

The Practical Origins of Ideas  
*Genealogy as Conceptual Reverse-Engineering*

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# Abstract

Why did such highly abstract ideas as truth, knowledge, or justice become so important to us? What was the point of coming to think in these terms? *The Practical Origins of Ideas* presents a philosophical method designed to answer such questions: the method of pragmatic genealogy. Pragmatic genealogies are partly fictional, partly historical narratives exploring what might have driven us to develop certain ideas in order to discover what these do for us. The book uncovers an under-appreciated tradition of pragmatic genealogy which cuts across the analytic-continental divide, running from the state-of-nature stories of David Hume and the early genealogies of Friedrich Nietzsche to recent work in analytic philosophy by Edward Craig, Bernard Williams, and Miranda Fricker. However, these genealogies combine fictionalizing and historicizing in ways that even philosophers sympathetic to the use of state-of-nature fictions or real history have found puzzling. To make sense of why both fictionalizing and historicizing are called for, the book offers a systematic account of pragmatic genealogies as dynamic models serving to reverse-engineer the points of ideas in relation not only to near-universal human needs, but also to socio-historically situated needs. This allows the method to offer us explanation without reduction and to help us understand what led our ideas to shed the traces of their practical origins. Far from being normatively inert, moreover, pragmatic genealogy can affect the space of reasons, guiding attempts to improve our conceptual repertoire by helping us determine whether and when our ideas are worth having.

**Keywords:** Philosophical Methodology, Conceptual Reverse-Engineering, Conceptual Ethics, Genealogy, Cambridge Pragmatism, Naturalism, David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche, E. J. Craig, Bernard Williams, Miranda Fricker.

*Our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connections they have found worth making, in the lifetimes of many generations.*

J. L. AUSTIN

*Concepts are neither true nor false, but they can be evaluated: do we have reason to track the distinction drawn by the concept? Should we have this or that concept in our repertoire at all?*

S. HASLANGER

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## CHAPTER ONE

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# Why We Came to Think as We Do

We did not make the ideas we live by. They are, for the most part, ideas we inherited, unthinkingly growing into patterns of thought cultivated by others, with little sense of why just these ways of seeing, valuing, and reasoning should have gained hold in the first place. Some ideas, like that of *water*, may be so plainly useful for creatures like us as to appear inevitable. But many of our most venerable ideas—such as *truth*, *knowledge*, or *justice*—are highly abstract, and their practical value for us is elusive. Why did these ‘highest concepts’, these ‘last wisps of smoke at the evaporating end of reality’ (*TI*, Reason, §4), as Nietzsche called them, ever become so important to us? What was the point of coming to think in these terms, and what would we lose if we lacked them?

Such *Pragmatic Questions* about the practical origins of ideas have seldom been raised. They have tended to be side-lined by more traditional *Socratic Questions* of the form ‘What is X?’ Aiming straight at the essence of truth, knowledge, or justice, the Socratic approach reckons that if only we achieve clarity about what these things really are, an understanding of why we came to be concerned with them will follow. Socratic Questions can prove obstinately vexing, however, and a consensus on what truth, knowledge, or justice are has yet to emerge. Accordingly, some have concluded with the American pragmatist C. S. Peirce that ‘we must not begin by talking of pure ideas—vagabond thoughts that tramp the public highways without any human habitation—but must begin with men and their conversation’ (1931, 8.112). Peirce, like the philosophers I discuss in this book, diagnosed a tendency

in philosophy to set ideas too high above human affairs, to contemplate them entirely *in vacuo*. Ideas are in their element in distinctive contexts of purposive human action, action which takes place against a background of contingent facts about us and the world we live in. Trying to understand the ideas we live by in isolation from the circumstances in which they are felicitously deployed is like studying a shoal of beached fish as if they were in their natural habitat.

Instead, we can turn the order of explanation around and let the *what* grow out of the *why*: we approach the question of the nature of truth, knowledge, or justice by first asking why we came to think in these terms. Such an inquiry into the origins of ideas can take many guises. Plato asked after the origins of ideas, but he sought them in an abstract realm of Forms. Conceptual historians of various stripes asked after the origins of ideas, but they sought them by tracing the changing meanings of words across different socio-historical contexts. My concern, by contrast, is with the *practical origins* of ideas: with the ways in which the ideas we live by can be shown to be rooted in practical needs and concerns generated by certain facts about us and our situation.

If an idea persists, the reason may be that it fills a need. What motivates this assumption is the realization that we are, as Jane Heal puts it, ‘finite in our cognitive resources while the world is immensely rich in kinds of feature and hence in the possibilities it offers for conceptualization’ (2013, 342). Why do we find at our disposal just the concepts we do rather than any of the countless imaginable alternatives? As Heal goes on to remark, this question cannot be answered simply by observing that using certain concepts enables us to form *true judgements* in terms of those concepts. More needs to be said—in particular, about what makes thinking and judging in just these terms *worthwhile*. This is especially true of the abstract notions at the heart of philosophy, which seem to be the stuff of idle grandiloquence rather than effective action. What needs, if any, were filled by introducing these ideas into our repertoire? What necessity was the mother of these inventions?

The method I propose to explore in this book is designed to help us look at ideas from a practical point of view—to look at what ideas *do* rather than at whether the judgments they figure in are *true*—in order to see how exactly our ideas are bound up with our needs and concerns. This method, which I propose to call *pragmatic genealogy*, consists in telling partly fictional, partly historical narratives exploring what might have driven us to develop certain ideas in order to discover what these ideas do for us. What *point* do they serve? What is the *useful difference* these ideas make to the lives of those who live by them? Much as an archeologist who digs up a mysterious relic

will try to reverse-engineer its point by imaginatively reconstructing the life of those who used it and hypothesizing what useful difference it might have made to that life, we can take an abstract idea whose point eludes us, such as truth, knowledge, or justice, and try to explain why we came to think in these terms by reconstructing the practical problems that these ideas offer practical solutions to. A pragmatic genealogy answers the question of why we came to think as we do by reverse-engineering the points of ideas, tracing them to their practical origins and revealing what they do for us when they function well.

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