varphi$ . If our confidence in the concept *F* is shaken, a pragmatic genealogy of *F* might restore that confidence by revealing some second-order reason to *use* concept *F* and thereby to *count* *R* as a reason to  $\varphi$ .

On this model, the reasons I am responsive to by virtue of being an engaged user of concept *F* are one thing, my reasons to be an engaged user of concept *F* are another, and there is no danger of the latter crowding out or competing with the former. This is not to deny that adducing more reasons for some conclusion can end up weakening rather than strengthening one's confidence in the conclusion – declaring 'If you don't like my principles, I have others', indeed makes one not a *more* principled person, but an *unprincipled* one. But the reasons revealed by pragmatic genealogies and the reasons adverted to

<sup>7</sup> See Queloz MS, where I also elaborate the distinction between engaged and disengaged concept use that I take from [Moore \(2006\)](#). For a briefer discussion of the distinction in *The Practical Origins*, see p. 3.

by the genealogized concepts are simply not reasons *for the same things* at all. When some second-order reason to use the concept of the intrinsic value of truth is excavated by genealogy, this might assuage any lingering anxieties I had about it being a relic of the enchanted world, and allow me to relax into being responsive to the first-order reasons the concept adverts to; but it will not give me an additional reason to see value in my students' pursuit of the truth, or an additional reason not to lie to my friend. The position of the pragmatic genealogist is therefore nothing like that of the unprincipled purveyor of principles.

As I see it, then, pragmatic genealogies and the self-effacingly functional conceptual practices they elucidate are not a species of consequentialist ethics, but rather an alternative to consequentialist ethics: a way of making explanatory use of the consequences of a way of thinking while acknowledging that the non-consequentialist considerations that a certain way of thinking immediately provides have *more authority* than the consequentialist considerations that may be advanced in explaining why we think in this way.<sup>8</sup>

Where second-order reasons do have a direct impact on first-order reasons is when genealogical reflection on one's reasons to use a concept comes up empty, or even unearths reasons not to use it. For what then happens is that one loses confidence in the concept, and, with it, one's capacity to deploy it in an engaged way. This incapacitates one from seeing the reasons one hitherto thought one had *as* reasons for oneself. One may still understand the concept, in the detached and disengaged manner in which one understands the concepts of a religion one does not oneself practice. But the concept one formerly lived by, along with its concomitant reasons, will have gone dead on one.

Finally, this perspectival distinction between engaged and disengaged concept use also helps us defuse Prescott-Couch's critique of the Williamsian conception of intrinsic value. Prescott-Couch writes: 'As a general matter, it is not sufficient for something to be intrinsically *valuable* that it be coherently intrinsically *valued* and that this coherent valuing be practically necessary'. Heard in one way, that is perfectly correct. But it elides the crucial question of *who* does the valuing and *who* judges whether the thing at issue is valuable. If I am an ethnographer studying another culture, I will keep separate books on what is intrinsically valued by the people I study and what I take to be intrinsically valuable. The first question requires me to make disengaged use of the concepts operative in that culture; the second question requires me to make engaged use of the concepts at work in my own culture. And, when practical questions come up concerning how I should run my own affairs in relation to some of these things valued in the culture I study, I can confidently judge, making engaged use of the concepts at work in my own culture, that

8 A point I expand on in [Queloz 2021b](#): §4, as Prescott-Couch also notes.

what is intrinsically valued in that other culture is not intrinsically valuable (really).

But it is a different matter altogether to turn that ethnographer's gaze back on my own culture, and to see it, not as other cultures see it, but as one culture among others. Disengaging ourselves from a particular concept of intrinsic value, such as the concept of the value of truth, we can explore whether we can find a vindicatory explanation of our valuing the truth in this way. But if we find such an explanation, and thus do not destroy our capacity to make engaged use of the concept, but rather give ourselves license to relax into using it in that way, then, once we raise the question of *what is in fact intrinsically valuable* – a question which can only be answered by making engaged use of one's own value concepts – no discrepancy will emerge in this particular case between what is intrinsically valued and what is intrinsically valuable. Rather, our perception of intrinsic value from the inside, engaged perspective will then be demystified by, and harmonize with, our explanation of why we came to think in this way from the outside, disengaged perspective.

That disengaged perspective is the one we take up when we seek to understand why we came to think as we do through pragmatic genealogy. As long as we do not conflate disengaged explanation with engaged evaluation, pragmatic genealogy can enable us to make sense of our perception of some things as intrinsically valuable in terms of human attitudes of valuing and their practical rationales without leading us to deny that not everything that someone values intrinsically is intrinsically valuable. Earnest moralizing is one thing, philosophical self-understanding is another.

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