

# BOOK SYMPOSIUM

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## The Practical Origins of Ideas: Genealogy as Conceptual Reverse-Engineering

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### Précis

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In *The Practical Origins of Ideas: Genealogy as Conceptual Reverse-Engineering*, I describe, develop and defend an underappreciated methodological tradition: the tradition of pragmatic genealogy, which aims to identify what our loftiest and most inscrutable conceptual practices do for us by telling strongly idealized but still historically informed stories about what might have driven people to adopt and elaborate them as they did.

What marks out this methodological tradition, I argue, is that it synthesizes two genres of philosophical genealogy that are standardly set against each other: state-of-nature fictions on the one hand and patiently documentary historiography on the other. These two genres of genealogy are usually taken to be mutually exclusive and to answer to radically different philosophical interests and temperaments. State-of-nature fictions are often interpreted as purely justificatory contrast foils, serving to exhibit some feature of the *status quo* as preferable to a hypothetical state of nature. Historiographical genealogies are often interpreted as purely explanatory factual input to philosophical reflection, paving the way for, but not constituting, evaluations of their object.

By contrast, I offer a systematic account of a tradition that combines both genres into a single genealogical method, augmenting genealogy's power and range by harnessing the strengths and possibilities of both genres. A pragmatic genealogy characteristically starts out from an imagined state of nature, but then incorporates real history to make sense of how the conceptual practice envisaged in its simplest form in the state of nature was actually elaborated, extended and transformed by historical forces.

The key to seeing how state-of-nature genealogy and historical genealogy can constitute two phases of a single method, I argue, is to think of them both as philosophical models of how our conceptual practices developed in

response to a series of practical needs – some highly generic, some specific to particular sociohistorical circumstances.

Starting out from an imagined state of nature has all the advantages of model-building over a purely descriptive historical approach that remains hostage to available documentation. It enables us to pierce the blinding veil of familiarity to tease out functions so basic that they are continually being discharged and are easily overlooked; it allows us to examine the practical origins of conceptual practices that are too fundamental to social co-existence for their emergence to fall within recorded history, so that any society we know of had these conceptual practices already; operating with an avowed fiction also distinguishes simplified models from simplistic histories, because the state of nature is expressly not a speculative depiction of our hominin ancestors in the Fertile Crescent; being a fiction, the state-of-nature model can perspicuously disaggregate and treat as developing in isolation what, in actual fact, would have had to arise together; it also permits heuristic exploration, meaning that we can change the parameters of the state-of-nature model to determine the conditions under which the conceptual practice in question would be pointful and the conditions under which it would be pointless – this allows us to specify more accurately the conditions on which the need for the practice depends, and assess how robust this need is under variation in historical circumstances; and we can elucidate some of the more complex and surprising features of the practices we actually have by imagining simpler counterparts to them and exploring why they would fail us or prove unstable.

Mindful of the fact that our conceptual practices are the product of a long history as well as of the highly generic and structural dynamics that come into view already in an idealized state of nature, however, a pragmatic genealogy must then de-idealize its model in the direction of our sociohistorical situation if it is to make sense of the conceptual practices we actually have. To this end, the genealogy must factor in additional needs, which, though indexed to sociohistorical circumstances, drive the further elaboration of the model in much the same way as the unsituated, generic needs. There is no discontinuity or break in the method here. We simply further tailor the model to the conceptual practice we want to get a grip on for philosophical purposes by drawing on historical information of the kind gathered by professional historians. Augmenting the model with local needs, which may to us now seem just as important or even more important than more generic needs, enables us to explain otherwise puzzling elaborations and differentiations of the conceptual practice. The dynamic model of a pragmatic genealogy thus acts as a receptacle for the detailed knowledge of the contingencies and vicissitudes of history gathered by the human sciences – but it represents that knowledge in a form that is tailored to the purpose of doing philosophical work.

This hybrid conception of genealogy as combining state-of-nature stories and real history to identify the various needs a conceptual practice answers

to pays dividends on several fronts. For one thing, it allows us to trace a distinct genealogical tradition from contemporary philosophers like Miranda Fricker and Philip Pettit back to David Hume, whose account of the origins of the virtue of 'justice' provides the first full-fledged example of a pragmatic genealogy. This pedigree should help analytic philosophy reconcile itself to the genealogical approaches it has long defined itself against.

Second, this conception allows us to shed new light on the philosophers in that tradition, and the book offers detailed readings of Hume, Nietzsche, E. J. Craig, Bernard Williams and Miranda Fricker that bring out neglected aspects of their thought while illustrating the rationale and potential of the pragmatic genealogical method.

Third, pragmatic genealogy proves to be especially valuable to understanding what I call the *self-effacing functionality* of many of our conceptual practices. A practice is self-effacingly functional if it is functional only insofar as it outruns its own functionality, that is, insofar as it is sustained by motives that are not conditional on the practice's functionality in a given context. The functionality of the practice will be secondary or even completely absent from the participants' minds as they engage in it, but for functional reasons. In this sense, the functionality is *self-effacing*: it is not *contingently* effaced, as a matter of historical accident; nor, in contrast to accounts of mystification in ideology critique, is it *necessarily* effaced: we can become aware of its functionality without destabilizing it. In fact, becoming reflectively aware of its functionality can *strengthen* our commitment to the practice, and help us see that its decidedly non-instrumental aspects are not just an accident or a product of manipulation, but an essential functional component of the practice.

Fourth, the method turns out to be particularly well suited to give us a comprehensive view of what a conceptual practice does for us. It systematically invites us to examine a practice's subservience to both generic and local needs while also placing and relating these aspects in a philosophical and historical space. This safeguards us from two ways in which our view of a conceptual practice can be simplistic: by understanding the practice exclusively as a response to generic needs when it also answers to more local needs; and by understanding the practice exclusively as a response to local needs when it also answers to more generic needs. If biologists and evolutionary psychologists are particularly at risk of being one-sided in the first respect, historians specializing in the nit-and-grit of particular times and places are particularly at risk of being one-sided in the second respect. The method of pragmatic genealogy is designed to capture both kinds of respects in which a conceptual practice does something for us.

Finally, this account of pragmatic genealogies as dynamic models elucidating conceptual practices' relations to our needs allows us to understand how they can legitimately affect the space of reasons by revealing the

respects in which conceptual practices are worth having. Such genealogies can therefore offer guidance to efforts to improve our conceptual practices: they can show the respects in which (and in which directions) we have reason to revise our practices. But pragmatic genealogies can also show us how we should *not* go about altering our conceptual practices by alerting us to what depends on them, and to the unsuspected ways in which even apparently idle historical accretions do valuable work. In other words, this genealogical method yields the kind of understanding required to revise our practices responsibly.

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