

## Genealogy

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Nietzsche and Foucault famously employ a philosophical method of “genealogy” and apply it to the realm of morality in particular. In this article I would like to do two main things: I will begin by offering a contribution toward a sort of “genealogy of genealogy,” that is, toward an account of how the method emerged historically. I will then give an explanation of how the method is supposed to work. In a subsequent, companion article in this journal, “Genealogy and Morality,”<sup>1</sup> I will discuss the method’s application to morality in some concrete ways.

### I

Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887)<sup>2</sup> has a strong claim to be considered the official birthplace of the method of genealogy and of its application to morality. But where do the method’s prior origins lie? Already in the preface of the work Nietzsche takes as his foil “Dr. Rée, like all English genealogists of morality.” This has understandably encouraged a fairly widespread impression among commentators that the German Paul Rée’s *The Origin of the Moral Sensations* (1877) and the work of the British moral theorists on which it builds, especially the work of Hume (but also Darwin), are

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Forster, “Genealogy and Morality,” *American Dialectic*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> *Zur Genealogie der Moral* might alternatively be translated *Toward the Genealogy of Morals*, which would bring out the idea of incompleteness better. Compare with the somewhat similar ambiguity of the “zur” in the title of Herder’s *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (1774) (a work to which we shall return later in this article).

the source of Nietzsche's method of genealogy.<sup>3</sup> There is probably *some* truth in this. However, as the same commentators have themselves noted, Nietzsche's attitude to Rée and his British predecessors is extremely critical.<sup>4</sup> In particular, Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* (1882/87) and especially in *On the Genealogy of Morals* itself repeatedly accuses them of at least three vices which his own method of genealogy claims to avoid: (1) a lack of real history (the history they offer being either unintentionally fanciful or merely "just so" stories); (2) a misguided assumption of the universality of moral values (especially, a projection of what are in fact merely their local values as universal); and (3) an apologetic, instead of critical, purpose in relation to modern European values. The indebtedness of Nietzsche's own method of genealogy to this tradition can therefore presumably only be rather modest.

Similar points would apply to a suggestion that French sources had a major influence on Nietzsche's method. Nietzsche does admire certain French moral psychologists, especially Stendhal. But unlike the British, they are not even characterized by him as genealogists—presumably because their approach to moral psychology is usually ahistorical. And his comments on the one obvious exception to this rule, Rousseau, are harshly critical. For example, in *Human all too Human* and *The Will to Power* he accuses Rousseau of historical fantasy and psychological ineptitude in his conception that mankind was originally free and morally innocent in a state of nature and only subsequently became corrupted by society. So here again the influence on Nietzsche's own method of genealogy must presumably be quite limited.

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<sup>3</sup> See for example D.C. Hoy, "Nietzsche, Hume, and the Genealogical Method," in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*, ed. R. Schacht (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994); and C. Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Hoy, *ibid.*, 253; Janaway, *ibid.*, 25, 30.

What I want to suggest is that there is another influence on Nietzsche's method which lies not in the English tradition or the French but in the German, and whose greater importance for the development of the method can be seen, among other things, from the fact that he regards it as basically innocent of the sorts of vices mentioned above.

Before discussing this influence, it may be helpful to say a few preliminary words about what the method of genealogy is. It is primarily a means to better *understanding*, or explaining, psychological outlooks and psychologically laden practices, and especially a means to better *self*-understanding. By contrast, its relevance for *evaluating* such outlooks and practices is in a sense secondary and also somewhat ambiguous. It is true that for Nietzsche this relevance for evaluation is ultimately the most important thing.<sup>5</sup> However, he sees genealogy as a *preparation* for evaluation, rather than as already *involving* it.<sup>6</sup>

The method achieves its distinctive contribution to better understanding people's psychological outlooks and practices, saliently including our own, by showing, in a naturalistic (that is, nonreligious, nonmythical, nontranscendent) way, that and how they have developed historically out of earlier origins prior to which they were not yet really present at all and from which they have emerged via a series of transformations.

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<sup>5</sup> See B. Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 165, 173; Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness*, 9-13.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, in *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden*, eds. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Munich: Deutsches Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988), 5:253: "Let us express this *new demand*: we need a *critique* of moral values, *the value of these values themselves must to begin with be called into question*—and for that one needs a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances under which they grew, under which they evolved and altered . . . knowledge of a kind that has never yet existed or even been desired."

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Now it seems to me that this method for understanding, or explaining, psychological outlooks and practices mainly arose before Nietzsche within Germany during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

As far as I know, the first person there who clearly expressed the idea of using a genealogical (or as he called it, "genetic") method as a means to better understanding psychological phenomena was Herder—who initially applied it mainly to poetry and language, but who also applied it to moral (and other) values.

Herder's unpublished *Attempt at a History of Lyrical Poetry* (1766) is perhaps his earliest deployment of the method. The essay opens with the following methodological remarks:

One of the pleasantest fields into which human curiosity likes to wander is this: to know the origin of that which is . . . In particular, we are keen to know the origin of *human* works and inventions . . . However, it is not only delightful to track down the origin of the objects that we want to understand with some measure of completeness but also necessary. Obviously, we lose with it a large part of the history, and how greatly does the history not serve toward explaining the whole? And moreover, the most important part of the history, from which afterwards everything is derived; for just as the tree can be traced back to its root, so likewise the bloom of an art to its origin. The origin contains within itself the entire nature of its product, just as the whole plant with all its parts lies hidden in the seed; and I will not be able to derive from the *later* condition the degree of illumination that makes my explanation *genetic*.<sup>7</sup>

The essay then turns to an extensive epistemological discussion of the following themes: the difficulty of discovering a psychological phenomenon's real origin; various illusions to which this difficulty tends to give rise, especially the connected illusions that the phenomenon initially emerged in a state of perfection and that it had

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<sup>7</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, ed. B. Suphan, et al. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1877-), 32:85-87. Note that although Herder himself here and elsewhere calls his method of explanation "genetic" rather than "genealogical," his mentor Hamann had already written of the "genealogy of a concept" in the "Essay on an Academic Question" that he published as part of his *Crusades of a Philologist* (1762).



a divine source; and the appropriate investigative means to use in order to overcome the difficulty and the illusions in question, namely tentative inference from the various sorts of empirical evidence that are available to the most plausible hypothesis. In this whole methodological and epistemological spirit, Herder then argues in the essay against theories of poetry which, seeing only as far back in history as the relatively advanced phases of poetry in which it had already attained a certain perfection, and ignoring the long process of trial and error that had gone before them, attribute poetry's origins to a divine source. And he argues that its original source instead lay in strong human sentiments, especially ones associated with primitive religion, and that these sentiments were negative ones such as fear rather than positive ones such as gratitude.

Herder's slightly later published work, the *Fragments on Recent German Literature* (1767-68), contains similar methodological and epistemological reflections, but this time in connection with language. It also refines his initial picture of the method by allowing for the possibility of *multiple* origins and thereby softening the suggestion that the eventual phenomenon is always fully *performed* in its origin. Since this slightly later work represents the first *public* appearance of the method, it is worth quoting its methodological part at some length:

With the origin of a thing we lose a part of its history, which, though, inevitably explains so much in the thing, and usually the most important part. Like the tree from its root, art, language, and science grow up out of their origin. In the seed lies the plant with its parts, in the animal foetus the creature with all its limbs—and in the origin of a phenomenon the whole treasure of illumination through which its explanation becomes *genetic*. Whence have so many confusions arisen but from the fact that people have taken the later condition of a thing, a language, an art for the first, and forgotten the origin? Whence so many errors than because a *single* condition in which people saw everything inevitably yielded nothing more than *onesided* observations, divided and incomplete judgments? Whence so much argument than because each person

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regarded *these his* concepts and rules, however onesided they were, as the only ones, made them into pet thoughts, decided everything *according* to them, and declared everything *outside* them to be nothing, to be deviation? Finally, whence so much self-confusion than because one in the end could make nothing of a thing that did not always remain the same, always appeared changed.—Whence all this, than because one lacked the first point from which the fabric of the confusion spun itself, lacked the beginning from which the whole confused mass can be so easily unwound afterwards, and did not know the origin on which the whole history and explanation rests as on a basic foundation . . . Most things in the world are produced, developed, raised, and torn down by a chance, and not by purposeful efforts, and where now do I mean to get to with my conjectures in a magical land of accident where nothing happens according to fundamental principles, where everything exempts itself most abruptly from the laws of intention and purposefulness, where everything, most and the most valuable things, falls to the hands of the god of chance. If we had a history of human inventions, how we would find products that arose in accordance with Epicurus's cosmogony through a coincidence of atoms! Series of causes cooperated, against and after one another: cog gripped cog, one motive against another, one thing suppressed another without plan or rule, the throws changed fierily and quickly, chance had almost exhausted its bad lots before better ones fell.—Now if one sketches according to a philosophical heuristics plans concerning how a thing could have arisen, should have arisen, one makes a fool of oneself with all one's a priori fundamental principles! Not how language should have arisen, could have arisen, but how it arose—that is the question!<sup>8</sup>

Like the earlier essay, the *Fragments* then proceeds to an extensive discussion of related epistemological issues, a discussion similar in content to the earlier essay's, though this time focusing on language rather than poetry. Accordingly, Herder goes on to emphasize the difficulty of discovering the origin of language; various illusions to which this difficulty gives rise, especially the connected illusions of language's initial perfection and of its divine origin; and the

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<sup>8</sup> J. G. Herder, *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, 2:62-65. Notice that in this insistence on the need for real history, as opposed to mere "plans concerning how a thing could have arisen, should have arisen" in which "one makes a fool of oneself with all one's a priori principles," Herder already implies a criticism not only of Rousseau (of whose a priorist theories about the origins of language and of culture generally he was very critical, for example in *Treatise on the Origin of Language* [1772]) but also of Hume (whose distortions of history he especially criticizes in *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* [1774]). In other words, Herder already foreshadows Nietzsche's severe criticisms of these English and French predecessors.

appropriate investigative means to use in order to overcome the difficulty and the illusions in question, namely tentative inference from the various sorts of empirical evidence that are available to the best hypothesis. In this whole methodological and epistemological spirit, he then argues against Süßmilch's theory that the impressive complexity and purposiveness of our languages could only have arisen from a divine origin, on the ground that this involves overlooking language's earlier development from cruder beginnings. And he instead champions the contrary thesis that language indeed emerged from such cruder beginnings, and that it only reached its later highly developed forms via a long and thoroughly human process of development.

In addition, Herder already began to apply such a method to *moral* (and other) *values*. For example, in the *Fragments*—inaugurating an intimate association of genealogy with philology, etymology, and exact interpretation that would remain one of its central features henceforth<sup>9</sup>—he calls for someone to "trace exactly the metamorphoses which in Greek the words *anêr*, *anthrôpos*, *agathos*, *kalos*, *philokalos*, *kalok'agathos*, *kakos*, *epicheirêtês*, and in Latin *vir*, *homo*, *bonus* and *melior* and *optimus*, *honestus*, *pulcher* and *liberalis*, *strenuus* and such national words have undergone, which were the honor of their age, and changed with it."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* (1774), where he largely focuses on moral, aesthetic, and prudential values, he develops the large-scale "genetic" thesis that history has consisted of a great chain of cultures (Oriental patriarchal culture, then Egyptian culture, then Phoenician culture, then Greek culture, then Roman culture, and so on) which

<sup>9</sup> Concerning this intimate association in Nietzsche, see S. Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), especially pages 86-92.

<sup>10</sup> J. G. Herder, *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, 1:306 (Greek slightly amended).

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have built on each other cumulatively and thus eventually produced modern European culture (toward which he is strikingly ambivalent). To give one very specific example of how he envisages this process in the case of moral values: he claims that Greek culture combined the obedience of antecedent Oriental and Egyptian culture with the freedom of antecedent Phoenician culture in a new synthesis, and then passed this on to subsequent European cultures.<sup>11</sup>

Hegel took over this method from Herder. Hegel already employs it in his unpublished early theological writings from the 1790s (a period during which he was strongly influenced by Herder in many other ways as well). Especially noteworthy in this connection are *The Positivity of the Christian Religion* (1795/96) and *The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate* (1798-1800). These works in particular again apply the method to the sphere of *morality*.

The method also constitutes an important strand in the complex weave of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), which was of course *published* by Hegel and therefore represents a more important link in the method's historical transmission. Thus, in the preface of the *Phenomenology* Hegel says that while the content of our own modern spirit/mind [*Geist*] in its natural condition initially appears to us immediate and familiar [*bekannt*] (by which he means, roughly, that we have the relevant linguistic-conceptual facility and automatically accept the relevant beliefs), it is in fact historically mediated and to that extent still not really known [*erkannt*] by us; and indeed, he implies that the superficial familiarity in question not only fails to guarantee such knowledge but even impedes it:

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:495-96.

The existence that has been taken back into the substance is . . . to begin with only *immediately* transposed into the element of the self; this possession that it has earned therefore still has the same character of uncomprehended immediacy . . . as the existence itself . . . At the same time it is thereby something *familiar* [*Bekanntes*], a thing of a sort with which the existing spirit is done, and in which its activity and hence its interest no longer resides . . . The familiar in general is not known [*erkannt*] because it is familiar.<sup>†</sup> It is the most common self-delusion and delusion of others to presuppose something as familiar in knowing and to welcome it in this way.<sup>12</sup>

Hegel then promises to transform this initial mere familiarity to us of our modern spirit's, or mind's, content into a genuine knowledge of it by acquainting us with the history of its becoming that he is about to present in the *Phenomenology*:

In the spirit that stands higher than another the lower concrete existence has sunk to being an inconspicuous moment; what was previously the thing itself is now only a trace; its shape is shrouded and become a simple nuance. The individual whose substance is the higher spirit runs through this past . . . This past existence is already the earned possession of the universal spirit that constitutes the substance of the individual and . . . its inorganic nature.—In this respect education, considered from the side of the individual, consists in its earning this present matter, consuming its inorganic aspect, and taking possession of it . . . Because the individual's substance, because indeed the world spirit, has had the patience to go through these forms in the long course of time, and to take on the huge labor of world history, in which the world spirit developed in each form the whole of its own content of which that form was capable . . . it is indeed true that in the nature of the case the individual cannot comprehend its substance by doing less.<sup>13</sup>

Later, in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel basically repeats this conception that our present mode of thought has developed out of historical antecedents and needs to be understood in terms of that development (this time, in specific

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<sup>†</sup> Note the ambiguity of this sentence: familiarity is not sufficient for being known versus familiarity prevents being known. Hegel means the sentence in *both* of its possible senses.

<sup>12</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke*, eds. E. Moldenhauer and K.M. Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 3:34-35.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:32-34.

application to *philosophical* thought), and he also adds a revealing reference to Herder as the source of the conception:

These acts of thought, as historical, initially seem to be a matter of the past and to lie beyond *our reality*. But in fact what *we* are we are also historically, or more precisely: just as in that which occurs in this region, the history of thought, the past is only *one* side, likewise in that which we are the communal eternal is inseparably connected with what we are historically. The possession of self-conscious rationality that belongs to us, the present world, did not arise immediately and grow only out of the ground of the present, but it is an essential aspect of it to be an inheritance and more specifically the *result* of work, and indeed of the work of all preceding generations of the human species. Just as the arts of outer life, the mass of means and skills, the institutions and habits of social and political coexistence, are a result of the reflection, the invention, the needs, the desperation and the misfortune, the volition and the execution, of the history that preceded our present, likewise what we are in science and more specifically in philosophy is owed to *tradition*, which winds through everything that is transient and that has therefore passed away like a *holy chain*, as *Herder* has called it, and has preserved and transmitted to us that which the previous world has brought forth.<sup>14</sup>

Nietzsche then largely took over this method of explanation from Hegel, and in particular from Hegel's *Phenomenology*, in order to form his own method of genealogy. For, despite famously having strong disagreements with Hegel on many issues, Nietzsche admired Hegel's historical sensibility. Thus Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) that Schopenhauer "has through his unintelligent fury against Hegel managed to break the whole last generation of Germans away from the context of German culture, which all things considered was a peak and divinatory subtlety of the historical sense."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, more specifically, Nietzsche admired in Hegel a historical sensibility that Hegel had taken over from *Herder*, especially on the subject of *morality*. Thus Nietzsche writes in a note from 1885/86: "That the history of all moral phenomena can be simplified to the extent that Schopenhauer believed—namely,

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 18:21.

<sup>15</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, in *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke*, 5:130. See also: *The Gay Science*, # 357.



that pity can be discovered to be the root of every moral inclination hitherto—this degree of nonsense and naivety was only possible for a thinker who was robbed of all historical instinct and who had in the strangest way even escaped that strong schooling in history that the Germans have been through from Herder to Hegel.”<sup>16</sup>

Accordingly, already in *Human All Too Human* (1878) Nietzsche in effect restates both the problem of a lack of self-understanding and the solution of genealogical explanation that Hegel had identified in the preface of the *Phenomenology*:

It is a sign of superior culture to hold fast in consciousness, and form a faithful image of, certain phases of the development which lesser human beings live through almost unthinkingly and then erase from the blackboard of their souls . . . For this it is necessary to isolate those phases artificially. Historical studies develop the capacity for this artistry . . . The historical sense consists in the ability quickly to reconstruct such systems of thought and feeling when the occasion requires it . . . Its first result is that we understand our fellow human beings as quite specific such systems and as representatives of diverse cultures . . . And again, that we are able to separate out and present independently parts from our own development.<sup>17</sup>

Subsequently, in *The Gay Science* (1882/87) Nietzsche repeats the same points, but this time, revealingly, he does so using the very same word-play on the terms *bekannt* [familiar] vs. *erkannt* [known] that Hegel had used in the preface of the *Phenomenology*:

*The origin of our concept “knowledge” [Erkenntnis].—I take this explanation from the alley. I heard one of the common folk say “He knew/recognized me [er hat mich erkannt]”—and I asked myself, What does the common folk mean by the word knowledge [Erkenntnis] actually?, What does it want when it wants “knowledge”? Nothing but this: something foreign should be reduced to something familiar [Bekanntes]. And we philosophers, have we actually meant more by the word knowledge? . . . For “What is familiar is known”: in this they are agreed. Even the most careful of them believe that the familiar is at least easier to know than the foreign; for example, that it is methodologically*

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885-1887*, in *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke*, 12:160.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches I und II*, 2:226.

appropriate to begin from the "inner world," from the "facts of consciousness," because this is the world that is *more familiar to us!* Error of errors! The familiar is what one is used to; and what one is used to is the most difficult thing to "know."<sup>18</sup>

Finally, Nietzsche also repeats the same line of thought prominently at the very beginning of *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), his most famous exercise in genealogy, again revealingly re-using Hegel's *bekannt* vs. *erkannt* word-play:

We are unfamiliar [*unbekannt*] to ourselves, we knowers [*Erkennenden*], we ourselves to ourselves. This has its good reason. We have never sought ourselves; so how is it supposed to happen that we should one day *find* ourselves . . . We remain foreign to ourselves precisely as a matter of necessity, we do not understand ourselves, we must mistake ourselves, for us the principle is for all eternity "Each person is most foreign to himself"—for ourselves we are no "knowers" . . .<sup>19</sup>

After Nietzsche, the most famous later exponent of the method of genealogy, Foucault, avowedly takes over the method from Nietzsche.<sup>20</sup> He thereby stands on the shoulders of the whole German tradition just described.

So much by way of a contribution toward a "genealogy of genealogy."<sup>21</sup> The following section, while it will primarily focus on a different task, will also elaborate this contribution in certain ways.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 3:593-94.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 5:247-48. Janaway in discussing this passage overlooks the Hegelian source of Nietzsche's word-play, and thereby this important clue to the German strand of the "genealogy of genealogy" that I am identifying here. See Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness*, 16 and following.

<sup>20</sup> Foucault credits Nietzsche as the most important influence on his own philosophical development (M. Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth* [New York: The New Press, 1997], 125: "What gave me for the first time the desire of doing personal work was reading Nietzsche"). More specifically, Foucault wrote a famous positive account of Nietzsche's method of genealogy, which served him as a model for much of his own work: "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (M. Foucault, *Memory, Counter-memory, Practice* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977], 139 and following; see also "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth*, 253 and following).

<sup>21</sup> The above identification of a strand of the "genealogy of genealogy" in Herder, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Foucault has of course abstracted from some deep differences in their philosophies of history which affect their respective versions of

## II

How exactly is the method of genealogy, as it was developed by this German tradition, supposed to advance (self-)understanding? It seems to me that it aspires to do so in two fundamental ways, which together constitute what one might call the *essential* model of genealogical explanation.

The method's *first* contribution to (self-)understanding can be described roughly as follows. Someone who possesses his or her own distinctive concepts, beliefs, values, art forms, customs, et cetera, but does not compare them with perspectives that have lacked them altogether or possessed variant alternatives runs a grave risk of taking them to be universal and indispensable, and also of overlooking what is distinctive in their character. Genealogy counteracts both of these types of (self-)misunderstanding by making one familiar with earlier historical periods that have lacked the relevant concepts et cetera altogether and with intervening historical periods in which they were anticipated but only in forms that are significantly different from the form in which one possesses them oneself, thereby making it possible for one both to perceive the non-universality and dispensability of the concepts et cetera in question and to compare them with others in order to reveal their distinctive character.

This first contribution that genealogy makes to

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the method—for example, different answers to the questions, Is history teleological or not?, Is history progressive or regressive or neither?, Is the course of history necessary or not?, Is history dominated by what is communally shared or by individuality?, Is historical knowledge objective or perspectival?, and so on. For a good discussion of one especially interesting and problematic peculiarity of Nietzsche's and Foucault's versions of the method, namely, their commitment to perspectivism or relativism, see A. MacIntyre, "Genealogies and Subversions," in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*.

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(self-)understanding is already emphasized by the inventor of the method, Herder (it is dependent on a recognition of the deep historical mutability of psychological phenomena which likewise really only emerged with Herder). Hence, for example, in the *Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Humanity* (1784-91) he writes:

The soul experiences a noble expansion when it dares to place itself outside the narrow circle that clime and education have drawn around us and at least learns amid other nations what one can dispense with. How much one there finds dispensed with and dispensable that one long considered essential! Notions that we often took to be the most universal axioms of human reason disappear here and there with the clime of a place, as dry land disappears like a cloud for someone sailing out to sea.<sup>22</sup>

And in an essay from 1783 he writes similarly concerning morality in particular:

When we have turned grey in certain ethical customs and modes of representation, and are consequently so grown-together with them that we believe them essential to humanity and so quite inseparable from it, how often have I been quite beneficially amazed and ashamed to find that a few levels further up or down [on the scale of peoples] whole peoples know nothing of these modes of representation and ethical customs, have never known anything of them, often cherish the very opposite ones just as dearly, and yet despite this are in a tolerably good condition and as comfortable as the fragile clay from which humanity is formed, together with the necessary expenses which each person incurs from without, could allow.<sup>23</sup>

This function of genealogy is also important for Hegel. Accordingly, in a speech on the purpose of studying Greek and Roman antiquity that he delivered in 1809 (shortly after publishing the *Phenomenology*) he identified the following task:

If the concepts of the understanding . . . are in us and we are able to understand them immediately, our first education consists in possessing them, i.e. in having made them into an object of consciousness and being able to distinguish them through characteristic marks.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> J. G. Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, in *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, 13:309.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 15:138.

<sup>24</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke*, 4:323.

And his proposed solution to this task, which he offered as a central rationale for studying Greek and Roman antiquity, was as follows:

But in order to become an object, the substance . . . of spirit must have stepped opposite us, it must have received the shape of something foreign . . . For the alienation that is a condition of theoretical education, this requires . . . the gentle pain and effort of the representation that one is dealing with something non-immediate, something foreign, with something that belongs to recall, memory, and thought.<sup>25</sup>

The same function of genealogy is also important for Nietzsche. For example, he writes in 1885:

What separates us most radically from all Platonic and Leibnizian ways of thinking is this: we believe in no eternal concepts, eternal values, eternal forms, or eternal souls; and philosophy, to the extent that it is scientific and not legislative, is for us merely the broadest extension of the concept of "history." On the basis of etymology and the history of language we consider all concepts as having *become*, and many of them as still becoming.<sup>26</sup>

This first contribution that genealogy makes to (self-)understanding is very important. However, while it is essential to genealogy, genealogy is not essential to *it*. This is because it could in principle be achieved by means of a comparison of the concepts et cetera in question with *historically unrelated* alternatives instead (as happens in the discipline of cultural anthropology, for example). Herder already recognized this possibility, and therefore recommended that such nongenealogical comparisons be undertaken as well (for example, in the loose sheets for his *Journal* [1769] and in the 10th Collection of his *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity* [1793-97]). Hegel and Nietzsche place less emphasis on this possibility, but they too are aware of it.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 4:321.

<sup>26</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1884-1885*, in *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke*, 11:613 (note that on page 442 Nietzsche associates this outlook with "Lamarck and Hegel"). See also S. Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, especially pages 86-92.

For example, Hegel remarks in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* that the ordinary human being "lives quite unconsciously in this manner, in accordance with this custom, without ever having considered that he has this custom. He enters a foreign country, is highly amazed, and experiences for the first time through this opposition that he has this habit."<sup>27</sup> This is also one of the functions of the largely cross-cultural rather than historical "typology of morals" that Nietzsche demands in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1786) as part of a "natural history of morals."<sup>28</sup>

By contrast, genealogy's *second* main contribution to (self-)understanding *cannot* be achieved in any other way. What is this second contribution? At its most basic level it consists in showing two things: first, *that* the concepts et cetera in question, rather than say being innate or immutable, are the products of historical developments before which they did not really exist at all and in the course of which they only existed in variant forms; and second, *what* exactly these historical developments that produced them have been.<sup>29</sup> At a less basic level, it normally also includes providing one or another further sort of explanation that is more specific in character. For example, Hegel's genealogies in the *Phenomenology* purport to show that modern concepts et cetera have emerged from a series of earlier antecedents which turn out to have been increasingly entangled in self-contradictions the further back in time one goes, so that their emergence can be seen to have been a rational process of gradual liberation from self-

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<sup>27</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke*, 19:379.

<sup>28</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, in *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke*, 5:105.

<sup>29</sup> Concerning genealogy's identification of the various antecedent conditions and steps that have eventually generated the concepts et cetera in question: Herder, Nietzsche, and Foucault all emphasize *multiplicity* and *accidentalness* in these antecedent conditions and steps, whereas, officially at least, Hegel instead strives to combine everything in a unilinear, necessary process.



contradictions. Or according to a sharply different sort of genealogy offered by Nietzsche, certain modern moral values (in particular, love and forgiveness) turn out to have originally emerged from quite contrary psychological motives (hatred and revenge), which still underlie them, so that they originally were, and still remain, deeply inconsistent and hence irrational.

So much for the *essential* model of genealogy. However, I would also like to identify what one might contradistinguish from it as the *typical* model of genealogy. In addition to the two features already described, this model incorporates two further features which, though not essential to or universally present in genealogies, are nonetheless strikingly common in the genealogies that the thinkers in this tradition actually offer. My reasons for focusing on these two further features lie partly just in the fact that they *are* so common. But they also lie partly in the fact that they are present in certain specific genealogies of morality which I want to champion in "Genealogy and Morality."

Thus, *thirdly*, many of the most important genealogies that the thinkers in this tradition develop in the end trace the modern psychological phenomena explained back to forms of *social oppression*. For example, in *This Too a Philosophy of History* Herder identifies as the very beginning of the history of cultures, and as a necessary condition for the subsequent emergence of cultures generally, the Oriental patriarchy of the Old Testament, an autocratic form of life that bordered on despotism.<sup>30</sup> Hegel too ascribes an essential role to social oppression in several of his genealogies. Thus in the early theological writings—especially, *The Positivity of the Christian Religion* and *The Spirit of Christianity*

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<sup>30</sup> J. G. Herder, *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, 5:478 and following. According to Herder's (of course, chronologically problematic) account, after the Oriental patriarchy of the Old Testament the Egyptians continued with a similarly authoritarian form of life (*ibid.*, 490).

*and Its Fate*—he identifies slavery and other forms of social oppression in the ancient world as the original cause of a distinctively tyrannical sort of morality which he considers to be characteristic of Judaism, Christianity, and secular modernity (above all, Kantianism with its “categorical imperative”). And he also identifies ancient slavery and social oppression as the cause of the distinctive otherworldism that is characteristic of the same tradition, which, on his account, originally emerged as a sort of escapism from such social oppression in *this* world.<sup>31</sup> Later, in the “Self-consciousness” chapter of the *Phenomenology*, he implies very similar explanations: the “Lordship and Bondage” section of the chapter again represents ancient slavery and social oppression, and the chapter then explains the sorts of tyrannical morality and otherworldism that arose in antiquity, especially the Christian “Unhappy Consciousness,” as generated by that slavery and social oppression.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the *Phenomenology* ascribes a further important genealogical role to this ancient trauma of slavery and social oppression: by complementing the lord’s original “being-for-self,” or self-assertiveness, with the bondsman’s “being-for-another,” or deference, such slavery and social oppression made possible a gradual synthesis of these two psychological attitudes within the individual over the course of subsequent history, and thereby eventually created individuals who are capable of participating in a modern free society.<sup>33</sup> Finally, Nietzsche in his genealogy of Christian values, and of the closely related values of secular modernity, famously traces these back to slavery and social oppression in the ancient world as well—especially to the oppression of the Jewish people in ancient Palestine by Greek and Roman

<sup>31</sup> See M.N. Forster, *Hegel's Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), ch. 2.

<sup>32</sup> See *ibid.*, ch. 2 and 312-26.

<sup>33</sup> See *ibid.*, 247-55.

imperial overlords, which, according to Nietzsche, caused the Jewish people to undertake a systematic inversion of the values of the Greeks and Romans out of motives of hatred and resentment [*Ressentiment*].

A *fourth* and final feature of the typical model has already been touched on in passing: *self-contradiction*. In the course of developing his genealogy of cultures in *This Too a Philosophy of History* Herder had emphasized that there seemed to be no common criteria that would ever make it possible to justify *these* moral (or other sorts of) values against *those* ones.<sup>34</sup> This insight had raised the specter of skepticism, a specter that Herder sometimes entertains explicitly in his works, though he officially wants to resist it (see, for example, his early essay *On Change of Taste* [1766], as well as *This Too a Philosophy of History* itself).<sup>35</sup> His attempts to resist it had pursued two different strategies: first, a relativism that saw each set of values as explicable in terms of, and appropriate to, its own cultural context (this was his position in *This Too a Philosophy of History*); second, a retreat from his assumptions of deep value diversity and of the absence of common criteria toward a claim that there is in fact a more fundamental universality in values, especially a universally shared commitment to "humanity" (this was his position in *Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Humanity*). However, these two strategies were not only mutually incompatible, but also severally problematic (for example, the nonjudgmentalism of the first, relativist strategy is psychologically unsustainable, and the claim of universally shared values made by the second strategy is empirically dubious). Hegel in the introduction of the *Phenomenology* accordingly developed an alternative strategy for solving the same problem, which he then conscientiously tried to

<sup>34</sup> J. G. Herder, *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, 5:490-92.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:511-13.

implement in the main body of the work. His strategy was to insist that despite the (conceded) absence of common criteria, the various "shapes of consciousness" that have arisen historically do not generate skepticism because they all turn out to be *implicitly self-contradictory*, only Hegel's own standpoint being self-consistent. Under Hegel's influence, Nietzsche then pursued a strikingly similar strategy. For example, Nietzsche's most famous genealogy, his tracing of Christian and modern secular values such as love and forgiveness back to original motives of hatred and resentment [*Ressentiment*], similarly purports to identify a self-contradiction within those values.<sup>36</sup>

Not surprisingly given its direct descent from Nietzschean genealogy, Foucault's method usually conforms to the *essential* model of genealogy described above, and it often conforms to the *typical* model as well, incorporating in addition a tracing of a modern outlook or practice back to social oppression and an identification of a sort of self-contradiction at its core. For example, in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault implies that, like the Victorian

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<sup>36</sup> This characterization of Nietzsche's strategy largely agrees with W. Kaufmann, P. Foot, and R. Geuss, who have all interpreted Nietzsche's genealogy of the relevant values as a form of internal critique. However, I do not mean to imply here that self-contradictoriness is Nietzsche's sole, or even most important, reason for rejecting the values in question. Indeed, it is possible that it constitutes *no reason at all for him*, that he only intends it to function as a reason for such rejection in an *ad hominem* way, that is, for people in the opposing moral tradition who, unlike himself, are also committed to self-consistency (for some hints that he may not himself be committed to self-consistency, see for example *Beyond Good and Evil*, # 296; note that several of his influential predecessors, including Schlegel and Hegel, had already at points expressed skepticism about the law of contradiction). This is one likely point of difference between Nietzsche and the Hegel of the *Phenomenology*. Another is that unlike the Hegel of the *Phenomenology*, who attempts to demonstrate the self-contradiction in a viewpoint *at the semantic level and directly*, Nietzsche typically tries to do so *between the semantic and the motivational levels and via the viewpoint's historical origin*. This exposes Nietzsche to some possible objections to which Hegel in the *Phenomenology* (though perhaps not in other works, such as the early theological writings) would in principle be immune. I shall return to this topic from a certain angle toward the end of "Genealogy and Morality."

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forms of sexual “repression” that preceded it, modern sexual “liberation” in reality functions as a means of excitement and control, so that it is in a sense both rooted in social oppression and self-contradictory.<sup>37</sup>

So much for the *essential* and the *typical* models of genealogy. In the companion article that is to follow, “Genealogy and Morality,” I shall go on to argue that these models can be applied successfully—and indeed, to some extent already were applied successfully by Hegel and Nietzsche—in order to enhance our understanding of aspects of modern morality.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 47-9, 130-1, 156-7.

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