On Genealogy
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NOTE TO READERS: The following is a précis of my in-progress monograph, *The Contingent World: Genealogy, Epistemology, Politics*. The book consists of three chapters: (1) ‘The Revelations of History’, on the history of genealogical thinking from the pre-Socratics to contemporary evolutionary debunking arguments, (2) ‘Genealogical Scepticism and Genealogical Luck’, on the epistemological significance of genealogy, and (3) ‘Genealogy, Politics and Worldmaking’, on the practical significance of genealogy. This précis contains material from all three chapters in condensed form. My apologies for the incomplete citations. Please do not circulate, quote or cite without permission. Many thanks for reading; comments very welcome to amia.srinivasan@gmail.com

‘Happy is he who is able to know the causes of things’

Virgil, Georgics II:490.

Introduction: Genealogical Anxiety

Each of us finds himself not just already in the world, but already in a particular world: a particular moment in history, a particular culture, a particular family, a particular language, a particular body. We are, in Heidegger’s phrase, *thrown* into the world. What is more, our representations of the world – our beliefs, values, and concepts – are radically shaped by these particularities, these contingent facts about where we find ourselves in the space of possibility. What are we to make of this? Am I justified in having the beliefs, values and concepts I do if I have them only because of my particular, contingent history? What reason do I have for thinking that my beliefs are true, or that my values are genuinely valuable, or that my concepts grasp the contours of reality, if I could so easily have held contrary beliefs or values, or cut up the world in terms of rival concepts? Naturally, my beliefs *seem* true to me; likewise, my values seem genuinely valuable, and my concepts seem genuinely apt. They are, after all, *my* beliefs, values and concepts.
But would not my beliefs also seem true to me, my values valuable, and my concepts apt, even if they had been altogether different – if a different historical or cultural formation had endowed me with a worldview radically unlike the one I in fact have? What am I to do with this other me, this shadow me, this me who believes the opposite of everything I believe, who values what I disvalue, who articulates the world in terms of concepts that are alien to my own? What if she is the right one, and I am the shadow?

This series of questions gives voice to what I call ‘genealogical anxiety’: the anxiety that the causal origins of our representations, once revealed, will somehow undermine, destabilise or cast doubt on the legitimacy or standing of those representations. I say ‘somehow’ because it is not at all obvious just why or how genealogical revelations might have such a destabilising or undermining effect. Likewise, it is not clear what exactly might be meant by ‘legitimacy’ or ‘standing’. But what does seem obvious is that we humans, at least in some places and at some times, are prone to genealogical anxiety. Consider this fragment from the pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes:

Mortals suppose that the gods are born (as they themselves are), and that they wear man’s clothing and have human voice and body. But if cattle or lions had hands, so as to paint with their hands and produce works of art as men do, they would paint their gods and give them bodies in form like their own—horses like horses, cattle like cattle.

According to Xenophanes, the Greeks believe that the gods exhibit human features – that they are born, have human bodies and voices, and wear human clothing – but only do so because they (the Greeks) are themselves human. This is why non-human creatures, if they were capable of depicting the gods, would do so after their own likeness: horses like horses, cattle like cattle. At the depths of the Greeks’ beliefs lies not reason at all, but an all-too-human cause: the narcissistic desire to make the gods in our own image.

The form of Xenophanes’ argument is familiar to us. We know immediately its intended implication: that, because they have their origin in human narcissism, the Greeks’ beliefs about the gods are somehow deficient, of poor standing, illegitimate. And we not only recognise the form of Xenophanes’ argument, but instinctively feel its force. It really does feel to us that this genealogical revelation

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2 Xenophanes, fragments 5-6.
should have some negative bearing on the Greeks’ theology. (And perhaps, by extension, our own.) On reflection, though, we can see that Xenophanes’ genealogy of Greek theology — his identification of its causal origin in human narcissism — does not entail that Greek theology is false. For it is consistent with Greek theology having its roots in human narcissism, after all, that the gods really are born, and have human form and voices, and wear human clothes. To think otherwise is to commit what philosophers call the genetic fallacy: to falsely suppose that there is a general entailment from a belief’s origin to its truth-value. Even so, the feeling that Xenophanes’ genealogy somehow destabilises or undermines the standing of Greek theology remains. For even if the Greeks’ beliefs about the gods are true, they would be true, we want to say, by mere accident. And this shows that the Greeks’ beliefs are not, in some important sense, as they ought to be.

Not all genealogies prompt anxiety. Indeed some of them appear to have the opposite effect: appearing to affirm, legitimise, or bolster what they explain. Bernard Williams calls such genealogies ‘vindicatory’, comparing them with the critical genealogies, such as the one offered by Xenophanes, that provoke anxiety. Consider, for example, the ‘pedigree tracing’ genealogies that are found in the Iliad or the Bible; here, the value of a person or object is taken to be validated and secured by its unbroken line of pure descent from an original, value-conferring source. Thus Agamemnon’s sceptre endows him with authority because it originates with Hephaestus and Zeus. The gospels of Matthew and Luke, though offering conflicting genealogies of Jesus, both trace his ancestry to David, presumably in an attempt to secure Jesus’ connection with the Old Testament prophecies of a Messiah descended from the king. Our own modern fetish for historical memorabilia and family genealogies suggests we are hardly immune to the allure of vindicatory pedigree tracing. More mundanely, consider the genealogy of my belief that, as I write this, there is a computer in front of me. I have this belief because there is in fact a computer in front of me, which interacts with my perceptual systems in such a way as to allow me to recognise the presence of the computer. Intuitively, this genealogy vindicates rather than undermines the belief that it explains.

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5 I say ‘general’ because there are some (rare) cases in which the revelation of a genealogy does entail the truth or falsity of a belief. For example, if I acquired a belief from the testimony of an omniscient deity who invariably lies, then the origin of my belief entails its falsity. Vice versa for an omniscient deity who always tells the truth. 
7 Williams (2002), Truth and Truthfulness. Williams uses the word ‘shameful’ to contrast with ‘vindicatory’. I prefer ‘critical’.
6 The example is from Geuss ibid, 274ff.
The search for vindicatory genealogies has an important place in the history of philosophy. Most famously, Locke and Hobbes offered accounts of how the state—liberal in the case of Locke, authoritarian in the case of Hobbes—emerge out of a hypothesised state of nature. Crucially, Locke and Hobbes took their genealogical accounts to not only explain the emergence, but moreover demonstrate the value and legitimacy, of their favoured political arrangements. More recently, Edward Craig has offered a vindicatory genealogy of the concept knowledge, and Bernard Williams has offered a genealogical vindication of the value of truthfulness. Like critical genealogies, vindicatory genealogies can be at once intuitively compelling and mysterious. We can feel, instinctively, that a ‘good’ pedigree reflects well on a person, object or institution. But why should the causal origins of a thing be capable of conferring value or legitimacy on it? That something has a ‘good’ causal origin does not entail that it is (still) of value, and vice versa. For example, ‘holistic’ admissions policies might have had their genesis in good faith attempts to increase diversity and address social inequalities, but that hardly means they are not deployed as tools of discrimination today. Conversely, the current widespread availability of the birth control pill might have had its origins in eugenicist programmes, but that hardly makes it a bad thing. Indeed, why should a genealogy have any sort of normative significance at all, either of the undermining or legitimising kind? Perhaps our tendency to think it does is irrational, simply a product of our unjustified fetish for origins—a fetish from which philosophy should seek to set us free.

This book aims to show that the intuitive power of genealogy does not rest on mere historicist fetish: that where things come from, and how they came to be the way they are, can and does matter for how we should think of their contemporary significance. Another way of putting this is to say that history, in the broad sense, matters for philosophy. In putting forward this case, my focus will be, as I have already intimated, on a certain subclass of genealogies, of which Xenophanes’ genealogy of Greek theology is a paradigm case: that is, critical genealogies of our representations—in particular, our beliefs, values, and concepts. Thus I will not have much to say about genealogies that intuitively vindicate what they explain, nor about genealogies of things that are not representations, e.g.

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7 Williams ibid and Craig 1990.
8 Beliefs, valuations and concepts do not exhaust the list of representations. Emotions and perceptions are also representational, exhibiting semantic properties like being about the world and being subject to evaluations of accuracy. So are cognitive states like knowing, judging and supposing. But my focus will be on this narrower class of representations. But I leave these aside.
practices, people, or institutions. This is in part a pragmatic choice, one meant to keep the present study contained. But it is also driven by my sense that there is something especially interesting in critical genealogies of representations. For they have been advanced, and pressed into both theoretical and political service, by a wide range of thinkers, both historical and contemporary. And yet, in a sense, we still do not know what they are.

1. The revelations of history

I have said that this book can be thought of as an attempt to show why history, in a broad sense, matters for philosophy. So it is appropriate that I begin with history – specifically, a brief historical study of genealogical anxiety. Apart from what strikes me as its intrinsic interest, this history will help me fix my topic – i.e. critical genealogies of representation – by way of example. It will also begin to give us a sense of what the power of such genealogies might consist in, by reconstructing the uses to which critical genealogies have been put in the distant and recent past.

Writing about thirty years after Xenophanes’ death, the Greek historian Herodotus echoed his predecessor’s anti-theological argument in support of his famous pronouncement that ‘custom is lord of all’. Just as all animals, according to Xenophanes, would depict the gods after their own likeness, all the different nations would, according to Herodotus, call their own culture superior. ‘For if it were proposed to all nations to choose which seemed best of all customs’ he wrote, ‘each, after examination, would place its own first; so well is each convinced that its own are by far the best…..’. He goes on:

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9 This might seem to presuppose a false dichotomy between representation and practice, ignoring the way in which even ‘non-intellectual’ practices (e.g. dancing, exchanging gifts, going to the doctor) are meaningful and communicative, and thus to be distinguished from mere behaviour. (On this theme see e.g. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations (1953); Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (1973); Castoriadis, The Imaginary Institution of Society (1975); Taylor, Modern Social Imaginaries (2004); and Moyn, ‘Imaginary Intellectual History’ (2014)). While I will be stressing the practical dimension of representing – indeed, one of my fundamental themes here is that these intellectual activities are (also) worldly doings – I will largely ignore the ‘representational’ dimensions of ‘non-intellectual’ practices, using the notion of ‘representation’ narrowly to pick out objects with semantic features. Cf. Geuss (1981) On the Idea of a Critical Theory, 6-7.

10 I would very much welcome further examples of critical genealogies/genealogical anxiety, beyond those mentioned, especially from non-European sources.
I will give this one proof among many from which it may be inferred that all men hold this belief about their customs. When Darius was king, he summoned the Greeks who were with him and asked them for what price they would eat their fathers’ dead bodies. They answered that there was no price for which they would do it. Then Darius summoned those Indians who are called Callatiae, who eat their parents, and asked them (the Greeks being present and understanding through interpreters what was said) what would make them willing to burn their fathers at death. The Indians cried aloud, that he should not speak of so horrid an act...

Herodotus’ point is not merely that each culture prefers its own customs. It is moreover that each culture believes its own customs superior, and the customs of other cultures to be inferior, a violation of the natural order. What we learn from a cross-historical study, of the sort that Herodotus’ account of the origins of the Greco-Persian Wars affords us, is that every culture shares this belief about its own case, suggesting in turn that belief in one’s own cultural superiority is an inevitable by-product of having a culture at all. Beliefs in cultural superiority are caused not by the facts about which cultures are or are not superior – any more than the Greeks’ beliefs about the gods are caused by the gods – but instead by humans’ propensity to project their own contingent attachments onto the world, as if they were of objective value.

Xenophanes’ and Herodotus’ genealogies, of Greek theology and humans’ beliefs about cultural superiority, respectively, share a parallel structure. Both identify a systematic pattern across beliefs in a certain domain, which in turn supports a particular causal explanation of those beliefs. Xenophanes’ pattern is counterfactually established: by imagining that cattle and horses can paint, we realise that they would depict the gods in their own likeness, horses like horses, cattle like cattle. From this we can infer that the Greeks’ beliefs about the gods are caused by a basic narcissistic impetus common to all animals. Importantly, this narcissistic impulse is indifferent to the truth, in the sense that – in advance of learning what theological beliefs are produced by human narcissism, and without presupposing that the Greeks’ theological beliefs are largely true – we have no reason to believe that human narcissism has a tendency to produce true beliefs in the domain of theology.

Herodotus establishes a similar pattern in human beliefs about cultural superiority, though he does so empirically, rather than through counterfactual acts.

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of the imagination. Each culture judges itself superior, in turn suggesting a unified causal explanation: that humans have a psychic propensity to believe in their own cultural superiority, or alternatively, that cultures that inculcate in their members a belief in cultural superiority are those most likely to take hold and thrive. Either explanation, like Xenophanes’ implied explanation of the Greeks’ theological beliefs, is indifferent to the truth about cultural superiority, again in the sense that we have no antecedent or independent reason to believe that this causal mechanism will tend towards true beliefs. Intuitively, this indifference to the truth – what I will call its alethic indifference – bears negatively on the epistemic standing of the belief.

And yet we know that the fact that a belief is based on an alethically indifferent method is not enough to show us that it is false. For the belief that the gods are human-like or that my culture is superior could be, as it were, accidentally true. So in what sense could these beliefs be epistemically flawed? The answer lies in the distinction between truth and epistemic justification. A true belief might fail to be a justified one. (I may, for example, truly believe that Trump won’t be re-elected, but if I so believe on the basis of wishful thinking, it won’t be a justified belief.) And since justifiably believing a proposition is a necessary condition on knowing a proposition, this is also to say that a belief that happens to be true might yet fall short of knowledge. This appears to be the epistemic upshot of Xenophanes’ and Herodotus’ genealogies: even if the gods are human-like, or my culture superior, these beliefs cannot amount to knowledge. For their genealogies are indifferent to the truth.  

Another early Greek example of a critical genealogy is a fragment of a play cited by Sextus Empiricus, and alternatively ascribed to Euripides or Critias. The object of the critical genealogy is once again Greek theology – in this case, the belief in an all-knowing and retributive divine:

There was a time when the life of human beings was disordered and beastly, and life was ruled by force, when there was no reward for the virtuous nor any punishment for the wicked.
And then I think that humans decided to establish laws to punish [wrongdoers] so that justice might rule and be master over crime and violence (hybris).

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12 How we might spell out in detail such an argument is the topic of §2.
13 Sextus Empiricus, Adversus Mathematicos, ix. 54. Sextus ascribes the fragment to Critias. I’m grateful to M.M. McCabe for this example.
And they punished anyone who did wrong. Then, since the laws held public deeds in check and prevented men from open acts of violence, but they acted secretly, then it was, I believe, that a shrewd and clever-minded man invented for mortals a fear of the gods, so that there might be a deterrent for the wicked, even if they act or say or think anything in secret.

Hence from this source the divine was introduced that there is a deity who enjoys imperishable life, hearing and seeing with his mind, his thought and attention on all things, his nature so divine that he will hear whatever is said among mortals and be able to see whatever is done.14

The genealogy of the Sisyphus fragment departs from those of Xenophanes and Herodotus in two significant ways. First, whereas Xenophanes and Herodotus focus on certain patterns of belief that are merely suggestive of a particular (and intuitively discrediting) causal account, the Sisyphus author explicitly offers a causal explanation of theism: namely, that it was the brainchild of ‘a shrewd and clever-minded man’. Second, whereas Xenophanes’ and Herodotus’ genealogies seem to be purely critical, discrediting what they (indirectly) explain, the Sisyphus genealogy feels to us more ambiguous, at once critical and vindicatory. On one hand, the Sisyphus fragment (like Xenophanes’ and Herodotus’ genealogies) intuitively casts doubt on the epistemic standing of theism. While the (putative) fact that theism arose as a scheme for social deterrence does not entail that theism is false, it does intuitively cast doubt on the epistemic rationality or justification of the belief. At the same time, theism’s status as a sort of ‘noble lie’, serving the presumably valuable function of rescuing humanity from a life ‘disordered and beastly’ and ‘ruled by force’, suggests that theism is of social value.15 Thus we have a genealogy that appears to be epistemically critical but practically vindicatory.16

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14 Translation from Charles H. Kahn (1997), ‘Greek Religion and Philosophy in the Sisyphus Fragment’. Kahn also suggests that a similar Polybius (VI.56.11–12).
15 Functional explanations of this kind – in which something is explained in terms of its actual or potential effects – poses certain metaphysical puzzles. See fn. 82.
16 The Sisyphus fragment tells us a causal story that is, taken literally, false. Theism is not plausibly the product of a single ‘shrewd and clever-minded man’. (Of course, read metaphorically – which is how I presume the fragment’s author intended us to read it – the causal story might well be right.) Intuitively, its falsity precludes its having any epistemic
Genealogical anxiety reverberates long past the Greeks. The eleventh century Persian philosopher and theologian Al-Ghazali describes an intellectual awakening prompted by a recognition of the genealogical contingency of religious belief:

the fetters of servile conformism fell away from me, and inherited beliefs lost their hold on me, when I was still quite young. For I saw that the children of Christians always grew up embracing Christianity, and the children of Jews always grew up adhering to Judaism, and the children of Muslims always grew up following the religion of Islam. I also heard the tradition related from the Apostle of God — God’s blessing and peace be upon him! — in which he said: ‘Every infant is born endowed with the fitra: then his parents make him Jew or Christian or Magian.’ Consequently I felt an inner urge to seek the true meaning of the original fitra, and the true meaning of the beliefs arising through slavish aping of parents and teachers.

force: it is hard to see why an account of the emergence of my belief that I know to be false should have any bearing on its justification. The question of practical significance is trickier. The Sisyphus genealogy, though false, might yet reveal the true function of theistic belief, thus bearing on the question of its practical value. Indeed there are some genealogies that, by their authors’ own account, do not even aspire to the truth, but are meant nonetheless validate the practical standing of their explanada. Thus Williams says that a genealogy is ‘a narrative that tries to explain a cultural phenomenon by describing a way in which it came about, or could have come about, or might be imagined to have come about’ (Williams 2002, 20, emphasis added). While the first two kinds of genealogy aim at telling a plausibly true (or ‘how possibly’) history of something — e.g. Rousseau in *Discourse on Inequality* and Kitcher in *The Ethical Project* — the third kind of genealogy offers what we might call a contrafactual genealogy: a causal history that is avowedly false. Williams’ genealogy of the social valuing of truthfulness, like Craig’s genealogy of the concept knowledge, is of this last kind. These genealogies are not meant to be accurate historical accounts, but rational reconstructions: highly simplified models of how some social thing could have emerged for human-like creatures who lacked those things. Such rational reconstructions are supposed to be practically powerful because they are capable of revealing to us the valuable function of what they reconstruct. I am grateful to Rebekka Hufendiek for prompting me to address these points.

17 Other Greek expressions of genealogical anxiety include (according to Williams ibid), Glauccon and Adeimants’ game theoretic account of the emergence of justice in in Book 2 of *Republic*, which (according to Williams), Plato has Socrates reject because Plato thinks that all genealogies are necessarily critical. In *On the Nature of Things*, Lucretius described how biological diversity, cultural advance, language and religion emerged naturally, without divine intervention, thereby undermining a teleological conception of the world.

18 *Deliverances From Error* 10
For Al-Ghazali, religious beliefs are the result of a childhood indoctrination that is both parasitic on and distorting of children’s natural inclination towards the divine. The alethic indifference of the origins of such creedal beliefs (viz. familial inheritance) to the theological truth means that these beliefs, epistemically speaking, ought to be discarded, and replaced by beliefs based on more secure grounds.

Al-Ghazali’s critical genealogy of religious belief not only anticipates the opening passages of Descartes’ *Meditations*, but also a twentieth century debate in the philosophy of religion about the rationality of ‘exclusivist’ religious belief. Anti-exclusivists insist that it is irrational to hold on to particular creedal beliefs – that Jesus is the son of God, say, or that Mohammed is God’s prophet – once one recognises the way in which those beliefs are formed by the contingencies of one’s particular religious upbringing. On the anti-exclusivist view, such creedal beliefs are all equally unjustified. Meanwhile, religious exclusivists argue that Christians (and only Christians) are justified in maintaining their creedal beliefs in the face of genealogical revelations about the contingency of those beliefs – and indeed, that so doing is consistent with having knowledge of the Christian truths. They do so, in effect, by denying the truth of the proposed genealogy: Christian beliefs, they argue, are unique in being the products of divine rather than natural causes. In other words, non-exclusivists agree with Al-Ghazali that there is an (epistemically) critical genealogy to be given of creedal belief, while Christian exclusivists insist that this genealogy leaves Christian belief, at least, untouched.

Like Al-Ghazali, religious exclusivists and non-exclusivists alike take it for granted that there is some divine reality: the question is whether we can know which representations of that reality are correct, given the genealogical contingency of our particular creedal beliefs. Likewise, Xenophanes’ critical genealogy targets only anthropomorphic theology, leaving open the possibility that some sort of theology is in fine epistemic standing. Spinoza similarly offers a critical genealogy of the belief in an anthropomorphic, agential divine – as well as beliefs in miracles and teleology – leaving room open for belief in a non-agential divine. Meanwhile, a different tradition of critical genealogy attacks theistic belief as such, arguing that the very belief in God’s existence is unjustified. Staying with early modernity, we have Hume’s *Natural History of Religion* (1757), which (according to

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19 Another sort of anti-exclusivist response insists that all religious beliefs get on to the partial truth, or are true relative to the relevant religious worldview. See e.g. John Hick (1982), *God Has Many Names* and (1989), *An Interpretation of Religion*; and Runzo (1993), *World Views and Perceiving God*.

some commentators) sought to debunk the epistemic standing of religious belief on the basis of its origins in human irrationality. Hume’s critical genealogy of religion is presaged by a similar genealogy by Hobbes in Chapter 12 of Leviathan. Less widely known is the early Enlightenment philosopher John Toland’s critical genealogy of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, which Toland argued was originally a misinterpretation of Egyptian funeral rites, promoted by the Greeks and ultimately adopted by Christian politicians eager to control their citizenry.

The most famous critical genealogies of religion were offered in the nineteenth century by Feuerbach and Marx, and, in the early twentieth century by Freud. Echoing Xenophanes, Feuerbach identifies the origin of theism in humanity’s tendency to project human characteristics on to an imaginary divine. The result, for Feuerbach, was not only an epistemic mistake – an erroneous belief in the reality of God – but also a practical one: the alienation of man from his own species-being. Marx, following Feuerbach, sees religious consciousness as a form of alienation, but one that moreover serves a particular ideological purpose: namely, the maintenance of capitalist relations of production. For Marx, unlike Feuerbach, the illusion of theism cannot be dispelled through a mere revelation of its epistemic flaws. Rather, religious ideology can only be dispelled through a revolution in the material conditions that both produce and require that ideology. Indeed, for Marx, when such a material revolution occurs, the question of God’s existence will be a salient question no longer – atheism will be as unavailable as belief. For simply entertaining the question of whether God exists is a symptom of a man’s alienation from his species-being. Freud, meanwhile, compares theism to a ‘childhood neurosis’, one that serves the function of giving humanity a false illusion of control. This illusion, for Freud, was not merely false, but also unnecessary – a form of infantile repression that a mature civilisation must overcome. What is striking about the critical genealogies of Feuerbach, Marx and Freud is that they are clearly intended to be not only epistemically but also practically damning – liberating us from belief that is not only false, but moreover oppressive. Attempts to debunk theism in the late 20th century on the basis of evolutionary psychology often share this dual character, at once targeting (as their proponents see it) the bad epistemic standing of theism, and the undesirable social function it plays.

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21 e.g. Kail (2010), ‘Hume’s Naturalistic Critique of Religion’
22 Toland (1704), Letters to Serena, letter 2. I am indebted to Eric Schliesser for this example.
23 Feuerbach (1841), The Essence of Christianity.
24 Marx (1888), Theses on Feuerbach
25 Freud (1927), The Future of an Illusion
26 Freud (1939) Moses and Monotheism
I have not yet discussed the most famous critical genealogy, indeed the genealogy that gives us the metaphorical use of the word ‘genealogy’: the account of the emergence of modern morality that Nietzsche offers us in On the Genealogy of Morals. Here Nietzsche tells us that our system of morality – a system that valorises kindness, meekness, sympathy and other values of the ‘herd’ – has its true origins not in human goodness or an omnibenevolent divine, but in a complicated and ugly interplay of forces: the resentment of the slave class against their masters, the paying of debts through the extraction of pain, and the will to power of the priestly caste. While the psychic force of Nietzsche’s critical genealogy is clear, it is no straightforward task to say what it is that Nietzsche is up to in offering his genealogy – in particular, whether he is interested in offering an epistemological argument against our claims to moral knowledge, a practical argument against the oppressiveness of bourgeois morality, or perhaps something else altogether.

What is clear is that Nietzsche is offering us, perhaps for the first time, not simply a critical genealogy of a belief or value, but also a genealogy of a concept. The first essay of the Genealogy tells us that our current concepts of good and bad displaced an older set of concepts, evil and good, through a conceptual revolution perpetrated by the slaves against their masters: the ‘slave revolt’ in morality. In this, Nietzsche anticipates many of the most prominent critical genealogies of the twentieth century, which take as their target not particular beliefs – e.g. in the existence of God – but particular concepts or conceptual schemes, variously referred to as forms of consciousness, epistemic paradigms, world-pictures, episteme, ideologies, and so on. I am thinking here of the critical genealogies of the ideology of industrial capitalism as offered by Weber, the Frankfurt school critical theorists, and other post-Marxists; of our concepts of sex, gender and sexuality as offered by Beauvoir, Foucault and Judith Butler; of Eurocentric ideologies as offered by Edward Said and Dipesh Chakrabarty; of liberalism as offered by Carol Pateman, Susan Okin, Charles Mills and Uday Mehta; and of Zionism as offered by Jacqueline Rose. These critical genealogies – influenced variously (and sometimes simultaneously) by Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, scientific naturalism, Marxist dialectical materialism, and the constructivist tendencies of German idealism – are united in subjecting not just individual beliefs but whole representational schemes to what Ricoeur called the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’.

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28 Nietzsche 1887.
29 See e.g. Kail, (2011) ‘Genealogy’ and the Genealogy’.
30 See e.g. Leiter (2002), Nietzsche on Morality.
31 See e.g. Geuss (1994), ‘Nietzsche and Genealogy’.
32 This account might be thought to over-assimilate in at least two ways. First, it glosses over the longstanding opposition because psychoanalytic and historicist approaches (see
We should also include in this list the critical genealogies (of e.g. liberty, the state, democracy and human rights) offered by intellectual historians who are explicitly committed to the amelioration of contemporary politics by way of historicist inquiry: Quentin Skinner, J.G.A. Pocock, John Dunn and the other Cambridge School historians, as well as ‘Berkeley School’ historians like Samuel Moyn.

Whereas a genealogy of belief intuitively calls into question the epistemic justification of that belief, a genealogy of a concept intuitively calls into question the concept’s ability to limit the contours of reality, or what we might call it aptness. Genealogies of racial thinking reveal, for example, that our racial categories, and the concept race itself, were introduced relatively late in human history, in order to legitimate forms of segregation and exploitation. This might well prompt us to ask: do concepts like race or black person pick out anything in the world – or are they in fact empty concepts, like witch or unicorn? For it might seem that the grounds on which our racial concepts were formed are, again, atheistically indifferent: we have no independent reason to expect that developing concepts on the basis of what will legitimise oppressive political practices is a reliable way of producing apt concepts. If so, then just as critical genealogies of beliefs can undermine their epistemic justification, critical genealogies of concepts can undermine their aptness.

Barring my brief mention of contemporary evolutionary debunkers of theism, I have not yet discussed the place of critical genealogies in analytic philosophy. Indeed, for much of its relatively short history, analytic philosophy has opposed itself to genealogical inquiry. The logical empiricist Hans Reichenbach warned against confusing the ‘context of discovery’ with the ‘context of justification’: where a theory came from, and whether it was in good epistemic standing, were two distinct questions. (Reichenbach’s distinction itself has a fascinating context of discovery. It appears that Reichenbach, who wrote Experience and Prediction in Istanbul after being dismissed from his Berlin post in 1933, was motivated by a desire to counter the Nazis’ condemnation of ‘Jewish’ theories, including his own.) This distinction, which has served as a presupposition of much of the philosophy of science, has also served as a pre-emptory defence against the...

e.g. Copjec, 2015, Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists), as well as the opposition between poststructuralist critiques of discursive power (Baudrillard, Bourdieu, Foucault) and Frankfurt School critical theory.

33 For an argument for eliminativism about our racial concepts, see Appiah (1994), ‘Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections’.

34 Reichenbach (1938), Experience and Prediction.

35 See Giere, ‘From Wissenschaftliche Philosophie to Philosophy of Science’ pp 34ff. and Fuller (2003), ‘The critique of intellectuals in a time of pragmatist captivity’.

36 Though not an uncontested one. See e.g. Kuhn’s (1962) The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, ch 1.
idea that philosophy – as the inquiry into timeless truths – should care about the context from which its own representations emerge. Karl Popper went further, joining the conservative political theorist Leo Strauss in arguing that historicist inquiry was not only irrelevant to the pursuit of truth, but also morally pernicious.37

In its opposition to critical genealogical thinking, analytic philosophy has bucked a trend in the rest of the humanities. The influence of Nietzsche, Freud and Marx has loomed large over post-war research in literature, modern languages, political theory, sociology, anthropology, gender and sexuality studies, cultural studies, and so on. In turn, analytic philosophy’s dismissal of genealogical anxiety goes some way toward explaining its isolation within the humanities. From the perspective of many outside the discipline, philosophers’ seeming failure to recognise their objects of inquiry – and indeed philosophy itself – as contingent products of culture and history makes the discipline seem preciously antiquated at best, and virulently dogmatic at worst.

The tide, however, is turning. Contemporary analytic philosophers are increasingly in thrall to critical genealogical reasoning. This is no doubt in part due to the newfound availability of genealogical accounts from the cognitive and evolutionary sciences, rather than what philosophers tend to think of as the more speculative genealogies of psychoanalysis or Marxism. Many ethicists have claimed in recent years, for example, that the naturalistic/evolutionary origins of our moral judgments demand that we abandon those judgments, or (on pain of nihilism) adopt an anti-realist construal of their contents, including Gilbert Harman, Peter Singer, Alan Gibbard, Philip Kitcher, Richard Joyce, Sharon Street, Josh Greene, Michael Huemer and Alex Rosenberg.38 With the same logic but in a very different spirit, Thomas Nagel has argued from the putative incompatibility of the evolutionary origins of moral judgment with moral realism to the conclusion that the evolutionary explanation of our moral judgments is false.39 James Ladyman and Don Ross have argued that the contingent evolutionary origins of our metaphysical

37 Popper (1957), The Poverty of Historicism; Strauss (1959), What is Political Philosophy and (1953), Natural Right and History.
39 Nagel (2012), Mind and Cosmos.
judgments should make us suspicious of their capacity to get onto the mind-independent truths about what exists – an argument presaged by Nelson Goodman and Hilary Putnam, who both argue from the cultural contingency of our ontological schema to different forms of anti-realism about ontology.40 And finally, the recently emergent sub-discipline of ‘experimental philosophy’ is largely devoted to arguing that people’s intuitive judgments about epistemology, ethics, philosophy of language and metaphysics systematically vary with culture, gender, socioeconomic status and extent of philosophical training – and thus that these armchair judgments should be cleansed from philosophical practice.41 In other words, experimental philosophers seek to offer a critical genealogy of philosophy itself. For better or for worse, analytic philosophy is no longer innocent of genealogical anxiety.

2. Genealogical Scepticism and Genealogical Luck

Two central themes emerged from our examination, in the previous section, of the history of genealogical anxiety. The first is the thought that critical genealogies can be epistemically powerful, showing us that our beliefs in a particular domain are unjustified and thus fall short of knowledge, or that our concepts likely fail to map the world as it really is. (For the sake of simplicity, I will focus here on the epistemic threat to beliefs posed by critical genealogies, though much of what I say can be applied, mutatis mutandis, to the case of concepts.) The second is the thought that critical genealogies can be practically powerful, revealing the oppressive nature of our representations. In this section I will very briefly address the epistemological significance of critical genealogy. In the next I turn to a more extended discussion of genealogy’s practical significance.

When I ask whether a critical genealogy of some belief can be epistemically powerful against it, I mean to ask whether the genealogy can rationally undermine the epistemic standing of that belief. For it is uncontroversial that, as a psychological matter, a genealogy can undermine our doxastic confidence. I want to know not whether a critical genealogy will cause me to abandon my belief, but whether it should. Further, when I ask whether a critical genealogy of some belief can be epistemically powerful against it, I want to know whether it can rationally require me to abandon the very belief it explains. For it is also uncontroversial that a

41 For an overview, see Knobe and Nichols (2008), Experimental Philosophy and (2014), Experimental Philosophy, Vol. 2.
genealogy can undermine the truth of our beliefs about our representations. Insofar as we falsely believe that we acquired some belief or from some particular origin (from God, say, or the clear light of reason), a genealogical excavation can straightforwardly show us that we are in error. Consider, for example, Raymond Geuss’ account of Nietzsche’s project in the *Genealogy of Morals*.\(^{42}\) Geuss says that the point of Nietzsche’s genealogy is to reveal that common beliefs about the origins of Christian values are false: that Christian values emerge not from a good and sacred place (e.g. Christ’s life and teachings) but instead from the ‘violent and bloody’ interplay of dark psychological forces.\(^{43}\) This genealogical revelation, Geuss claims, will have the predictable psychological effect of undermining the Christian’s belief in his own values, in turn destabilizing Christian forms of life.

Whatever its merits as a reading of Nietzsche — I will go on to offer an alternative take — Geuss’ account is not, I think, particularly satisfying as a general account of the epistemic power of genealogy. First, unlike Geuss’ Christians, we very often do not have beliefs about the origins of our representations. Rather, we simply find ourselves with various beliefs, values and concepts, whose origins we have never thought to investigate. Second, on Geuss’ account, the epistemic force of genealogy operates by way of a psychological trick. For, as Nietzsche himself noted,\(^ {44}\) there is no forced rational march from the discovery that one is mistaken about the origin of one’s representations to the jettisoning of those representations. (That one’s meta-beliefs are false generally does not entail that one’s first-order beliefs are also false; to think otherwise is to commit a version of the genetic fallacy.) As Geuss himself says, insofar as the falsity of my meta-representations disrupts my attachment to my first-order representations, this is ‘as it were my problem’,\(^ {45}\) not a problem with which the genealogy has saddled me.\(^ {46}\) This makes the epistemic force of genealogy, on Geuss’ account, contingent on my own psychic weakness. By contrast, I am in search of an account that will vindicate the epistemic force of critical genealogies without presuming any irrationality on our parts.

Can a genealogy of a belief ever undermine its justification? And if so, which sorts of genealogies, and of which beliefs? That we can give a genealogy of

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\(^{44}\) See Nietzsche, *Gay Science* §345 and *Will to Power* 69n; cf Reginster, ‘Nietzsche on Ressentiment and Valuation’ (1997), 302. Moreover, that a belief is false is no decisive objection for Nietzsche: see *Genealogy of Morals* §3.24; *Beyond Good and Evil* §4; *Ecce Homo* §IV.7.

\(^{45}\) Geuss, ‘Nietzsche and Genealogy’, 287.

\(^{46}\) Cf. Williams ibid, for a similarly psychological understanding of the distinction between vindicatory and shameful genealogies.
a belief presumably does not itself suffice to cast the justification of that belief into
doubt. For we can, in principle if not in practice, offer a genealogy of every belief
ever held. Everything I believe, and everything you believe, we believe because of
various contingent background features about ourselves: because of what we have
been taught to believe, the arguments and evidence to which we have been exposed,
the languages we have been taught to speak, the concepts we have been trained to
use, the claims that (because of our historical, cultural or evolutionary formations)
strike us as intuitive, the workings of our evolutionarily-inherited perceptual
systems, and so on. If the mere in principle availability of a doxastic genealogy were
sufficient to deprive a belief of justification, then none of our beliefs would turn out
to be justified. We would arrive immediately at a place of global scepticism, in
which no belief is justified, and thus no knowledge is possible.

Perhaps that is where we do indeed find ourselves. I have nothing much to
say against such a view, except that it strikes me as false. I know, for example, that
I am not alone in the world, that I share the world with other persons and creatures,
who really are valuable, and who call on me to treat them with love and respect. I
know that there are beautiful things, and sublime things too, and that they are part
of what make life worth living. All of these beliefs of mine can be given causal
explanations – they can, we might say, be genealogised – but an epistemology that
says that any genealogisable belief is unjustified proves, in my view, too much. In
any case, the genealogical sceptics we encountered in the previous section – from
Xenophanes and his attack on anthropomorphic theology, to contemporary
evolutionary debunkers of morality – are not global sceptics, though they are
sceptics of a kind. While genealogical sceptics think that the genealogy of some
beliefs reveal those beliefs as unjustified – our theological beliefs, say, or our moral
beliefs – they do not tend to think all our beliefs unjustified. This is unsurprising.
For genealogical sceptics are, on the whole, naturalists. They are interested in the
causal explanations of our beliefs, and moreover think that we can come to know
the right (or at least plausible) causal explanations of our beliefs through empirical
(scientific, historical, psychological, etc.) investigation.

To vindicate the claims of genealogical sceptics, we need to give an account
of just why it is, that certain genealogies, e.g. of our moral, theological or
metaphysical beliefs, show their objects to be unjustified.47 Specifically, we are in

47 As I mentioned above, some critical genealogists are interested in deploying sceptical
arguments to advance anti-realism about the relevant domain. They argue that, on the
assumption of realism about a domain D, the genealogy of our D-beliefs render those beliefs
unjustified; but since our D-beliefs are in fact justified, it follows that realism about D is
false. In what follows I assume realism about the domains under discussion: I assume that
search of an epistemic principle that is capable of taking us from an empirical premise about the origins of a belief (or set of beliefs), to a negative normative conclusion about the justificatory status of that belief (or set of beliefs). But such a principle, must not overgeneralise to global scepticism. Can such a principle be found? One reason for optimism is that it is overwhelmingly intuitive to think there are at least some cases in which the genealogy of a belief undermines its justification. Suppose that you take a drug that causes you to hallucinate a goat in the quad. On this basis you come to believe that there is a goat in the quad. In fact, there is a goat in the quad, brought in to graze by some eccentric academic with a love of barnyard animals. Nonetheless, you clearly don’t know that there is a goat in the quad. Your belief, while true, has the wrong sort of causal formation, since it was based not on your seeing the goat, but instead your hallucination. Thus the answer to our first question – whether a genealogy of a belief can ever undermine the belief’s justification – is a clear yes. Some genealogies of belief show their objects to be unjustified. Hallucinogenic drugs, brainwashing, visual illusions, unreliable testimony, wishful thinking, shots in the dark, pseudo-clairvoyants: if these are the grounds of your beliefs, then your beliefs (even if true) fall short of knowledge.

The real question raised by genealogical scepticism is thus not whether a genealogy of a belief can undermine its justification (it can), but which sorts of genealogies, and of which beliefs? Specifically, can the sorts of (historical, cultural, evolutionary, etc.) genealogies offered by genealogical sceptics undermine the justification of the sorts of beliefs (moral, theological, metaphysical) they wish to target? Another way of putting this is to ask whether a belief’s being caused by certain historical, cultural or evolutionary forces is ever epistemically akin to a belief’s being caused by hallucinogenic drugs, brainwashing, visual illusions, unreliable testimony, wishful thinking, shots in the dark, or pseudo-clairvoyants? What is the general features of these aberrant belief-forming methods that makes them incapable of producing knowledge – and is this general feature also to be found in the cases of moral, theological, mathematical or metaphysical belief?

Here is what I take to the most promising case for vindicating the genealogical sceptic’s claim that our moral, theological and/or metaphysical beliefs it is possible for even subjectively ideal agents to be wildly mistaken about the moral, theological or metaphysical truths.

are undermined by their genealogies. These beliefs – like beliefs that have their origins in hallucinogenic drugs, brainwashing, visual illusions, and so on – are based on an unreliable mechanism. For (as I said above) our moral, theological and metaphysical beliefs are caused by forces – of culture, history or evolution – that are alethically indifferent. And such belief-forming mechanisms, even if they happen to get me onto the truth, could easily not have done. Even if, say, my particular cultural formation endows me with true moral beliefs, there are nearby possible worlds in which I had a different cultural upbringing, and thus different (and false) moral beliefs. Thus having true moral beliefs based on the contingencies of culture is like having a true belief that Trump won’t be re-elected on the basis of wishful thinking. In epistemological terms, the basis of my moral beliefs fails to be safe, where a belief-forming mechanism is safe just in case it doesn’t lead to false beliefs in nearby possible worlds.

The safety principle is, I think, the genealogical sceptic’s best hope. It is generally agreed that safety is a necessary condition on knowledge, and there is a plausible case to be made that the genealogy of our moral, metaphysical and theological beliefs show them to be unsafe. What can we say in response? Rejecting the safety principle outright is not a promising option. Thus the only option is to argue that the genealogy of these beliefs does not in fact show them to be unsafe. There are two general ways to so argue. First, I can argue that the possible worlds in which my belief-forming method leads me into error are too modally distant to undermine their reliability. I might argue, for example, that the possible world in which a different cultural upbringing led me to have moral beliefs different from the ones I actually had — the world in which I was raised in a conservative town in the southern United States, or in the 17th century rather than the 20th – is simply too distant to render my actual moral beliefs unjustified. Compare the possible world in which I am an envatted rather than embodied brain. The fact that my visual perception would generate false beliefs in such a world is, on pain of scepticism, insufficient to render my actual perceptual beliefs unjustified. Such a world, we might explain say, is simply too distant from the actual world to render my visual perception unreliable. Reliability does not require perfect reliability: that a thermometer won’t be able to tell us the temperature a few feet from the sun hardly renders it unreliable. Second, I can argue that the genealogical sceptic has mischaracterised the method on which my beliefs are based — that the method I use to form my beliefs is not the same as used by my possible world counterparts with contrary beliefs. This is, recall, the response favoured by defenders of religious

\[^9\text{For a detailed argument for this conclusion – and the worries I raise for it below – see Srinivasan (2015) 'The Archimedean Urge'.}\]
exclusivism. Thus Alvin Plantinga argues that Christian beliefs are justified, despite their cultural contingency, because the Christian’s beliefs are formed on the basis of a special method, namely the method of believing in accordance with the deliverances of the Holy Spirit. Meanwhile, those who grow up in non-Christian households have the bad genealogical luck of being endowed (through no fault of their own) with believing-forming methods that do not reliably put them onto the theological truth. The fact that people from non-Christian backgrounds do not tend to believe in the Christian truths, Plantinga would say, is no more threat to the Christian’s justification, than is the fact that a colourblind person cannot distinguish between red and green to the colour-beliefs a threat to those who are lucky enough to have full powers of colour-discrimination.

These two anti-sceptical responses rely, crucially, on judgments that are inseparable from the very issue at hand. First, what counts as a ‘nearby possible world’ for the purposes of assessing the reliability of our belief-forming methods? Second, how should we individuate belief-forming methods for the purposes of assessing their safety? The problem for the present dialectic is that there are no principled, independent answers to be given to these questions. Any judgment about what does and does not count as a nearby possible world, or what do and do not count as the same method, will have to be informed, in a circular fashion, by whether we judge the relevant case to be a case of knowledge or not.

Where does this leave us? That there is no independent, principled way to settle the question of what counts as a sufficiently ‘nearby’ possible world, or the ‘same’ method, for the purposes of safety, is not itself a devastating blow against the safety principle. One can think of this as a kind of benign circularity, in which our judgments about epistemic justification and our judgments about modal proximity and methods mutually inform each other. But this benign circularity transforms into a serious problem whenever we look to the safety principle in the hope that it will tell us conclusively whether a given belief is or is not justified, given its genealogy. This means that the genealogical sceptic who appeals to safety will risk begging the question against his opponent. For he will have to make assumptions about which possible worlds are nearby, or which methods are in use, which will in turn be informed by his judgment that the beliefs in question are not justified. But this is to presuppose precisely what must be proven. We arrive thus at a dialectical impasse.

But things are more complex still. For genealogical scepticism is faced with a threat of self-defeat. If the genealogical sceptic is right that our genealogically-contingent beliefs in moral, theological or metaphysical propositions are unjustified, it would seem to follow that our genealogically-contingent beliefs in
epistemological propositions are unjustified. For our epistemological beliefs appear to depend on the contingencies of culture, history and evolution in just the same way as our moral, theological or metaphysical beliefs. If the evolutionary contingency of our moral beliefs entails that our moral beliefs are unjustified, does not the evolutionary contingency of our epistemological beliefs entail that our very belief in the safety principle is unjustified? If so, the evolutionary debunking argument of our moral beliefs entails that we ought not believe one of its own premises.\textsuperscript{50,51} Of course, that the genealogical sceptic’s argument is self-defeating is not to say that its conclusion is false. But it is to say that the genealogical sceptic can offer his opponent no reason to accept his conclusion. For if his argument is in fact sound, it appears to follow that we are not justified in believing that it is.

Where does this leave us? Some epistemologists have suggested that if we can show that there is no dialectically compelling argument for genealogical scepticism, our work will be done.\textsuperscript{52} For then we will have shown that such scepticism, to use Schopenhauer’s image, is ‘an impregnable fortress but from which the garrison can never sally forth’, which we can ‘pass by it and leave…in our rear without danger’. But this, I think, is a mistake. Just because the sceptic cannot rationally compel us to abandon our beliefs does not mean that he exercises no epistemic power over us. Insofar as we are untroubled by genealogical anxiety, we are free to dismiss the genealogical sceptic, and carry on with our doxastic lives as usual. But for those in the grip of genealogical anxiety, this is not a real option. For such people, the sceptic is not inside an impregnable fortress, but lurking in our own hearts, feeding our darkest suspicions that the beliefs we hold most dear are the mere quirks circumstance. Perhaps the genealogical sceptic can provide me no compelling reason to think I am unjustified. But what reason do I have for thinking that I am in fact justified? Insofar as my beliefs are justified, the genealogical sceptic reminds me, it must be because they are formed on the basis of a reliable mechanism. It must be, in other words, that there is something special about the belief-forming method with which the contingencies of evolution, history, culture and upbringing

\textsuperscript{50} Sharon Street (2006, n. 57) addresses the worry that her evolutionary debunking argument against moral realism is self-defeating by saying that she simply assumes agreement about what our epistemic reasons are. As I argue in Srinivasan 2015, this assumption is false. At best Street’s argument works as an \textit{ad hominem} attack on those who are inclined to so agree.

\textsuperscript{51} This is not to suggest that the safety principle is self-defeating. One could \textit{accept} safety and yet deny that it implies that our moral, theological, etc., beliefs are unjustified; one would then be under no pressure to think that one’s belief in the safety principle is, by one’s own lights, also unjustified.

\textsuperscript{52} This seems to be where, e.g. White 2010 leaves us, and indeed I argued for a similar conclusion in Srinivasan (2009).
have endowed me: a specialness that does not characterise those who do not share my evolutionary, historical, cultural or familial formation. Put another way, if I am committed to the claim that my genealogically-contingent beliefs are justified, I am ipso facto committed to the claim that I am the beneficiary of what we might call good genealogical luck. Thus the genealogical sceptic exercises what we might think of as a kind of metaepistemic power: a power to reveal just what we must believe about ourselves if we want to consistently believe that our genealogically-contingent beliefs are in fact justified.\textsuperscript{53} In order to maintain that belief – in order not to merely dismiss the genealogical sceptic but to positively contradict him – one has to believe oneself to be genealogically lucky.

Of course, there is no in principle prohibition on thinking oneself genealogically lucky. For example, because I had the good fortune of being born well after Darwin, and being taught his theory of evolution by natural selection, I know that the appearance of intelligent design in nature is just that: mere appearance. William Paley, who died four years before Darwin would be born, was not so genealogically lucky, which is why he (falsely but quite understandably) believed in intelligent design. There feels nothing odd or illicit in saying that I and others like me are genealogically lucky vis-à-vis the truth about intelligence design, whereas Paley and others like him are genealogically unlucky. And yet, it can feel – to some of us, at least some of the time – problematic to think of oneself as genealogically lucky in the cases of moral, theological and metaphysical beliefs. First, it can seem as if one has no suitably independent reason for thinking oneself genealogically lucky in such cases. Take for example Plantinga’s defence of Christian exclusivism. It is obviously circular: only if Christian theology is in fact true could it be that the Holy Spirit reliably guides Christians towards the truth. Plantinga has no reason, independent of the Christian beliefs that are at issue, to think that he and other Christians are genealogically lucky.

By contrast, it appears that I do have independent reason for thinking myself genealogically lucky vis-à-vis the truth about intelligent design. For I have good reason to believe that Paley would have rejected intelligent design had he been exposed to all the relevant evidence, most importantly the elegance and power of Darwin’s theory. After all, the vast majority of thoughtful people who have carefully considered all the relevant evidence agree with me, and not with Paley. Plantinga appears to have no similar reason for thinking that those who disagree with him – those, for example, who believe in the tenets of Muslim or Jewish

\textsuperscript{53} This is a metaepistemic power because being in a position to justifiably believe that one’s first-order belief is justified is not a plausible condition on one’s first-order belief being justified. To think otherwise leads to an endless regress of justificatory demands.
theology – would come to agree with him if only presented with more evidence. While religious conversion is certainly possible, it rarely if ever suffices to simply explain the tenets of Christian theology to the would-be convert. This matters because, in the case of religious (or moral or metaphysical) beliefs, there appears to be a deep epistemic symmetry between me and my counterpart with a different genealogy – a symmetry that does not obtain in cases of other genealogically-contingent beliefs, like my belief in evolution. In cases of such symmetry – in which me and my counterpart are equally apprised of the relevant evidence, and equally sincere and diligent in our pursuit of the truth – it seems that I can have no non-circular reason for thinking that I am the lucky one, and she unlucky.54

None of this is to say that one cannot justifiably believe that one is genealogically lucky vis-à-vis one’s moral, metaphysical or theological beliefs. For it might well be that it is no requirement on having a justified belief that one have an independent reason to believe that one is genealogically lucky vis-à-vis that belief. I not only know that I have hands, but also that I am (luckily) not a brain-in-a-vat. But my reason for believing I am not a brain-in-a-vat is the very proposition – that I have hands – that I would not know if I really were a brain-in-a-vat. So my reason for thinking that I am lucky vis-à-vis my beliefs about the external world is not independent of those first-order beliefs. By analogy, perhaps I can not only know the various moral, metaphysical and theological truths, but also know that it is my genealogical luck that allows me to know them.

Even so, this is only a comfort to those who have not, in a moment of genealogical anxiety, lost confidence in their moral, metaphysical or theological beliefs. For the moment one stops believing the various moral, theological, or metaphysical propositions that are under genealogical attack, one will no longer be able to use them as premises in an argument to the effect that one is genealogically lucky. Knowing the reliability of one’s genealogically contingent belief-forming methods requires that one has not already abandoned those very methods under

54 One can of course insist that such symmetries between oneself and one’s genealogical counterpart are illusory. For example, Plantinga could insist that the Hindu or Muslim is in fact evidentially impoverished, precisely because she has not yet opened up her heart to the deliverances of the Holy Spirit. Many of us would presumably respond by drawing a distinction between widening someone’s evidence, on one hand, and converting someone, on the other. But it is hard to explain the difference in a neutral way. We cannot deny that opening one’s heart to the Holy Spirit might furnish one with more evidence, without begging the question against the Christian. And, as Kuhn taught us, arational conversion has its own role in seemingly rational theory-change. So the question of whether one has an independent reason to think oneself genealogically lucky cannot itself be settled in a dialectically neutral way. I leave aside this complication in what follows.
sceptical pressure. One must, as it were, hold one's epistemic nerve. For those of a dogmatic spirit, like Plantinga, this position is a perfectly comfortable one. But for others – the genealogically anxious – it is a position of epistemic angst.

It can also be a position of ethical and political angst. There is a crucial difference between the spectre of your brain-in-a-vat counterpart and the spectre of your counterpart with a different genealogy. There are no envatted brains that we know of; they remain figures of philosophers' imagination. But you and I have actual counterparts with different genealogies. For there are real people, equally intelligent, equally motivated by a concern for the truth, equally sincere, who – because of their different historical and cultural formations – disagree with us.\textsuperscript{55} Being far closer to us in possibility space makes it harder to dismiss them as genealogically unlucky, epistemically speaking. But it also makes it ethically harder for us to dismiss them. For there is a certain moral unsavouriness in thinking of oneself as genealogically lucky as compared with actually existing people, as compared with merely hypothetical people. To think of oneself – or, more generally, one's particular community, class, culture, or historical moment – as genealogically lucky, and others as genealogically unlucky, seems to open oneself up to just accusations of chauvinism, narcissism and immodesty.

Indeed, it is a certain ethical queasiness, I think, that motivates many instances of genealogical anxiety. Here, for example, is the philosopher of religion Joseph Runzo, criticising the doctrine of Christian exclusivism:

\begin{quote}
Ethically, Religious Exclusivism has the morally repugnant result of making those who have privileged knowledge, or who are intellectually astute, a religious elite, while penalizing those who happen to have no access to the putatively correct religious view …\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

A similar sentiment is often voiced by experimental philosophers against mainstream analytic philosophers. Commenting, for example, on putative cross-cultural variation in intuitions about how linguistic reference works, Edouard Machery, Ron Mallon, Shaun Nichols and Stephen Stich write that the idea that 'Westerners' have more reliable intuitions than 'East Asians' 'smacks of narcissism in the extreme'.\textsuperscript{57} The criticisms here are not epistemic – not about a lack of

\textsuperscript{55} This applies to cultural and historical genealogies, but not evolutionary genealogies. It is a vexed question in evolutionary theory just how modally nearby other evolutionary possibilities are.
\textsuperscript{56} Runzo (1988), 'God, Commitment, and Other Faiths: Pluralism vs. Relativism'
\textsuperscript{57} Machery \textit{et al} (2004), 'Semantics: Cross-Cultural Style'
justification or knowledge – but about the moral failings of those who would position themselves as genealogically lucky.

What is the source of the moral discomfort in such cases? I do not think it is much of a mystery. Belief in the genealogical luckiness of one’s culture, nation, community or sect has often played, and continues to play, a central role in legitimating the domination of the (putatively) unlucky. Of course, whatever ethical or political discomfort we feel in thinking ourselves genealogically lucky also sits side-by-side with our attachment to the very ethical and political commitments that come under threat from the genealogical sceptic. We are faced with cases in which those with different genealogies to us believe propositions that strike us as morally and politically abhorrent: they condone torture, believe homosexuality immoral, consider women inferior to men, and so on. On one hand, we want to stand firm with our first-order moral convictions in the face of this disagreement. How can we not? On the other, we are – or should be – all too aware of the dangers of ideological intolerance.

Many contemporary defenders of ‘Western values’ think that this is a fictive problem, one bred by an insufficiently muscular liberalism or a postmodern relativism. They counsel us to confidently believe in our own genealogical luckiness vis-à-vis the values of democratic liberalism. But this response does not take seriously the idea that beliefs are not only true or false, epistemically justified or unjustified, but also prone to making things happen in the world. Action does not follow from belief with logical necessity, but the connection between belief and action is hardly arbitrary, either. Perhaps we are right, epistemically speaking, to respond to the genealogical sceptic by insisting on our own genealogical luckiness. But this does not begin to touch the worry that such a belief, whatever its epistemic merits, might serve as a cover for the violation of those very values which we claim we want to save.

3. Genealogy, Politics and Worldmaking

My theme in this final section is the practical significance of critical genealogies. As I suggested above, many thinkers have seen the excavation of the origins of our representational practices as a means not (only) towards the epistemic debunking of those representations, but instead (or also) towards social or political transformation. This is particularly true of the twentieth century critical and cultural theorists who, following Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Marx and Freud, aim not only to explain the emergence of dominant representational forms, but moreover to liberate us from the oppressive conditions with which they are intertwined. Why
this affinity between genealogy and radical politics? In what way can critical
genealogy serve the ends of political transformation?

One possible answer sees the practical force of critical genealogies as
necessarily parasitic on its (putative) epistemic force. On such a view, a critical
genealogy of a representation is practically powerful (insofar as it is powerful)
because it prompts us to abandon that representation on epistemic grounds –
because, that is, we come to see it as false, irrational or unjustified. In turn, the
abandonment of this representation destabilises and transforms the practices that
were sustained by it. This appears to be the view, for example, of Feuerbach and
the other Young Hegelians from whom Marx would eventually distance himself –
in part because of their differences on just this issue.58 It is also a view shared by
the Frankfurt School theorists: on their view, a critical theory is able to emancipate
individuals from the ‘world-picture’ that legitimates their ‘unfree existence’ (as
Habermas puts it) by showing that the world-picture is ‘ideologically false’,
meaning that its genealogy (in coercive conditions) renders it epistemically
unacceptable.59 It is this epistemic recognition, via genealogical revelation, that is
crucial to critical theory’s ability to practically emancipate.

Some readers of Nietzsche also interpret the Genealogy this way. Peter Kail,
for example, argues that Nietzsche seeks to demonstrate, by way of his genealogy,
that Christian beliefs – in the goodness of altruism, or the existence of an afterlife
– are held not because they are supported by the evidence, but rather ‘because they
serve the psychological well-being of the believer’.60 Thus, Kail concludes, they are
(on Nietzsche’s view) epistemically unjustified. However, one does not find any
explicit claim in Nietzsche’s writings to the effect that our moral beliefs are
epistemically flawed. Nietzsche’s repeated concern, rather, is with the value
of Christian morality, by which Nietzsche appears to mean its conduciveness or not
to the flourishing of the highest reaches of human excellence. Moreover,
Nietzsche’s concern for epistemic goods like truth and justification is decidedly
ambivalent.61 Indeed, an obsession with epistemic error is what characterizes,

58 This is not to say that Marx was indifferent to epistemic questions: in The German Ideology
(1867) he says that ‘in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a
camera obscura’. Rather, Marx does not think that mere epistemic realisations will suffice for
political transformation.

genealogy makes an ideology epistemically unacceptable is a matter of disagreement within the
Frankfurt School, with Adorno endorsing a kind of contextual historicism about epistemic
normativity, and Habermas famously endorsing a universalist transcendental epistemology,
as signalled by his notion of the ‘ideal speech situation’.

60 See Kail, ‘“Genealogy” and the Genealogy’, (2011), 229.

61 See n. 44.
Nietzsche says, the ‘English psychologists’ from whom he distances his own project at the start of the Genealogy.\textsuperscript{62} Finally, the focus on epistemic error as the upshot of genealogy makes much of what is striking about Nietzsche’s particular story about the emergence of morality – the way in which our modern notions of good and evil arose out of a series of violent conflicts over the ownership and command of our normative concepts – drop out as philosophically inessential, mere narrative embellishment. I find it implausible that Nietzsche’s project in the Genealogy is a fundamentally epistemic one, or one that hinges for its transformative potential on an epistemic conclusion.

The same is surely true of Foucault, who – as Nancy Fraser persuasively argues\textsuperscript{63} – is uninterested in questions of the truth, justification or rationality of the representations he historicises. (Indeed, it is this disinterest in epistemic questions that leads Foucault to deny that his genealogical method is a form of ‘ideology critique’, thereby distancing himself from the Frankfurt School theorists.) And yet, it is clear that Foucault is invested in not only the description of the conditions of emergence and domination of our representations – the ‘implicit systems that determine…our most familiar forms of conduct’\textsuperscript{64} – but also in their destabilisation and transformation, ‘in what way it would be possible to escape’ these systems.\textsuperscript{65}

Indeed, examples abound of theorists who offer critical genealogies in a clear spirit of practical transformation, while at the same time denying or evincing little interest in the (putative) epistemic power of their genealogies.\textsuperscript{66} This is not to deny that many critical genealogists are interested in revealing the epistemic defect in our beliefs, as an end in itself or as a means towards practical transformation. The empirical and evolutionary ‘debunkers’ of contemporary analytic philosophy are certainly engaged in such a straightforwardly sceptical project,\textsuperscript{67} as are plausibly various historical thinkers discussed in \S1, including Xenophanes, Hume and Spinoza. But there is also a significant strand of genealogical thinking whose aim is not (primarily) epistemological: whose central aim is not, that is, to show us

\begin{enumerate}[\textsuperscript{62} Genealogy of Morals §1.3. What also marks the English psychologists out, for Nietzsche, is their inability to do proper history, a striking claim given Nietzsche’s own unorthodox approach to history.\textsuperscript{63} Fraser, 1981, ‘Foucault on Modern Power’.\textsuperscript{64} Foucault (2001), \textit{Dits et écrits}, 1051, as translated in Tiisala (2017), ‘Overcoming “the Present Limits of the Necessary”: Foucault’s Conception of a Critique’, (2017).\textsuperscript{65} Foucault, ibid, 1060–1, as translated in in Tiisala ibid.\textsuperscript{66} On my reading, these include Samuel Moyn on human rights, Charles Mills on liberalism, Uday Mehta on imperialism, John Dunn on democracy, Quentin Skinner on liberty and the state, Judith Butler on the sex/gender distinction, and MacKinnon on the concept of rape.\textsuperscript{67} Or the related project of showing us that scepticism follows unless we are willing to accept an anti-realist treatment of the relevant domain of belief.}
that our representational practices fail to put us in touch with the world or are otherwise epistemically flawed. What then is the aim of this form of critical genealogy?

I wish to propose three answers to that question. The answers are not meant as forced alternatives: one can put forward or read a critical genealogy as doing all three things at once. (Nietzsche’s genealogy of morals, I will suggest, is an example of a genealogy amenable to such a reading.) But one can equally ‘get off the boat’, as it were, when one wishes: a given critical genealogy might be best characterised as having some but not all of these practical powers.

### 3.1 Contingency and the ‘sense of possibility’

When historically-minded theorists defend the relevance of history to our contemporary thinking, they most often cite history’s power to reveal the *contingency*, as opposed to necessity or inevitability, of our current representational arrangements. Thus Foucault writes in ‘What Is Enlightenment?’ that the point of his mode of historical inquiry is to reveal ‘what is the part of that which is singular, contingent, and due to arbitrary constraints in that which is given to us as universal, necessary, mandatory’. The representational forms that we think of as being universal and timeless preconditions of experience (à la Kant) are revealed, Foucault says, as having the statue of the merely historically a priori. In his own history of human rights, Samuel Moyn complains of historians who use history to ‘confirm…the inevitable rise’ of human rights, rather than acknowledging the ‘choices that were made and the accidents that happen[ed]’ as part of their recent emergence. In his masterful ‘Political Philosophy as a Critical Activity’, James Tully writes that a ‘history or genealogy has the capacity…to [en]able us to see [our current arrangements] as a limited and contingent whole’. Tyler Krupp writes that ‘genealogy narrates the contingent path of historical unities’. Geuss says that genealogy reveals ‘overwhelming contingency’.

This identification of critical genealogies with the revelation of contingency might appear to sit badly with some of the critical genealogies I have discussed. For some critical genealogies trace the origins of our representations to

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68 Foucault ibid 1393, as translated in Tiisala ibid. See also Krupp, ‘Genealogy as Critique?’ (2008), 319; Tully, 17; Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (2012), 17; Geuss ibid.

69 Moyn, *The Last Utopia*, p. 5.


72 Geuss ibid.
(what their authors claim to be) features of universal human nature, or to the determinations of historical necessity. Thus Feuerbach and Freud both see religious belief as answering to, and thus the product of, a primordial human need, while Marx sees religious consciousness and bourgeois morality as the inevitable superstructural products of historically necessitated forms of material life. Thus Marx writes that ‘the mode of production of material life conditions the…intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness’. For such critical genealogists, the representations they diagnose are not merely contingent, in the sense of purely accidental or random. Holding fixed the facts about human nature, or our current material conditions, it is necessarily the case that we have the representations we do. But crucially for these theorists, neither human nature (Feuerbach, Freud) nor our material conditions (Marx) is fixed. While religious consciousness is, for Feuerbach and Freud, inevitable given the current state of human immaturity, this is something we can yet outgrow; and while religious consciousness and bourgeois morality is, Marx thinks, inevitable given our current material conditions, these conditions can and will be overcome through revolution. This is not to say that one cannot in principle offer a critical genealogy that reveals a representation to be necessary in a very strong sense: that it could not be otherwise, given fundamental and immutable truths about the kinds of creatures we are. But such a critical genealogy would be critical without hope of alteration: it would diagnose our representations without seeking to emancipate us from them. Perhaps unsurprisingly, few if any extant critical genealogies take this form.

Why might contingency matter? What do we learn about a representation when we learn that it is not necessary or inevitable, but the result of certain choices, accidents, or other contingent features of our particular historical or cultural moment? Here I think Quentin Skinner is most helpful. ‘It is easy,’ he writes in Liberty Before Liberalism, ‘to become bewitched into believing that the way of thinking about […] normative concepts bequeathed to us by the mainstream of our intellectual traditions must be the ways of thinking about them. The history of philosophy…is there to prevent us from being too readily bewitched.’ The historian of ideas, Skinner goes on:

73 Marx (1859), A Critique of Political Economy.
74 Indeed, this is a feature of a certain kind of vindicatory genealogy, such as those of Craig and Williams. What these genealogies purport to reveal, respectively, is that any stable, recognisably human society will inevitably share our concept of knowledge and our concern for truthfulness.
...can help us to appreciate how far the values embodied in our present way of life, and our present ways of thinking about those values, reflect a series of choices made at different times between different possible worlds. This awareness can help to liberate us from the grip of any one hegemonic account of those values and how they should be interpreted and understood. Equipped with a broader sense of possibility, we can stand back from the intellectual commitments that we have inherited and ask ourselves in a new spirit of enquiry what we should think of them.²⁵

Skinner is suggesting here that history can provide us with what we might call a better modal sense: ‘a broader sense of possibility’, constituted by an awareness that there are other possible worlds in which our counterparts represent the world differently from the way we do. Crucially, this is more than a merely historical lesson. A genealogy endows us with more than the knowledge that there were once people who thought differently than us. (Indeed, certain genealogies, such as evolutionary genealogies, do not endow us with such historical knowledge at all.) A genealogy (also) endows us with the knowledge that there are other, perhaps many other, uninstantiated possible ways of thinking. Put more simply, when genealogies reveal to us the contingency of our representations, they reveal to us that we could, perhaps even easily, represent the world otherwise. Critical genealogies, then, open up the possibility space for our representational choices.

Such an enhanced modal sense is not itself sufficient for practical action. But by pointing to the contingency of what we took to be necessary—or whose contingency we were dimly aware of but never seriously considered—a genealogy can prompt us to ask questions that lead in the direction of action. If our representational arrangements could be otherwise, why this way of thinking rather than that? How do our current arrangements compare with counterfactual arrangements? Might there be better ways of thinking?

Quick on the heels of these questions comes another: in what sense ‘better’? We standardly compare ways of thinking in terms of their epistemic qualities: to the extent that they are true, valid, rational, justified, apt, and so on. Certainly, discovering that our beliefs or concepts are contingent can prompt such calls for epistemic comparisons. Are our beliefs more plausible, or more grounded in evidence, than the alternatives? Are our concepts better at cutting nature ‘at its joints’ than the alternatives? But we can also make non-epistemic comparisons

between our actual and possible representations. Instead of asking whether our representations are superior to the alternatives at getting onto the world – viz., whether they are superior qua representations – we can ask whether our representations are superior to the alternatives at making the world: whether they are superior qua social arrangements. To answer this question, we will want to know what it is our representations do. This, I will now suggest, is also a question that can be answered by genealogy.

3.2 Ideological function

The idea that a genealogy of a representation could tell us what that representation does – what effects it has in the word – is, on reflection, puzzling. A genealogy is an account of the causes of a representation. How then could it tell us anything about the effects of that representation? The puzzle is dissolved via the notion of a function. To say that a representation R has a function F – e.g. that theism has the function of social deterrence, or that bourgeois morality has the function of sustaining capitalist relations of production – is to say that (1) that R has a tendency to cause, sustain or otherwise produce F, and (2) that the fact that R has the tendency to produce F is the reason for its current existence. A functional explanation of a representation, in other words, explains the emergence and dominance of that representation in terms of the worldly effects it tends to bring about. Since genealogies are accounts of the emergence of representations, many genealogies are also functional explanations. Indeed, this is true of most of the genealogies we encountered in §1 are also arguably functional accounts, including the Sisyphus genealogy, the genealogies of Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, and Foucaultian and feminist genealogies of our sex and gender concepts.

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76 Not all genealogies are functional explanations – recall the earlier examples from Herodotus and Xenophanes – and not all functional explanations are genealogies. For one can offer a functional explanation (e.g. the heart is for pumping blood) without embedding that functional claim in a genealogical account (the heart evolved because it was selected for its capacity to pump blood). This raises an interesting question: if we can learn about the function of a representation not via genealogy, but simply by observing what it does now, what is the point of genealogy? Or, to put it differently, why take a historical approach to our representations, instead of an anthropological or sociological approach? I think there is much to say here but I will leave this question aside in the interest of space.

Some functional genealogies – like Williams’ genealogy of the value of truthfulness, or the Sisyphus fragment’s genealogy of theism – offer explanations of our contemporary representations in terms of the socially valuable functions they play, like social trust and harmony. In this they are (practically) vindicatory. By contrast, (practically) critical genealogies attempt to reveal the oppressive functions of one or other of our dominant representations, for one or other group. (As I will discuss below, even Nietzsche’s genealogy of morals can be read in this way.) Such genealogies, we can say, purport to reveal the ideological function of our representations: they explain the emergence and continued dominance of our beliefs, values and concepts in terms of the role they play in producing, propping up, legitimating and obscuring oppressive social arrangements. The practical upshot of such a revelation of ideological function is clear: insofar as we can – more on this shortly – we ought to jettison these representational practices.

The idea that a genealogy can reveal the ideological function of a representation might seem to ignore Nietzsche’s warning, echoed by Foucault, not to mistake the historical function of something for its contemporary function. But when I say that a genealogy of a representation can reveal its ideological function, I mean its contemporary ideological function. A genealogy of a representation, like a family genealogy, does not simply pinpoint the ‘first cause’ of its explanandum. (A genealogy that simply identified a single historical ancestor of a living person would not be much of a genealogy.) Rather, a genealogy traces descent: it explains why it is that a contemporary thing – a living person, a dominant representational mode – exists, now. Part of that story will be one of origination: it will identify, to the extent it can, the earliest ancestor of the relevant explanandum. But then it must explain, further, how the current phenomenon emerged from that ancestor. In the case of a contemporary representation, a genealogy will tell us not only when and how the representation was first introduced into our representational lexicon, but how and why it survived and flourished from that originary moment until now. And that story can and often will be a functional one: the contemporary representation survived and flourished because of the particular purpose it serves.

The idea that a representation can function ideologically has an uneasy place in mainstream analytic philosophy. Indeed, analytic philosophers often see the attempt to reveal ideological function as a kind of historicist non sequitur.  

78 Genealogy of Morals, II.12
79 I don’t mean to suggest that it is only philosophers who in this way resist the notion of ideological function. For a defence by a historian of Enlightenment values against Horkheimer and Adorno’s argument that they function ideologically, see Wokler, ‘Ernst Cassirer’s Enlightenment’ (2012).
Thus a common response to the observation that a certain form of representation has historically gone hand-in-hand with – and thus plausibly serves to legitimate and sustain – a certain set of oppressive practices, is that there is no necessary or conceptual connection between the representation and its effects. Take, for example, John Tasioulas’ response to Samuel Moyn’s genealogical critique of human rights discourse as having done ‘far more to transform the terrain of idealism than…the world itself’. Tasioulas objects to Moyn’s holding human rights responsible for doing, or failing to do, this or that. One might with no less cogency say that justice, equality, fairness, mercy and love have not ‘done enough’ to transform the world as it is…however, this way of speaking conflates human rights, understood as genuine normative demands, and the fallible practical measures through which we seek…to fulfil them

But Moyn is presumably not holding the discourse of human rights (morally) responsible for anything. His point is, rather, that the discourse of human rights serves the function of maintaining certain forms of political domination (specifically, material inequality), all the while purporting to serve the interests of justice. Thus the concept of human rights functions ideologically. Tasioulas’s response to this critique is to simply deny that this oppressive function could be part of the concept of human rights: thus ‘the project of limning the concept of human rights is not one of cataloguing the various uses – legitimate or not – to which speakers put that concept’ (ibid). But this retort misses the point of a functional genealogy. The connection that Moyn draws between human rights and inequality is not one of conceptual necessity. But nor is it not one of mere contingency, either. Rather, the proposed connection is functional. Whatever the proper analysis of the concept human rights, and whatever the noble intentions of some of its users, its ascendancy as a normative concept, Moyn is arguing, has something to do with its ability to legitimate certain aspects of the political status quo.

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82 That said, the notion of ideological function is not without its problems. Functional explanations are teleological: they explain the means in terms of the ends. But, barring backwards causation, how could the effects of a representation explain the existence of that representation? The puzzle is easily dissolved in cases where representations are intentionally brought into use because of their effects – for example, when we say that theism was developed by a ‘shrewd and clever-minded man’ in order to deter evil. In such cases, functional talk is elliptical for intentional talk, which is in turn (arguably) reducible to causal talk. But things are trickier in cases where we want to speak of the function of a representation, but do not think that the representation was intentionally brought into
By explaining our representations in terms of their ideological function, critical genealogies also show us the precise ways in which our representations can and do affect the world they (purport to) represent. Some of these effects are straightforwardly causal. The widespread belief that women are submissive or that welfare recipients are lazy have familiar, discriminatory effects on how women and welfare recipients are treated – discriminatory effects that are plausibly part of the explanation for why these beliefs are so widespread. Concepts like alien, immigrant, woman and homosexual also arguably serve an ideological function – legitimating the oppressive treatment of the subjects they pick out – as do, more obviously, concepts that might in fact be empty but are widely taken not to be, such as slut. The same might plausibly be said of concepts that are generally thought to pick out natural rather than social kinds. Thus Judith Butler tells us that, while the overt function of the concept biological sex is to help us limn the contours of biological reality, its covert function is to coercively order the world along the gender binary.83

I have been speaking of the way that certain representations lead ‘us’ to treat the aspects of the world they pick out. But critical genealogy can also reveal the way in which the ideological function of our representations can work via our own self-representation. The belief that women are submissive, for example, not only leads men to treat girl and women in certain ways, but also – because of the internalization of that belief on the part of women – affects how women themselves behave, and treat each other.84 The belief that women are submissive is also an example of a self-fulfilling belief: a belief that can become true, qua generic, precisely because it is widely believed to be true. Likewise, to borrow an example from Ian Hacking, being classified under the concept schizophrenic can lead people to develop schizophrenic symptoms that make it the case that they properly fall under the concept.85 If so, the concept schizophrenic not only changes how certain people are systematically treated, but also brings into existence a new kind of person: the being because of its effects. Many functional genealogies appear do take this form. One obvious solution is to see such functional talk as elliptical for talk of non-intentional selection, in just the same way that we can understand talk of biological function as being elliptical for natural selection explanations (see Karen Neander, 1991, ‘Functions as Selected Effects’). What the selection mechanism(s) might be in the social as opposed to biological sphere is a complex issue, one that I cannot go into here. See Rosen (1996), On Voluntary Servitude, for an argument that there is no plausible selection mechanism, and thus that all theories of ideology are doomed.

83 Butler (1990), Gender Trouble.
85 Hacking ibid
schizophrenic. This, we might think — in a Foucaultian mood — is in fact the ideological function of the concept schizophrenic: not only to legitimate the subjection of certain kinds of people to the coercive force of various medical and legal institutions, but to bring a new kind of person into existence.

Why might it be oppressive to bring into existence a new kind of person? Put another way, is there any wrong in introducing the concept schizophrenic over and above the negative treatment this will encourage of people so classified? Is there a distinctive wrong involved, as Foucault and his followers often seem to suggest, in bringing into existence a new kind of subject? This is a deep and important question, and not one I can fully answer here. But let me say something brief in favour of the thought that there is in fact a distinctive wrong here. That defence takes up Searle’s way of understanding social kind concepts. According to Searle, a social kind (e.g. money) comes into existence because we collectively assign things (e.g. bills and notes) that satisfy a certain constitutive rule (i.e. are issued by a certain authority) a certain status (i.e. being money), which involves being endowed with a certain social purpose (i.e. to serve as an exchangeable bearer of value). Thus our concept money brings into existence a new thing, i.e. money. The assignment of the social purpose of serving as an exchangeable bearer of value to certain material objects might be perfectly innocuous.

We can also collectively bring into existence things with more problematic purposes. Many radical feminists, most notably Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, can be read as arguing that the concept woman — a seemingly natural concept that simply picks out adult human females — in fact assigns the purpose of being for the sexual use of men to people who satisfy the constitutive rule of being adult human females. The collective assignment of such a purpose might be (now) largely unconscious; but then so is, Searle says, the collective assignment of purpose to those things we pick out with the concept money. To see what purpose is essential to the social kind money, we need to examine how we in fact use money; likewise, to see what purpose is essential to the social kind woman, we need to examine how we in fact treat women. Would it be so strange to think that such an examination would reveal that women are indeed for the sexual use of men, even if few were willing to consciously endorse such a view? If not — and I think not — the concept woman, rather than merely picking out people who satisfy a certain criterion (i.e.

\[86\] Foucault (1961), *A History of Madness*

\[87\] Searle (1995), *The Construction of Social Reality*. I use the word ‘purpose’ instead of Searle’s original ‘function’ so as not to confuse this discussion with the earlier discussion of ideological function. Purpose differs from function, in my usage, in that the former must be assigned by a mind, consciously or unconsciously, while the latter need not.
are adult human females), brings into existence people who have the social purpose of being for the sexual use of men. Since no one ought to have such a purpose conferred on them, there is a case for thinking there is a distinctive wrong in bringing the social kind woman into existence.

Once a genealogy has revealed the ideological function played by some representation, what practically follows? That depends in part on what can in fact be done about it. On one extreme view – call it the idealistic view – worldly states-of-affairs are the mere products of our representations, such that a change at the representational level will necessitate a change in material conditions. But such a view is implausible. As Marx taught us, an ideology may have the function of legitimating and obscuring certain oppressive material conditions, but ideology is ultimately and also the causal product of those conditions. The mutually re-enforcing nature of ideological representation and material reality might lead us to the pessimistic view that, after all, nothing can be done about either. But here, as Marx also reminds us, the correct answer is surely that something must be done about both, at once: a revolutionary practice thus consists in the simultaneous 'changing of circumstances and...self-change'. 88 On the question of how to engage in such revolutionary practice, we might imagine that genealogy – given its essentially backwards-looking and diagnostic nature – must be silent. But this, I want to suggest by way of conclusion, need not be so.

3.3 Genealogy as a guide to worldmaking

In the preface to the Genealogy, Nietzsche proposes to ‘give voice to this new demand; we need a critique of moral values, the value of these values should itself, for once, be examined’. 89 To be able to give such a critique, he goes on, ‘we need to know about the conditions and circumstances under which the values grew up, developed and changed’. 90 This pronouncement has led many to read the Nietzsche’s genealogical inquiry into the ‘conditions and circumstances’ of morality’s development as itself constituting a revaluation of values. 91 But in Ecce Homo, Nietzsche goes on to describe the Genealogy, retrospectively, as ‘a psychologist’s three crucial preparatory

88 Marx (1888), Theses on Feuerbach.
89 Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals, Preface 6.
90 ibid
91 See e.g. Leiter, Nietzsche on Morality (2002).
works for a revaluation of all values’. In what sense is the Genealogy merely ‘preparatory’ for this crucial task, and not the task itself?

Nietzsche makes clear, in the Genealogy and elsewhere, that modern morality has the function of controlling, subduing and neutering the instincts of higher men, those individuals capable of the grandest reaches of human excellence. Nietzsche worries that ‘men of great creativity, the really great men...will be sought in vain today’ for ‘nothing stands more malignantly in the way of their rise and evolution...than what in Europe today is simply called “morality”’. The worship of meekness and forgiveness, the priority of the herd over the individual, the insistence on equality and universalism, the belief that suffering is to be minimised and happiness maximized: all these features of modern morality – a bastardized blend, Nietzsche tells us, of Christianity, Kantianism, utilitarianism and asceticism – conspire against what is best and most noble in men. Thus Nietzsche inverts Thrasymachus’ dictum that justice is the advantage of the stronger into his own dictum that morality is ‘the prudence of the lowest order’.

The Genealogy constitutes a profound (if ultimately misguided) condemnation of modern morality. In what sense, then, is the Genealogy merely preparatory, and not itself a full-blown revaluation of values?

In a famous passage near the end of Book One of the Genealogy, Nietzsche narrates a conversation with someone who has taken up his invitation ‘to have a little look down into the secret of how ideals are fabricated on this earth’. His interlocutor, having descended into ‘this dark workshop’, reports back:

I think people are telling lies; a sugary mildness clings to every sound. Lies are turning weakness into an accomplishment, no doubt about it – it’s just as you said...and impotence which doesn’t retaliate is being turned into

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92 Nietzsche, Ecce Homo, ‘Why I write such good books’, emphasis added. See also Genealogy of Morals §1.5, where Nietzsche explicitly says (as pointed out by Melissa Lane (2012) ‘Doing Our Own Thinking for Ourselves: On Quentin Skinner’s Genealogical Turn,’ 77) that the valuation of values is not the task of the Genealogy, though it was the task of his earlier Human, All Too Human.
93 See Kail ibid and Lane ibid for alternative accounts of the ‘preparatory’ nature of the Genealogy.
94 See e.g. Beyond Good and Evil 62 and 228, Daybreak 163, Will to Power 274, 345, 400, 870, 879, Antichrist 5 and 24, and Ecce Homo IV:4.
95 The case for reading Nietzsche’s central complaint against modern morality in this way is made by Leiter ibid.
96 Will to Power 957.
97 I use ‘men’ and ‘mankind’ deliberately in describing Nietzsche’s views.
98 Genealogy of Morals I:13.
99 Genealogy of Morals I.14
“goodness”; timid baseness is being turned into “humility”; submission to people one hates is being turned into “obedience” (actually towards someone who, they say, orders this submission – they call him God). The inoffensiveness of the weakling, the very cowardice with which he is richly endowed, his standing-by-the-door, his inevitable position of having to wait, are all given good names such as “patience”, also known as the virtue; not-being-able-to-take-revenge is called not-wanting-to-take-revenge, it might even be forgiveness…They are also talking about “loving your enemies” – and sweating while they do it…But enough! enough! I can’t bear it any longer. Bad air! Bad air! This workshop where ideals are fabricated – it seems to me just to stink of lies…”We good people – we are the just” – what they are demanding is not called retribution, but “the triumph of justice”; what they hate is not their enemy, oh no! they hate “injustice”, “godlessness”; what they believe and hope for is not the prospect of revenge, the delirium of sweet revenge…but the victory of God, the just God, over the Godless…¹⁰⁰

Nietzsche’s interlocutor is here witnessing a sort of pantomime of the slave revolt in morality. But he is also witnessing, as Skinner tells us, the workings of an ancient rhetorical strategy, what Quintilian calls paradiastole, or paradiastolic redescription. This is the strategy whereby, Skinner explains, one replaces ‘a given evaluative description with a rival term that serves to picture the action no less plausibly, but serves at the same time to place it in a contrasting moral light’.¹⁰¹

What I want to suggest is that Nietzsche here satirizes paradiastolic description in order to call our attention to the basic mechanism by which the slave revolt in morality was achieved: to remind us that it was not a matter of sheer contingency or blind luck, but a product of human artifice and skill.¹⁰² In particular, the slave revolt in morality involved a conscious attempt to change our representational practices – replacing the good/bad dichotomy with the evil/good dichotomy; recasting virtues and vices, and vices and virtues; spreading belief in free will, agency, moral responsibility, and the afterlife – and thereby bringing into

¹⁰⁰ ibid
¹⁰² I read this as a satire of paradiastole because the rhetorical redescriptions do not abide by Quintilian’s rule of ‘neighbourliness’: that is, that one must replace the reigning description of a phenomenon with a closely related (but contrary) description (e.g. bravery for brazenness). In the Genealogy, we instead have the authors of slave morality replacing one set of representations with clearly opposed representations. Thanks to Bryan Garsten for calling my attention to this point.
being a set of practices (of social debt and punishment, of promise-making and keeping, of asceticism and herd socialization) that are both sustained by and sustain these representational practices. Later in the same passage, Nietzsche describes the ‘black magicians who can turn anything back into whiteness, milk and innocence’ as having performed the ‘boldest, subtlest, most ingenious and mendacious stunt’. The slave revolt in morality is a ‘mendacious stunt’, but one that impresses Nietzsche nonetheless: it is a piece of ‘black magic’ that calls for both revulsion and admiration.

It is in this sense that the *Genealogy* is, I want to suggest, a merely ‘preparatory’ work for the revaluation of values. A full revaluation of values will not merely diagnose the ideological function of our values, thereby prompting the ‘higher men’ to rebel against them, but will moreover *revalue* them, transforming them anew. For it is one thing to reveal that morality has the function of harming the strong at the expense of the weak, and another still to make the strong good once more. Nietzsche’s *Genealogy*, by revealing the means by which modern morality came into being, prepares the ground for the ‘reverse experiment’ and ‘redemption of this reality’ that ‘should be possible in principle’, at least for a future ‘creative spirit’ of ‘sufficient strength’.

Reading the *Genealogy* this way is to read it as a guide to what I want to call *worldmaking*: the transformation of the world through a transformation of our representational practices. A critical genealogy is a guide to worldmaking when it not only explains our representations in the terms of the ideological function they serve, but also shows us the role that agents have played in the emergence and continued dominance of those representations. For then we, as agents, might hope to be able to – by a similar mechanism, but to a very different end – make our representations, and thus our world, anew.

There are grounds to read Nietzsche as exhorting a worldmaking of a very ambitious kind. Nietzsche’s interlocutor describes the masterminds of the slave revolt as ‘telling lies’ and as ‘rumour-mongers and clandestine forgers’. That the slaves are lying about morality presupposes that there is moral truth that they are (deliberately) getting wrong: that they are speaking falsely when they say that the

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105 I borrow the term from Goodman ibid, though I use it more expansively than him.
106 Not just our representational practices, but also the non-representational practices that are sustained by them. For the sake of simplicity my focus here will be on the transformation of the representational side of things.
weak are good and the strong evil.\(^{108}\) It is doubtful however that Nietzsche thinks that the moral truth exists independently of what we make of it. In *The Gay Science* he writes that, ‘Whatever has *value* in our world now does not have value in itself, according to its nature — nature is always value-less, but has been given value at some time’. This seemingly anti-realist view of morality\(^ {109}\) — on which what is genuinely valuable is constituted by what we think and treat as valuable — implies that we have the power to make what was once good now bad, and vice versa, precisely by changing our patterns and practices of valuing. While rhetorical redescription thus begins as an affront to our created moral reality — an act of lying and forgery — it can, on such a view, end up as a true representation of it. For Nietzsche, I am suggesting, rhetorical description has the power not only to change our representations of value, but moreover to change what really is valuable: to bring value in and out of existence. Thus the ‘creative spirit’, Nietzsche says, will be ‘misunderstood by people as though [he is taking] a flight from reality’, when in fact he is here to ‘redeem it from the curse which its ideal has placed on it up till now’.\(^ {110}\)

In a crucial passage of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche describes how it is that representations come to exercise their functional roles in the world:

> every purpose and use is just a *sign* that the will to power has achieved mastery over something less powerful, and has impressed upon its own idea of a use function; and the whole history of a ‘thing’, an organ, a tradition can to this extent be a continuous chain of signs, continually revealing new interpretations and adaptations….The form is fluid, the ‘meaning’ even more so…I lay stress on this major point of historical method, especially as it runs counter to just that prevailing instinct and fashion which would much rather come to terms with absolute randomness, and even the mechanistic senselessness of all events, than the theory that a *power-will* is acted out in all that happens….\(^ {111}\)

Nietzsche’s genealogy is not (as is sometimes suggested) about the revelation of sheer contingency, understood as ‘absolute randomness’ or ‘mechanistic senselessness’. Instead, his genealogy is about revealing just how deeply the way

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*\(^{108}\) For an opposing view, to the effect that Nietzsche is a fictionalist about morality, see Hussain, ‘Honest Illusions: Valuing for Nietzsche’s Free Spirits’ (2007).*
*\(^{109}\) *Gay Science* §301; cf. *Daybreak* 3.
*\(^{110}\) *Genealogy of Morals*, I.24.
*\(^{111}\) *Genealogy of Morals*, II.12*
the world is depends on how we represent it; and, moreover, that how we represent it is a matter of which of the various ‘interpretations and adaptations’ vie for domination. In revealing this, Nietzsche’s genealogy is a reminder – at least for those of us who are sufficiently strong, creative and noble – of our worldmaking power. It is also a reminder of the limits on that power. For simply changing one’s own local representations is insufficient to successfully worldmake. One’s proposed redescription must vie for uptake against the dominant mode of representation. What is more, for representational interventions to be successful, it is often the case that they must be taken up by the very people whose interests will be undermined if the representations do in fact take hold. The slave revolt in morality required not only, Nietzsche tells us, that the slaves believe themselves to be good. It also required that the masters come to believe themselves to be evil. Such representational interventions – as all the most effective political actors know, and as the best histories teach us – require not only the gifts of sound judgment and persuasive style, but also the gift of good luck.

For his own part, Nietzsche often seemed to rail against the way in which his worldmaking powers were hostage to the uptake of others. He complains, for example, that his Thus Spoke Zarathustra sold so few copies, and explains that this is because it is an ‘unintelligible book…based on experiences that I share with nobody’. Of Beyond Good and Evil he writes that ‘everybody has complained that I am “not understood,” and the approximately one hundred copies which have been sold have made it quite obvious to me that I am not understood’. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra begins with his title character stepping out of a cave and asking what the sun would be if not for those on whom it shines. After attempting and failing to take his message to the world, Zarathustra returns, at the end of the book, to his cave once more. It is a poignant image of a failed worldmaker. It also speaks of the pragmatic and political problems with Nietzsche’s profoundly individualistic vision of worldmaking.

For an alternative vision, we should turn, I want to suggest, towards those whom Nietzsche would presumably despise: the participants in the various slave revolts still underway. I am thinking in particular of the representational revolutions, still incomplete, associated with the great liberation movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: workers’ struggle to end capitalist exploitation, the struggle of black and brown people against colonial and other racialized forms of oppression, and the feminist struggle to bring an end to patriarchal domination. All these revolutionary projects are in part projects of worldmaking: the project of

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112 Allison, Reading the New Nietzsche (2001), xiii
113 Ibid.
transforming our representational practices in order to bring into existence new, as yet impossible forms of life. Thus Marxist revolutionary practice consists, in part, in reinterpreting the world from the perspective of the proletariat. While the ‘Free-trader Vulgaris’, Marx says, sees the marketplace as ‘a very Eden of the innate rights of man’ where ‘alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham’, those who are forced to sell their labour are positioned to describe a different world: to see buyer and seller transformed into ‘capitalist’ and ‘labourer’, and to see the marketplace as a place not of free exchange but of exploitation (Marx 1867/1887, 123). Indeed, Capital itself – despite Marx’s claim that it offered only a scientific theory – can be read as an exercise in reinterpretation of our economic and social realities, an exercise that brought into being whole new social categories.\

For Marx, it is the proletariat’s relationship to the means of production that allows its members to see, and thus conceptualise, the material reality under the ideological appearance. For a thinker like DuBois, by contrast, it is black Americans’ all too acute awareness of themselves as objects of white consciousness that gives rise to their worldmaking power. Thus ‘the Negro…is…born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world’. What black Americans yearn for, DuBois says, is the reconciliation of two currently unreconcilable identities. (He might have added that, for black women, the challenge was to reconcile three unreconcilable identities.) To end black Americans’ oppression, DuBois says, a new sort of person will have to be made possible, a person who is simply ‘both a Negro and an American’. But that person will be made possible, DuBois thinks, only once we have reconceptualised what it is to be American. Thus DuBois ends The Souls of Black Folk – in a gesture that would later be echoed by James Baldwin — by retelling American history as a history of its black slaves. ‘Would America have been America without her Negro people?’ DuBois asks. If our answer – or, rather, the answer of white people – is no, then we have opened up some small space of possibility for that which is currently impossible.

Similarly, for feminists such as Beauvoir and MacKinnon, it is women’s awareness of themselves as objects of men’s representations – the objects, that is, of male worldmaking – that gives rise to women’s own power to remake the world. ‘[M]ale power creates the reality of the world’ MacKinnon writes, and it is the task of feminism to ‘expose it as specifically male for the first time’. She goes on:

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114 Burawoy (2017), 'The Poverty of Philosophy: Marx Meets Bourdieu'.
115 DuBois (1930), The Souls of Black Folk
116 In his 1965 Cambridge Union debate with William F Buckley.
For example, men say all women are whores; feminism observes that men have the power to make prostitution women’s definitive condition…Men say women desire to be degraded; feminism sees female masochism as the ultimate success of male supremacy and puzzle over its failures.117

But simply exposing our sexual reality as a result of male power is not yet sufficient. In a paradiolistic gesture more than worthy of Nietzsche, MacKinnon tells us that feminism claims the voice of women’s silence, the sexuality of women’s eroticized desexualization, the fullness of ‘lack,’ the centrality of women’s marginality and exclusion, the public nature of privacy, the presence of women’s absence. This approach is more complex than transgression, more transformative than transvaluation, deeper than mirror-imaged resistance, more affirmative than the negation of negativity. It is neither materialist nor idealist; it is feminist.118

Feminism reinterprets the male-created world for itself, in a way that is at once true to reality, resisting an idealistic flight from it, and transformative of it – resisting a materialistic capitulation to it.

This dual demand – to resist both idealism and materialism, futility and complacency – structures all endeavours at worldmaking. Indeed it, in a broad sense, structures all our creative endeavours. A creative act is a proposed interpretation of an artistic tradition. If it hews too closely to that received tradition, it will be derivative, a complacent acceptance of what has come before. If, however, it departs too radically from what preceded it, it will be simply be unintelligible, a futile attempt to make sense. Likewise with our attempts at worldmaking, individual or communal: our representational interventions must at once feel as if they are getting the world right, and to picture it anew. I do not mean this as an argument for Fabianism, in either art or politics. Far from it. At its best, worldmaking is a radical endeavour, bringing into existence worlds we scarcely thought possible. But I do mean it as a diagnosis of the difficulty of worldmaking. In that, it is also one answer to why history matters for politics.

118 ibid 117.