The Practical Origins of Ideas, by Matthieu Queloz. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021.

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Philosophy is a discipline of grand abstractions. Truth, justice, knowledge, goodness, democracy, beauty, freedom, and other venerable ideas have been at the center of philosophical inquiry at least since Socrates. To understand the nature of these things, philosophers have traditionally asked questions of the form 'What is X?'. What is truth? What is justice? What is knowledge? These are familiar questions. Yet, these questions have proven to be vexing. After more than 2500 years of reflection, there has yet to emerge consensus on what truth, knowledge, or justice are.

Perhaps we are asking the wrong questions. Instead of asking 'What is truth?' or 'What is justice?'', it might be more fruitful to ask *why* we've come to think in these terms. What role do these ideas play in human life? What is the point of thinking in terms of these grand abstractions? If we lacked these concepts, what else would we lose?

In *The Practical Origins of Ideas: Genealogy as Conceptual Reverse-Engineering*, Matthieu Queloz recommends a shift in how philosophers should go about the business of doing philosophy. Instead of inquiring directly into the nature of truth, knowledge, or justice (etc.), he suggests that we inquire into *our ideas* of these things. The method, broadly speaking, is to look at our most venerable philosophical concepts from a practical point of view. Queloz calls this method 'pragmatic genealogy'. A pragmatic genealogy aims to explain why we came to think as we do by reflecting on the purposes of our ideas, tracing them to their origins, and revealing what they do for us (p. 2). This is not to say we are no longer inquiring into the nature of things. Instead, we investigate the nature of truth, knowledge, and justice by first asking why we came to think in these terms. This puts the explanatory weight on the function of a particular type of discourse, not on the existence of the entities referred to in that discourse (p. 35).

In Queloz's schema, pragmatic genealogy is a species of *conceptual reverse-engineering*, which is itself a species of *function-first approaches* (pp. 44-5; see also Hannon 2019, pp. 22-6). Function-first approaches focus on the function of having a concept. But there are function-first approaches that do not reverse-engineer at all, either because we already know the function or because we focus on the function a concept *should* serve. Thus, conceptual reverse-engineering is only a species of function-first approaches. Also, there are non-genealogical versions of reverse-engineering that investigate a concept's function synchronically, i.e. without genealogy. Thus, pragmatic genealogy is only a species of conceptual reverse-engineering.

Queloz's book has ten chapters, but these can be meaningfully divided into three parts. Chapters 1-3 articulate the method of pragmatic genealogy, outline its benefits, and situate this approach within the broader philosophical landscape. Chapters 4-8 examine five case studies in pragmatic genealogy: David Hume's genealogy of justice (Chapter 4), Friedrich Nietzsche's genealogies of justice and truthfulness

(Chapter 5), Edward Craig's pragmatic account of knowledge (Chapter 6), Bernard Williams essay on truth and truthfulness (Chapter 7), and Miranda Fricker's genealogy of the virtue of testimonial justice (Chapter 8). These five chapters provide a closer look at the method of pragmatic genealogy, deepening our understanding of it with concrete examples, and highlighting more general features of pragmatic genealogy. The final two chapters discuss the normative significance of pragmatic genealogies and the nature of philosophy as a humanistic discipline.

This book is rich and suggestive. It aims to uncover a methodological tradition that combines pragmatism, naturalism, and genealogy into a unified framework that 'cuts across the analytic-continental divide and runs right through the heartland of Anglophone philosophy' (p. 4). The chapters on Hume, Nietzsche, Craig, Williams, and Fricker are especially edifying; anyone looking to learn more about these thinkers will profit from reading this book. Queloz also persuasively argues for some surprising conclusions; for example: that Nietzsche is actually a critic of the very kind of genealogical debunking with which he is often associated (100), and that Williams is really a pragmatist even though he takes 'the pragmatist' to be his primary opponent in *Truth and Truthfulness* (p. 155).

Unlike a lot of contemporary scholarship, the book is refreshingly ambitious. It tackles big questions like 'What is philosophy about?' and 'How should we investigate its subject matter?'. The book is also delightful to read: the prose is colorful, elegant, and sharp, and Queloz has a knack for bringing high-minded ideals down to earth. I wish more philosophers wrote so well. Overall, it is an excellent and important piece of philosophy.

I am broadly sympathetic with the claim that we can make philosophical progress by reflecting on the practical value of our ideas. The book also succeeds in highlighting the underappreciated continuities in the work of Hume, Nietzsche, Craig, Williams, and Fricker. I am less convinced, however, that we must detour through genealogy to reap the benefits of this approach. Further, there are some discontinuities in the philosophical approaches of Hume, Nietzsche, Craig, Williams, and Fricker. This creates some confusion about precisely what pragmatic genealogy amounts to and who really qualifies as a member of this tradition, as I'll explain below.

Let's start with the 'what', 'why', and 'how' of pragmatic genealogy. What springs to mind when you hear the word 'genealogy'? Your thoughts likely turn to Nietzsche and Foucault, along with notions like 'contingency', 'debunking', and 'history'. As commonly understood, genealogy is a form of historical philosophy that reveals the contingent origins of our norms, practices, and institutions (and often with the aim of debunking their authority or legitimacy). But this is not the only way to understand 'genealogy' in a philosophical context. According to Queloz, we can conceive of genealogy along two different lines. On one side, we have the thoroughly historical genealogies of the Foucauldian variety, which 'trace out the multiple roots of something across real history' (p. 5). On the other side, we can place the fictional and primarily justificatory state-of-nature stories given by political philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, and Nozick.

I find this expansive conception of genealogy more confusing than illuminating. In Queloz's schema, the explicitly fictional state-of-nature stories count as 'genealogies' because they provide 'developmental narratives' (p. 5). But this masks important differences between theorists like Hobbes, Locke, and Nozick, on the one hand, and scholars like Foucault and Nietzsche, on the other. The latter are attempting to provide causal accounts, while the former are providing justificatory arguments in a genealogical guise. (Queloz argues that Nietzsche's genealogies are best interpreted as providing a *fictional* model comparable to the state of nature. But I find this claim difficult to reconcile with the causal-explanatory language Nietzsche uses, e.g., about the 'original' motive of justice and the changes to justice 'over generations'.) As we'll come to see, the 'historical' dimension in Queloz's methodology is not really an attempt to reveal the origins or causal dependence of our ideas. He insists that pragmatic genealogists *are not describing actual history* (p. 16). This contrasts with the ambitions of Foucault and Nietzsche, both of whom criticized philosophers for their lack of 'real history'. So, I suggest we keep these different approaches apart. In fact, we already have the terminology to distinguish them: there are *state-of-nature* accounts, which are fictional and primarily vindicatory stories, and there are *genealogies*, which are historical and causal-explanatory accounts. Peter Kail (2021) makes a similar point in this review of Queloz's book.

But let's proceed with Queloz's terminology. Where does he situate the 'pragmatic genealogies' that he traces through the work of Hume, Nietzsche, Craig, Williams, and Fricker? Instead of putting these figures on one side or other of the aforementioned dichotomy, Queloz puts them in the middle of a spectrum. Pragmatic genealogy involves a mixture of historicizing and fictionalizing: it 'consists in telling partly fictional, partly historical narratives exploring what might have driven us to develop certain ideas in order to discover what these ideas do for us' (p. 2). In other words, pragmatic genealogy is a method that blends fiction with history and justification with explanation.

Why combine these ingredients into a single methodological cocktail? Queloz's book is heavily influenced by Bernard Williams's *Truth and Truthfulness*, a book that combines fiction with history and justification with explanation. I suspect that Queloz takes Williams's approach as the blueprint for the method of pragmatic genealogy, which he then uses to interpret the work of Hume, Nietzsche, etc. What exactly is this blueprint? Here is what Queloz says:

> Pragmatic genealogies proceed in two steps, with the first involving idealization, the second de-idealization: first, render plausible a hypothesis about why creatures like us would go in for an idealized, prototypical model of the practice we actually have—the 'proto-practice'; second, explain how we got from the proto-practice to the practice we actually have—the 'target practice'. (p. 50-1)

Let's flesh this out a bit. First, we start from a fictional state of nature that abstracts away from the 'nit-and-grit' of history (p. 14). It allows us to depict extremely general facts about the human condition and model the main practical pressures that have sculpted our conceptual practices. In particular, we imagine how a concept or idea serves the interests of those in a hypothetical situation who otherwise

lack that concept or idea. The aim is to 'reverse engineer' the points of our concepts by reconstructing the practical problems to which these ideas offer solutions (p. 3).

A clear example is Craig's approach to knowledge. Instead of asking what knowledge *is*, Craig suggests we ask what the concept of knowledge *does* for us. To answer this question, he invites us to imagine an 'epistemic state of nature', that is, a community of inquirers who rely on each other for information and who are similar to us in terms of their general needs and interests, although they do not yet have the concept of knowledge. Craig appeals to extremely general facts about the human condition to explain why the concept of knowledge would come about. In particular, he argues that we need to form accurate beliefs about the world to successfully navigate it; however, there is only so much information one can gather by oneself. Thus, we need to pool and share information with others in our community. Yet, people vary in terms of their reliability on various topics, so we must be able to mark out the people on whom we should rely from those we should not rely on. Finally, the concept of knowledge emerges in connection with these basic and uncontroversial needs: we speak of 'knowers' to mark out good sources of information. By anchoring the practical value of the concept of knowledge in basic, universal needs that humans can be assumed to have anyways, Craig illustrates why the concept of knowledge is bound to emerge as a matter of practical necessity: it provides a solution to a problem that virtually all humans will face.

The second step of pragmatic genealogy is *de-idealization*. The account descends from the highly abstract model to factor in more local socially-historical needs. We gradually de-idealize the model to help us understand the ways in which our conceptual practices may be elaborated in different settings. Williams's genealogy of truthfulness is a notable example. It starts with a fictional account of how the human concern with truthfulness might have arisen, then it proceeds to examine how the virtue of truthfulness has been 'changed, transformed, differently embodied, extended, and so on by historical experience' (qtd. in Queloz, p.171). Fricker continues the project begun by Craig and Williams, but she further de-idealizes the state-of-nature model to factor in social categorization. In particular, she examines the ways in which group identification and prejudice exert a distorting influence on the communal practice of acquiring and sharing truths. Unlike Craig and Williams, Fricker demonstrates how the epistemic division of labor becomes complicated by the politics of 'us' and 'them' (p. 197). While de-idealization represents a 'later' stage in the concept's development, this does not necessarily mean temporally later. As Queloz emphasizes throughout the book, pragmatic genealogies are not tracing the development of concepts through actual history. Thus, 'later' simply means 'less idealized' (p. 16).

What is the value of thinking of our ideas in terms of their point? A major benefit is the *demystifying* role this method can play in philosophy. Queloz writes, 'it can dispel the air of mystery . . . by translating venerable but suspiciously empyrean ideas of justice or truth back into nature', thereby ridding us of 'the need for metaphysical explanations of the sort that philosophers from Hume through Nietzsche to Rorty and Huw Price take issue with as involving unnecessary ontological commitments or explanatory material' (p. 28). In this sense, the book is a successful defense of *pragmatism*. But is there something especially important about reverse-engineering the point of our concepts *through genealogy*? What are

the benefits of pragmatic *genealogies*, if any, when we can simply theorize about the function of our concepts without genealogy?

A large portion of the book is devoted to answering this challenge. In Chapter 2, Queloz outlines three alleged benefits of pragmatic genealogy over purely functional (i.e. non-genealogical) alternatives: first, it can provide 'explanation without reduction' in the sense that it does not explain *away* the object of inquiry (e.g. unmasking altruism as really a form of selfishness); second, it can 'affect the space of reasons' by strengthening or weakening our confidence in our ideas; third, it can 'facilitate responsible conceptual engineering' by putting us in a position to ask how a concept might serve the same point better. However, it is unclear why these benefits are unavailable to those who reverse-engineer the point of our concepts without genealogy. As Queloz later acknowledges, reductionism is not an essential feature of non-genealogical approaches (p. 36). Moreover, conceptual reverse-engineering without genealogy is able to vindicate or subvert our ideas (e.g. by finding out whether they are worthwhile). Finally, we can facilitate responsible conceptual engineering by figuring out whether a conceptual practice answers to needs, and what needs these are, without providing a fictional genealogy of these ideas. Thus, it is not clear that genealogical approaches have any advantage on these grounds.

In Chapter 3, Queloz argues that genealogy is especially called for in two kinds of cases: *historically inflected practices* and *self-effacingly functional practices*. A practice is 'historically inflected' if it has a number of different functions and serves a variety of historically local needs. (The chapter on Hume provides a nice discussion of historical variation about the precise conventions we might use to resolve the conflict over external goods.) A practice is 'self-effacingly functional' if it is a functional requirement on the practice that participants are not primarily motivated by awareness of its functionality. I do not have space to discuss historically inflected practices, but I will briefly discuss self-effacingly functional practices.

Williams's genealogy of truthfulness provides a paradigm example of a self-effacingly functional practice. The function of truthfulness is, roughly, to share information effectively. Yet, our motives in being truthful are not conditional on its fulfilling that function. According to Williams and Queloz, it is only *because* they are not conditional in this way that truthfulness can fulfill its function. If the virtue of truthfulness were understood in purely instrumental terms, then we would face the *free rider problem*: 'each participant wants there to be a practice in which most of the others take part, without, if he can get away with it, taking part himself' (Williams 2002, p. 58). This threatens to undermine the practice of truthfulness. To render truthfulness more stable, we must not value it on purely instrumental terms. In other words, the functionality of truthfulness must become *self-effaced*: we must not value truthfulness for reasons of functionality but rather *for its own sake* (see pp. 160-75).

A major selling point of pragmatic genealogy is its adeptness at handling self-effacingly functional practices. According to Queloz, purely functional (i.e. non-genealogical) explanations are limited to an 'actualist and static' view of our practices (p. 57), which makes them likely to miss the explanatory connections between the instrumental and non-instrumental aspects of the relevant practice. However, it is unclear to me why pragmatic genealogy is able to achieve a better grip on practices exhibiting self-

effacing functionality. It seems we can make points about self-effacement directly, without the state-of-nature apparatus. One might argue, for instance, that we have a practice of intrinsically valuing truthfulness because merely valuing it instrumentally would not suffice to stabilize the practice, and that such intrinsic valuing is itself instrumentally valuable for sharing reliable information. As far as I can see, nothing bars those who take an 'actualist and static' view of our conceptual practices from bringing out the instrumental reasons for the de-instrumentalization of thought. Thus, purely functional (i.e. non-genealogical) accounts may be equally adept at explaining self-effacingly functional practices. Alexander Prescott-Couch (forthcoming) also makes this point.

I'll conclude by highlighting a few similarities and differences between the five case studies in pragmatic genealogy. This bears on the issue of whether Hume, Nietzsche, Craig, Williams, and Fricker should be counted as members of the same methodological tradition.

Unlike many genealogical explanations, the genealogies in this book all possess *vindicatory* aspects. Hume's genealogy of justice, which Queloz takes to be the first fully-fledged pragmatic genealogy, is intended to reinforce our commitment to justice by showing how it derives from noble origins that give us good reasons to think as we do. Similarly, the chapters by Craig, Williams, and Fricker provide pragmatic vindications of the concept of knowledge, the virtue of truthfulness, and the virtue of testimonial justice, respectively, by explaining why these practices are necessary, or at least deeply important, for creatures like us. Even the genealogies of Nietzsche, who has the reputation of a genealogical debunker, tend to vindicate truthfulness and justice by explaining their practical value in satisfying individual and social needs. Thus, the genealogies in this book are united by their vindication, not subversion, of our practices. This demonstrates the normative significance of pragmatic genealogy: it shows that some of our most venerable ideas are indeed worth having.

According to Queloz, the genealogies in this book also highlight 'the *instrumental reasons for the de-instrumentalization of thought*' (p. 37). Hume, Nietzsche, and Williams give instrumental justifications for our conceptual practices concerning justice and truthfulness, but these practices must also *outgrow their instrumentality* to be functional. We must come to value justice and truthfulness for their own sake. However, the de-instrumentalization of thought does not seem to play an essential role in the work of Craig. In Craig's account, there is no argument for why, on instrumental grounds, concept-uses would need to take knowledge to be intrinsically valuable. (Instead, we get an explanation for why there are good instrumental reasons for the concept of knowledge to serve the needs of people beyond oneself (see pp. 147-8); but this does not require anything like self-effacement or intrinsic valuing.) It seems possible for us to appreciate the instrumental value of the concept of knowledge—and act with the aim of identifying reliable informants who will contribute to the general stock of information—without undermining the functionality of this practice. In other words, this conceptual practice need not shed the traces of its instrumental origins to serve its purpose. To comfortably place Craig in the tradition of pragmatic genealogy, we need to know why the concept of knowledge would serve its function only if individuals do not engage in the conceptual practices for reasons of functionality.

Fricker's account also differs from the other pragmatic genealogies, but in another way. In the genealogies of Hume, Nietzsche, Craig, and Williams, the aim is to reverse-engineer our way from the ubiquity of a concept (e.g., justice, truth, knowledge) to the underlying needs it serves; but the opposite is true in Fricker's case. As Queloz says, 'Fricker's genealogy. . . is not about a deeply familiar and ubiquitous trait whose uniquity calls for explanation; it is about a trait that is as yet insufficiently familiar [namely, testimonial justice] and not yet ubiquitous enough' (p. 194). This difference is important. Fricker is not using the method of pragmatic genealogy to *explain* anything about our current conceptual practices. Her aim is to diagnose the shortcomings of our current conceptual practices so that we may see how to *improve* them. She argues that we need the virtue of testimonial justice to reliably seek truth in a world filled with prejudice. This ameliorative aspect of Fricker's genealogy makes it stand out. Instead of aiming to *vindicate* what we have, her genealogy indicates what we should strive for. This is certainly a worthwhile philosophical project, but it seems sufficiently different from the other pragmatic genealogists that we might wonder whether it belongs to the same tradition.

I'd like to end by emphasizing that I have learned a lot from this book. Queloz demonstrates that we can derive substantial philosophical payoffs by examining our most venerable philosophical ideas from a practical point of view. He also shows there is much to be gained by interpreting Hume, Nietzsche, Craig, Williams, and Fricker through the lens of pragmatic genealogy. This may surprise many readers. In contemporary analytic philosophy, there is much skepticism surrounding philosophical traditions like pragmatism, genealogy, and state-of-nature theories. In my opinion, critics of these traditions often misunderstand the aims and value of these approaches. Queloz does an important service for philosophy by demonstrating the importance of reflecting on the purposes of our ideas, tracing them to their origins, and revealing what they do for us.*

Works Cited

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