# Genealogy, Conceptual Ethics, and Conceptual Engineering

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**Abstract**

Against those who would either identify genealogy with reductive genealogical debunking or deny it any evaluative and action-guiding significance, I argue for the following three claims: that although genealogies, true to their Enlightenment origins, tend to trace the higher to the lower, they need not *reduce* the higher to the lower, but can elucidate the *relation* between them and put us in a position to think more *realistically* about both *relata*; that if we think of genealogy's normative significance in terms of a triadic model that includes the genealogy's *addressee*, we can see that in tracing the higher to the lower, a genealogy can facilitate an *evaluation* of the higher element, and where the lower element is some important practical need rather than some sinister motive, the genealogy can even be *vindicatory*; and finally, that vindicatory genealogies, unlike subversive genealogies, offer *positive guidance* for how to move forward.

## 1. Higher and Lower, Reason and Power

What is genealogy? A genealogy is a developmental narrative describing how a cultural phenomenon—such as a concept, value, practice or institution—could have come about. The phrase "could have come about" is helpfully equivocal between three senses here, covering not only *actual*, but also *conjectural* and even *counterfactual* developments. First, if the emergence of the phenomenon in question falls within the scope of recorded history, genealogy may thread together a selection of documented events. Second, given philosophers' interest in ideas and practices that are so fundamental to human life that they have often long emerged already even in the oldest documented societies, genealogists seeking to start further back may have to make do with speculations about the distant past and contribute to what

the Scottish philosopher Dugald Stewart termed "conjectural history" (1858, 34).[1]
Third, genealogists may also seek to elucidate a cultural phenomenon by *imagining*
how and why it could or could not have developed. Genealogies beginning in a
hypothetical "state of nature" (or some equivalent of it, such as Philip Pettit's (2018)
'Erewhon', a Butlerian anagram of 'nowhere') are examples of such developmental
narratives that seek to explain why things in fact are as they are, but seek to do so by
considering explicitly counterfactual genealogical stages.

It may seem strange to lump together avowedly imaginary genealogies with
genealogies that at least profess to be historically accurate. But it is not that the
genealogists describing counterfactual developments—who include David Hume
(2000), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1977), E. J. Craig (1990, 1993), Bernard Williams
(1997, 2002), Miranda Fricker (2007), and Philip Pettit (2018, forthcoming)—do not
care about real history. It is rather that for some philosophical purposes, they find it
best not to *start out* from over-specific and under-supported speculations about a
particular point in pre-history, such as the Fertile Crescent in the late Pleistocene.
They prefer to start from more generic and less contentious idealizations of human
communities. Abstracting away from the peculiarities of particular stretches of
human history, these idealizations aim to embody highly general and structural
dynamics that are plausibly at work in any human community. Much as scientists
find it expedient to investigate the behaviour of real gases by starting from an ideal
gas model whose point particles move without being subject to various forces that
real particles would be subject to, these state-of-nature genealogists use a model to
identify highly generic and explanatorily basic dynamics at the root of certain

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[1] See Marušić (2017) for a nuanced discussion of Stewart's conception of conjectural
history.

cultural phenomena; and as Williams's genealogy in particular illustrates,[2] that model than can then still be lowered into the stream of history to consider how these generic dynamics were concretely realized, elaborated, transformed, extended, and differentiated in particular times and places.

Genealogies setting out from state-of-nature models are thus "histories of the present," in Michel Foucault's phrase, but they move from the socio-historically generic to the socio-historically specific and from the explanatorily basic to the explanatorily derivative. This can serve various functions. It allows genealogists to reveal both why a cultural phenomenon developed in *some* form across many different societies and why it takes the *particular* form it does in a given society. But it can also serve to bring out, in an uncluttered and particularly striking way, why a cultural phenomenon has some otherwise puzzling feature: one way to show why a certain value needs to develop into an *intrinsic* value, for example, is to imagine a situation in which it is understood merely as an instrumental value, and demonstrate just why that would not be a stable resting point. Or a hypothetical genealogical narrative might serve to show that certain explanatory resources are sufficient to account for a phenomenon's emergence *in principle*, thereby suggesting that while the phenomenon's actual history was doubtless more complex and erratic, even a less simplified account of it need not invoke radically different explanatory resources: it can do without assuming extraordinary feats of foresight and planning,

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[2] "The idea is that although you can make these absolutely schematic, basic needs for [the] virtues [of truth] clear at the level of what I call the state of nature—that is, by pure reflection on the needs of human communication—they are, in fact, to an enormous degree changed, transformed, differently embodied, extended and so on by historical experience. And a fundamental claim of the book is … that if we're going to understand the puzzles that surround these concepts now … [we] can only understand them through a historical knowledge of the concept[s]" (Williams 2007, 132).

or ascribing special faculties of intuition, or wheeling in an entire new class of entities or facts just to explain why we think and speak in certain terms.[3]

The heyday of genealogy in all three guises was the Enlightenment.[4] Jean le Rond d'Alembert, in his programmatic *Discours préliminaire* to the *Encyclopédie*, used the metaphor of "genealogy" to describe the method of "remounting to the origin and genesis of our ideas" (1751, i) and declared that all ideas and branches of knowledge ultimately trace back to human needs, though they were slower to appear the more remote or difficult to satisfy the needs were.[5] David Hume similarly proposed to explain ideas and virtues that appeared to be the product of human contrivance, such as *property* and *justice*, by exhibiting them as remedies to inconveniences resulting from the concurrence of certain human needs and circumstances.[6] As Stewart noted towards the end of the Scottish Enlightenment, genealogical

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[3] Williams maintains that a hypothetical story can do this even if the story is not merely fictional, but impossible: even a strictly impossible genealogy doing without certain resources can suggest that a historical story could be told that "also did without them, and called on no more input" (2000, 157).

[4] See Tuck (1979, 174), Lifschitz (2012), Hont (2015), Palmeri (2016), and Sagar (2018). On genealogy as an epistemological *topos*, see Weigel (2003); also available in English in Weigel (2006).

[5] See D'Alembert (1751, xiv). A splendid illustration of the genealogical order of ideas was published in Pierre Mouchon's *Table analytique et raisonnée* of the *Encyclopédie* (though Mouchon, a pastor in Geneva and Basel, was manifestly less critical of Christian doctrine than the more materialist among the *encyclopédistes*). The genealogical tree is available here: https://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/content/arbre-généalogique.

[6] See Hume (2000), in particular Book III, Part II, Section II, entitled "Of the origin of justice and property." I offer a reconstruction of Hume's genealogical method and its rationale in Queloz (2021b, ch. 4), but many Hume scholars have come to regard Hume as pioneering genealogist: Lottenbach (1996), Wiggins (2006, ch. 2), and Blackburn (2013, 78) describe Hume as offering a "genealogy of morals"; Price (2008) focuses on Hume's "genealogy of modals," while Kail (2016) reads Hume as pursuing a "genealogical naturalism."

explanations of "society in all its various aspects" had been "the peculiar glory of the latter half of the eighteenth century" (1854, 70). He particularly associated this "particular sort of enquiry," which he considered to be of "entirely of modern origin" (1858, 33), with Hume's *The Natural History of Religion* ([1757] 2008) and Adam Smith's *Dissertation on the Origin of Languages* ([1761] 1853). But the same period also saw the publication of many other works that might be described as genealogies of cultural phenomena, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* ([1755] 1977), Isaak Iselin's *Über die Geschichte der Menschheit* (1764) or Immanuel Kant's *Mutmaßlicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte* ([1786] 1900–, VIII, 109–23).

One important respect in which the spirit of the Enlightenment informs genealogy as a method is that genealogical inquiry typically serves (in Nietzsche's phrase) to *translate humanity back into nature.*[7] Genealogy reflects Enlightenment naturalism by presenting even the loftiest cultural phenomena, which seem to call for explanation in terms of transcendent origins in a Platonic Heaven of Forms or in the Mind of God, as being part of nature and fully explainable in terms of the rest of nature.[8] As Hume announces already in the title of his genealogy of religion, Enlightenment genealogy is not just history, but *natural* history:[9] it seeks to explain even the most exalted things as arising naturally, without mysterious saltations or divine interventions.

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[7] See Nietzsche (2002, §230).

[8] As Avi Lifschitz puts it, Enlightenment genealogies are characteristically animated by a naturalistic concern "to present human artifice as natural—or to explain how human beings have naturally crafted their cultural and material environments" (2012, 5).

[9] See Hume (2008). See Kail (2007; 2009, 2016) and Russell (2008) for discussions of Hume's genealogical approach to religion.

As a result of this Enlightenment naturalism, genealogies characteristically *trace the higher to the lower*: they take some of our loftiest abstractions, such as the concepts of reason, truth, knowledge, justice, virtue, or intrinsic value, and reveal their lowly origins in the will to power, prudence, self-interest, or instrumental value. Enlightenment genealogies do precisely not explain the higher in terms of equally high origins, as would befit it; they bring it down to earth, revealing its roots to be firmly anchored in human soil. The higher/lower distinction should not be taken too seriously, and it may not consciously figure in the minds of genealogists or their addressees. But it does give *theorists* of genealogy a useful way to generalize over the *explanantia* and *explanda* of genealogies, and in particular one which registers the clear hierarchical ordering within the otherwise haphazard collection of items—needs, interests, wills, drives, affects, concepts, beliefs, values, virtues, practices, institutions, etc.—that figure in genealogies: the *explanandum* is typically something highly respected, valued, refined, and exalted, perhaps even something seemingly transcendent or god-like, but at the very least something that is a prerogative of human beings, a distinguishing mark of our humanity—these are the things most likely to *call for* genealogical explanation, after all; the *explanans*, by contrast, is typically something less mysterious, but also less respected and valued: something ordinary, mundane, and firmly immanent—something all-too human, perhaps, or else something we share with other animals. On a common view of genealogy, it is just the fact that the *explananda* and *explanantia* of genealogies fall into this pattern of higher and lower that gives genealogies their destabilizing or debunking character. Foucault seems to suggest as much in an oft-quoted passage: "historical beginnings are lowly … capable of undoing every infatuation" (1971, 149).

But there are two aspects here that need untangling. The first and most basic way in which genealogy can become destabilizing is through the very act of genealogizing, in particular when something is historicized that *resists* historicization: even raising the question of a phenomenon's historical origins can have an unsettling effect if that phenomenon denies the question applicability by presenting itself as eternal or ahistorical. This is one reason why, at the time of the publication of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* ([1887] 1998), the very pairing of "genealogy" with "morality" was provocative in much the same way that Darwin's pairing of "origin" with "species" had been nearly three decades earlier. On the traditional Christian worldview, neither morality nor species were supposed to have origins at all, at least not in this distinctly worldly or sublunary sense—as the Foucauldian distinction marks the difference, they were supposed to have an *Ursprung*, a High Origin in the hands of the creator, but not an *Entstehung*, a historical emergence.[10] Christian morality set itself up for a fall by resting its authority on a claim to being a timeless revelation while simultaneously enjoining its adherents to be reflective and truthful, since this was bound eventually to issue in their becoming reflective and truthful about the history of their own values.[11]

Yet in tracing the higher *to the lower*, genealogy can seem to add insult to historicization: it treats these exalted phenomena not only as having a history, but as having a history tracing back to lower things, such as the base drives and needs that human beings share with other animals. In the eyes of those who regard the

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[10] See Foucault (1971). He attributes the distinction to Nietzsche, but it is truer to the spirit than the letter of Nietzsche's works, since Nietzsche's own use of the terms "*Ursprung*" and "*Entstehung*" or "*Herkunft*" does not appear to track any such distinction.

[11] See Nietzsche (2005a, Beyond, §2 ); see also Williams (2000, 160) and Queloz and Cueni (2019, §2).

most exalted phenomena as timeless givens that are categorically distinct from the lowly world of becoming, a genealogy tracing the higher to lowly practical needs is therefore doubly irreverent. It dispels the higher's pretensions to purity from mundane motives.

Here an important distinction beckons, however, namely that between *reductive* and *non-reductive* genealogies. It is one thing to reveal the higher to have an explanatory *connection to* the lower; quite another to reveal the higher to be just another *version of* the lower masquerading as the higher. A reductive genealogy *reduces* the higher to the lower, pulling the mask from the higher and thereby revealing it to be another instantiation of the lower masquerading as the higher: the will to truth is unmasked as the will to power, justice as prudence, selflessness as selfishness, intrinsic as instrumental value. Genealogy then appears as an application of the old rhetorical device that Quintilian, in his *Institutio Oratoria*, dubbed *paradiastole*: one evaluative description of a phenomenon is replaced by a redescription that casts the phenomenon in a very different evaluative light.[12]

One way to deploy genealogy in this reductive fashion is to debunk the lofty ideals of the Enlightenment itself. Enlightenment genealogizing can be turned back on itself, revealing a tension between the fuel and the findings of genealogical inquiry. This in-house tension makes itself felt, for example, when Kant defends metaphysics' claim to being the Queen of the sciences against Locke's attempt to undermine that claim by imputing an unflattering "genealogy" to the purported Queen, tracing her "birth" to "the rabble of common experience" (1998, A ix). Locke was mistaken in his genealogizing, Kant assures us, but he concedes that *if* Locke's

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[12] On genealogy as paradiastolic redescription, see also Skinner (2002, 185), Owen (2018), Srinivasan (2019, 144), and Queloz (2021a, 302).

genealogy had been accurate, the Queen's pretensions would "rightly have been rendered suspicious" (1998, A ix). This tension between rationalist and empiricist or naturalistic currents of thought is what leads Robert Brandom to describe genealogy as the "revenge of Enlightenment *naturalism* on Enlightenment *rationalism*" (2015, 3): if Enlightenment rationalism precipitated the disenchantment of the world *through* reason, genealogy provoked the disillusionment *with* reason; if the eighteenth century was the Age of Reason, the nineteenth century, with the advent of Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud, became the Age of the Great Unmaskers.[13]

A non-reductive genealogy, by contrast, presents the higher as genuinely distinct from the lower, but reveals a connection between the two which helps explain why the lower gave rise to, or favoured the retention of, the higher. Williams's genealogy of the value of truth offers a clear illustration of an explicitly non-reductive genealogy. The genealogy takes a higher element—in this case, truth as an intrinsic value, which is to say the attitude of valuing the truth *for its own sake*, so that one has a *pro tanto* reason to seek and tell the truth *because* it is the truth—and traces it to various lower elements: most basically, the fundamental human concern to obtain information about one's immediate environment and the risks and opportunities it affords. As Williams's genealogy brings out, someone who thinks of truth as an intrinsic value will behave differently from someone who does not—she will be more disposed to invest effort in finding out the truth even when it is otherwise of no use to her, or tell the truth to others even when she does not herself stand to gain from it and would be better served by keeping it to herself. If people were truthful only insofar as it served their concerns for things other than the truth, communication

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[13] See also Saar (2007) and Brassier (2016) for a discussion of this use of genealogy to unmask.

would be a great deal less cooperative, since we have all kinds of reasons *not* to tell the truth all the time. This is the basis of Voltaire's cynical quip that "people employ language only to conceal their thoughts" (1869, 82).[14] If it is to stake a claim against self-interest, therefore, the truth must be understood as valuable for its own sake—as being its own reward.

The upshot of Williams's genealogy is that the attitude of valuing the truth intrinsically stands in an instrumental relation to simpler and more basic concerns: *by* having many people in a society value the truth for its own sake, many other, less lofty concerns are indirectly being served, such as the concern to have access to a rich and reliable pool of information with which to meet one's basic needs. But the fact that the attitude of valuing the truth intrinsically stands in this instrumental relation to these other concerns does not debunk that attitude as a delusion; on the contrary, it helps explain why it makes perfectly good sense for a society really to cultivate this attitude: it is only *insofar* as truthfulness is understood as an end in itself that it can serve as a means to other ends. And if, like Williams, we explain the existence of values in terms of the existence of human valuations, then the fact that a society has good reason to *treat* the truth as an intrinsic value and possesses the hermeneutic and affective resources to *make sense* of it *as* an intrinsic value just is for it to *be* an intrinsic value in that society, and not just a mere illusion or pretence.[15]

A non-reductive genealogy, which traces the higher to the lower in the sense of

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[14] Similar *bon mots* have been attributed to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, Edward Young, Oliver Goldsmith, Robert South, and others. Voltaire's version has the advantage that it does not deny that truth-telling is a basic purpose of language—in fact, the joke turns on it.

[15] See Williams (2002, 92; 2006a, 137). I elaborate on this point in Queloz (2018; 2021b, ch. 7).

*explaining* the higher in terms of the lower, does therefore precisely not collapse the higher element into the lower. Rather, it helps us understand why the lower element would lead a genuinely new element to arise or be retained in some form over the course of history. One important way in which genealogy can do that is by revealing the *instrumental dependences* between the higher and the lower element: the respects in which one element *serves* the other. But the fact that the higher element is instrumental to the satisfaction of the lower element need not mean that the higher element, when correctly understood, must be seen as nothing but a dressed-up version of the lower. The search for the truth may be motivated in good part by the desire for fame, as James Watson candidly admits in his account of the discovery of the structure of DNA.[16] But the presence of an ulterior motive need not undermine the more immediate motive. Even if the search for truth is driven by a desire for fame, this does not reduce one to the other as long as what one desires to be famous *for* is having found out the truth.[17]

In fact, the mere observation of a link between high-minded concerns and more worldly ones *cannot* rationally undermine the high-minded concerns unless it receives succour from a further assumption: the assumption that high-minded concerns, to be the genuine article, *should not have* any such ties to lowly concerns. It is on the back of the conviction that the higher should remain entirely *pure of* the lower that revealing the higher's roots in the lower casts doubt on its high standing. Judith Shklar observes of genealogy in the original sense: "To recognize the destructive possibilities of genealogy one must also appreciate the pride in noble

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[16] See Watson (1968).

[17] A point that Williams (2002, 142) presses against reductive interpretations of work in the sociology of knowledge.

ancestors"; "it is because origins can glorify that they can also defame" (1972, 129–30). The point generalizes to genealogies of cultural phenomena. It is typically the antecedent pride in purity of origin that lends genealogies dragging their target through the mud their defamatory power. Genealogical debunking is enabled by the purist assumption that the higher must have higher origins.

But instead of facilely leveraging this purist assumption, sophisticated genealogists from Nietzsche through Foucault to Williams reject it as betraying a kind of weakness and failure to face up to reality. Nietzsche castigates what he calls "the metaphysicians' basic faith, *the faith in the opposition of values,*" which is the conviction that "[t]hings of the highest value must have another, separate origin *of their own*,—they cannot be derived from this ephemeral, seductive, deceptive, lowly world, from this mad chaos of confusion and desire" (2002, §2).[18] While he seeks to criticize Christian values in light of their genealogy, he does not take them to be undermined *simply* by their lowly origins: "inquiry into the origin of our evaluations … is in no way identical with a critique of them" (2009, 1885, 2[189]), he points out. "One could have proven ever so unflattering things about the origins of moral valuations: now that these forces are *here*, they can be used and have their *value* as forces" (2009, 1886, 7[6]).[19] In a similar vein, Foucault remarks: "I have done nothing other than write the history of psychiatry to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Why should so many people, including psychiatrists, believe that I am an antipsychiatrist? It's because they are not able to accept the real history of their institutions, which is, of course, a sign of psychiatry being a pseudoscience. A real

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[18] Compare also Nietzsche (1986, I, §1; 2002, §230; 2005b, Reason, §4).

[19] See also the better-known passage in Book Five of *The Gay Science* (Nietzsche 2001, §345).

science is able to accept even the shameful, dirty stories of its beginning" (1988, 15).

And Williams regards it as a weakness to be unable to accept that the things we prize

have humble beginnings and are entangled with lower things: "To suppose that the

values of truthfulness, reasonableness, and other such things that we prize or

suppose ourselves to prize, are simply revealed to us or given to us by our nature, is

not only a philosophical superstition, but a kind of weakness" (1995, 148).[20] By

rejecting both the reduction of the higher to the lower *and* the purist assumption

that any explanatory connection with the lower impugns the higher, these

genealogists clear a path for genealogies that explain the higher without explaining

it away.

Even when a genealogy is ostensibly reductive, moreover, the more charitable and

interesting reading may be one on which it is *ultimately* non-reductive. Post-

modernist genealogists like Foucault, in particular, are routinely understood as

trying to argue from the observation that the boundary between the force of reason

and the force of power is not always clear-cut to the conclusion that there is no real

distinction between reason and power, and that reason must reduce to power. But

as Amy Allen (2017, 187) and Daniele Lorenzini (2022) have recently emphasized,

Foucault himself is not best understood as *reducing* reason to power. He explores the

*relation* between the two, but it remains a relation between two non-identical *relata*.

As he unequivocally puts it in an interview with Gérard Raulet: "studying their

*relation* is precisely my problem. If they were identical, I would not have to study

them and I would be spared a lot of fatigue as a result. The very fact that I pose the

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[20] This is connected with Williams's Nietzschean "pessimism of strength" (2011, 190). See
Queloz (2021b, 187–92) and Krishnan and Queloz (manuscript).

question of their relation proves clearly that I do not *identify* them" (1998, 455).[21]

Admittedly, however, a genealogy investigating the relations between reason and power as Foucault does may leave one unable to continue to accept the opposition between the higher and the lower element *in its original form*. Even if genealogies do not reduce the higher to the lower, they tend not to leave everything where it was—that is part of the point of telling them. And if the original opposition conceived of the force of reason as completely *unconditioned by* and *exclusive of* merely causal power, then a Foucauldian picture will indeed force us to conclude that, on the terms of *that* opposition, everything is power.

Yet what this shows is not that Foucault's genealogical account is reductive after all, but that the model on which we classify genealogies into reductive and non-reductive ones, just as we classify sonnets into Petrarchan and Shakespearean ones, is too simple. One and the same genealogy can be reductive in one sense and non-reductive in another: it can collapse the higher into the lower in one sense but not in another.

To capture this complexity, we can redeploy the distinction between reductive and non-reductive as a distinction between *two phases* in genealogical reflection. In the first, reductive phase, genealogical reflection shows us that *as we conceived* the opposition between the higher and lower elements, the higher reduces to the lower, so that the lower is all there is. But recognizing that everything we thought was higher is really a form of the lower is but a first step. In the second, non-reductive phase, we can *resituate the original opposition within the lower*, and thereby come to

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[21] In this passage, Foucault is talking more specifically about the relation between knowledge and power, but on his account, knowledge is one of the principal forms that reason takes.

see that, on the more realistic understanding of the opposition that the genealogy suggests, the higher and the lower are, though more similar to each other than we originally thought, still far from identical.

What a genealogical exploration of the relation between reason and power encourages us to do, then, is to resituate the opposition between the force of reason and the force of power *within* the de-idealized world that the genealogy has laid bare—or, more accurately, it encourages us to realize that this less pure-minded distinction is the one that was being drawn in practice all along. If relations of power pervade even the clearest manifestations of the force of reason, we need not reject any and all attempts to contrast reason with power; we might instead "resituate the original opposition in a new space, so that the real differences can emerge between the force which is argument and the force which is not—differences such as that between listening and being hit, a contrast that may vanish in the seminar but which reappears sharply when you are hit" (Williams 2002, 9). In contrasting and interrogating the relation between the operation of reasons and the operation of causes, we need not think of the operation of reasons as floating free of the operation of causes. As Williams emphasizes, "hoping that public political discussion should be moderately rational and should address the reasons of individuals and groups" is not necessarily to be "committed to the nonsense of supposing that it could be transcendentally air-lifted out of the world of persuasion and power" (2006b, 117–18). We do not have to start from Platonic or Kantian conceptions of pure reason as something essentially unadulterated by causal forces that needs to be isolated and protected from distortion by power. We can start instead from a picture on which power is *everywhere*, being constitutively involved even in the most supremely rational forms of thinking and communicating, and understand appeals to reason

and rational argument as encouraging *some* expressions of power over *other* expressions of power. On this picture, we grant that even the clearest instances of rational belief-formation still take place within relations of power, and can never be entirely free of the influence of such extra-rational forces as affect, desire, emotion, charisma, or social status. But we draw the distinction between being moved by reasons and being moved by other forces *within* those expressions of power. To use a term that helpfully covers the middle ground between the extremes of being moved by reason alone and being merely coerced by irrational forces, we draw a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable forms of *persuasion.*

Crucially, however, which forms of persuasion to accept and encourage and which to reject and discourage is not something that can be determined simply on the basis of a metaphysical account of the nature of reason or rational argument: it is an ineliminably ethical and political question. The task is not just a matter of *finding out* what pure reason objectively amounts to before proceeding to keep it free of distorting interferences from non-rational forces. Rational forces are inextricably bound up with—indeed, enabled and supported by—non-rational ones, and the social task of determining which combinations to accept and foster and which ones to reject and sanction is not one that can be completed once and for all, without drawing on other values, but a continual and context-sensitive task that essentially draws on the rest of a society's values. Certainly, a concept or a belief should not be discredited *just* because its formation or acquisition is in part the effect of someone's power. That would invalidate far too much. Nor can we simply reject any concept- or belief-formation involving coercion or emotional manipulation, because that would once again exclude too much. Williams points to successful education as a prime example of partly coercive but benign persuasion:

… as the ancient Greeks well knew, the power of persuasion, however benignly or rationally exercised, is still a species of power. Even if we can separate rational from less rational *considerations* deployed in persuasion, there is little reason to suppose that we can separate a rational from an irrational *agency* of persuasion. … The point is very clear with education. Pupils enter education, most often, under some kind of coercion, and some of them stay in it and listen only for those same reasons. If they have a good teacher, those reasons fall away, but the good teacher will have substituted other powers of persuasion for those. Much successful education, after all, is a benign form of seduction. (2002, 226)

We cannot distinguish acceptable from unacceptable forms of persuasion simply by considering how our practices live up to some Platonic ideal of reason that is pure of power, or an Ideal Speech Situation *à la* Habermas that is free of *Herrschaft*. A better picture is one which "everything is, if you like, persuasion, and the aim is to encourage some forms of it rather than others" (Williams 1995, 148). This, as Williams notes, "is not a technical task, like clearing a radio channel of static. It is a practical and ethical task, like deciding who can speak, how and when" (1995, 148). The difference that leads us to accept the power of education and political debate but not the power of brainwashing and gaslighting is not *just* a technical difference to be discovered through sufficiently close scrutiny of the processes involved (important as this close scrutiny no doubt is). The difference is also, and essentially, an ethical and political difference that we are continually making and renegotiating in the light of our evolving social situation and our other values and convictions.

In thus changing our understanding not just of the *relation* between the higher and the lower, but of the very *relata*, genealogy counteracts the ever-present temptation to inflate mere *distinctions* into *dichotomies*.[22] A *distinction* may have a

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[22] A helpful contrast that Hilary Putnam adapts from John Dewey; see Putnam (2002, 7–11).

range of useful applications, but it need not carry with it the expectation that it must always and everywhere be clear-cut, or even applicable at all. Once paired with this expectation, however, the distinction becomes a *dichotomy*, suggesting a fundamental and ubiquitous gulf in the fabric of things—a metaphysical dualism, of which the Cartesian dualism of mind and body is the paradigm example. And as Brandom notes, the mark of a metaphysical dualism is that the relation between the distinguished items has become unintelligible or at least mysterious.[23]

A genealogy making intelligible how the higher relates to the lower, and why the two would come to be distinguished in the first place, can help dispel this air of mystery and deflate the dichotomy along with its concomitant dualism. It puts us in a position to understand the distinction *as a distinction* rather than as a dichotomy—a distinction that is not necessarily always clear-cut, and not necessarily always applicable, but that we may nevertheless come to draw in certain situations *for good reasons* that the genealogy can bring to light. Genealogical reflection will then *begin* by reductively debunking an inflated conception of the distinction as a sharp dichotomy. But in adverting to the forces explaining why we ever came to draw any kind of distinction between the lower and the higher in the first place, genealogical reflection also gives us the means to redraw the distinction in more realistic terms that are stable under reflection. The resulting distinction may not be always be clear-cut. But just because a distinction is not clear-cut does not mean that it is no real distinction. As Wittgenstein once remarked, rejecting a distinction merely because it is not clear-cut would be "like saying that the light of my reading lamp is no real light at all because it has no sharp boundary" (1958, 27).

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[23] See Brandom (1994, 615; 2002, 263–65).

## 2. From Origins to Evaluation

Thus far, I have argued that while genealogy traces the higher to the lower, it need not be understood as reducing the higher to the lower. Genealogy may not be reductive at all, and even where it is, the reduction may itself usher in a non-reductive understanding of the opposition between higher and lower.

But once genealogy is thought of in non-reductive terms, the question arises of how the genealogically revealed connection between higher and lower affects one's view of the higher. Two related ideas about this have gained currency: that genealogy must be thought of as merely *preparatory*, but not *constitutive* of the normative evaluation of the higher;[24] and that insofar as a genealogy, however indirectly, feeds into normative evaluation, its contribution takes a primarily *negative* form: it destabilizes or unsettles received ideas, but it does not positively offer guidance for how to devise or fashion better ideas.[25] On this account, genealogy reveals the contingency of our arrangements and thereby conveys "a sense for the non-necessary" (Saar 2002, 217). This "frees us for social transformation," but it "does not tell us precisely what to do or where to go" (Hoy 2008, 283). Genealogy liberates, but it does not guide.

Both of these ways of reining in the normative ambitions of genealogy can be motivated by a concern to steer clear of the 'genetic fallacy': the alleged mistake of inferring something about the normative status (i.e., the validity or justification) of something from propositions about its genesis (i.e., its origins or causal history). The distinctions animating the charge—between genesis and validity, explanation and justification, causes and reasons—trace back to Kant, who, perhaps reacting to the

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[24] See, e.g., Dutilh Novaes (2015, 100–1) and Koopman (2009; 2013, 20).

[25] See Lorenzini (2020, 2022) for critical discussions of this idea.

aforementioned pressure exerted by Enlightenment naturalism on Enlightenment rationalism, insisted on separating the *quaestio facti*—the question of fact, which is a matter of the factual origin of something—from the *quaestio iuris*—the question of right, which is a matter of the evidence for it.[26] These distinctions were eagerly taken up during the 'psychologism' debates raging from the 1880s to the 1920s, when philosophers were keen to demarcate their work from the nascent discipline of psychology.[27] The distinctions were further entrenched in the 1930s and 40s with the spread of logical positivism, and in 1934, the 'genetic fallacy' charge was explicitly introduced under that heading by Morris Cohen and Ernest Nagel.[28] In that period, the distinctions powering the charge derived their point not least from the need to counter the widespread and blatantly fallacious use of genetic reasoning to discredit ideas on the grounds of their alleged "Jewish origins"—the ideas of Einstein, notably, but also those of the logical positivists themselves.[29]

Yet for all their utility at different junctures in their history, the distinctions animating the 'genetic fallacy' charge should not be inflated into dichotomies. Just because *some* reasoning from origins to justification is fallacious does not mean that every form of reasoning along these lines is. And just because *some* things are usefully classified as falling either on one side of these distinctions or the other does not mean that nothing defies such neat partitioning.

Once it is recognized that genealogy, though it traces the higher to the lower, need neither reduce the higher to the lower nor commit the genetic fallacy, this opens up two possibilities: (i) the genealogical connection to the lower can be used

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[26] See Kant (1998, A 84/B 116).

[27] See Kusch (1995).

[28] See Cohen and Nagel (1934, 388).

[29] See Giere (1999, 14) and Edmonds (2020, 29, 114–28, 38).

to inform an *evaluation* of the higher; and (ii) this evaluation of the higher can be used to *guide* us in moving forward. Where that higher element is a *concept*, genealogy can be a form of *conceptual ethics*—a critical evaluative reflection on which concepts we have most reason to use—and the resulting evaluation can in turn guide attempts to extend, revise, or improve our conceptual repertoire through *conceptual engineering.*[30]

Take evaluation first. A non-reductive genealogy can affect our evaluation of the genealogized object in more complex ways than a genealogy which simply *identifies* its object with something lower. It is a familiar thought that a genealogy tracing some respected higher element to "the will to power" or some other dark desire can be experienced as *subversive* of the higher. A less familiar thought is that when the lower element is an *important practical need* rather than some sinister motive, a genealogy tracing the higher to the lower can be experienced as *vindicatory*, which is to say *strengthen confidence* in the higher, especially if that higher element was previously suspected of being an otherworldly idea that no longer had a place in a modern, disenchanted understanding of the world. A genealogy can vindicate the

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[30] I take the term 'conceptual ethics' from Burgess and Plunkett (2013a, b), though they make slightly broader use of it to include epistemological and methodological reflection on what should inform such evaluative reflection; see also McPherson and Plunkett (2020). On the relation between conceptual ethics and conceptual engineering, see Burgess and Plunkett (2020). The idea that genealogies of concepts can inform claims in conceptual ethics has recently been in the ascendant. It has been defended in those terms by Plunkett (2016) and Dutilh Novaes (2020). But the general idea that genealogies can inform one's evaluation of their object has been advocated more widely (Geuss 2020, 69–82; Leuenberger 2021; Lorenzini 2020; Prinz and Raekstad 2020; Srinivasan 2019; Testini Forthcoming; Thomasson 2020), and it is a staple of the literature on Nietzsche; see, e.g., May (1999), Richardson (2004), Owen (2007), Prescott-Couch (2014), Leiter (2015), and Reginster (2020) for different interpretations of Nietzsche to this effect.

continued cultivation of the higher element by showing that it is not just an archaic holdover or an irredeemable fetish, but an indispensable instrument to the satisfaction of an important concern.

To see how a genealogy can properly have this kind of evaluative force, it helps to think of genealogizing as a *performative*: *in telling* a genealogy, the genealogist performs a kind of speech act. When viewed in those terms, it becomes evident that a genealogy is not *intrinsically* vindicatory or subversive, but vindicatory or subversive *for someone*. This suggests that even a minimalist model of how a genealogy facilitates the evaluation of its object should be not just *dyadic*, with a higher and a lower element, but *triadic*. In telling a genealogy to someone, the genealogist connects:

(1)  the *higher element* whose origins the genealogy proposes to uncover;

(2)  the *lower element* to which the genealogy traces the higher element;

(3)  the genealogy's *addressee*, who has certain values and normative expectations, including about what kinds of origins the higher element *ought to have* if it is to merit confidence and respect.

On this triadic model, a genealogy alerts the addressee to a certain connection between the higher and the lower element, and in virtue of the addressee's values and normative expectations, that connection can be normatively significant in the eyes of the addressee and alter the addressee's evaluation of the genealogized object.

The genealogies of Craig (1990), Williams (2002), and Fricker (2007), for example, aim to be vindicatory, and they ultimately all draw their vindicatory force from the idea that human beings have a very basic need to acquire more information about their environment than they can acquire on their own if they are going to

survive in that environment and cope with its risks and opportunities.[31] Given this need, it follows that human beings have a need to *pool* information through some sort of epistemic division of labour, and they accordingly need to develop and cultivate the concepts and dispositions that will enable them to pool information *effectively*. According to Craig's genealogy, the original point of the prototype of the concept of knowledge is to equip inquirers *to tap into* the pool of information, in particular by enabling them to *identify good informants* on a given issue. According to Williams's genealogy, the original point of the dispositions involved in valuing the truth intrinsically is to equip members of the community to be *accurate contributors to* and *sincere dispensers from* the pool of information. And according to Fricker's genealogy, the original point of the virtue of testimonial justice is to enable recipients of information to *neutralize the confounding influence of prejudice* in drawing from the pool. These are genealogies of different aspects of the institution of testimony, and what promises to make them vindicatory *for us* is that they derive, from a need so basic and generic that we can hardly avoid *sharing* and *endorsing* it even now, a need for things that we did not necessarily expect we needed in that way, such as the concept of knowledge, the intrinsic value of truth, and the virtue of testimonial justice.

Yet the genealogies can only *aim* to be vindicatory; whether they in fact are depends on the third element in the triad: the *addressee* of the genealogy. Most basically, it depends on whether the addressee wants to see the need that is purportedly served by the higher element satisfied. The genealogy's upshot can be

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[31] See also Craig (1986, 1993, 2000, 2007), Williams (1997, 2007, 2014), and Fricker (2009, 2010, 2019). I offer detailed reconstructions of these three genealogies and highlight the connections between them in Queloz (2021b, chs. 6–8).

thought of as taking a conditional form: *if* you care about the lower element, *then* you should care about the higher element. That is where the addressee's *own values*—what they endorse or condemn, what they regard as a legitimate concern and what as a mere caprice—are determinative. We might say that there is a normative division labour between the genealogy and the addressee. The genealogy channels evaluative valence from the lower to the higher, but the one injecting the relevant evaluative valences is the genealogy's addressee, even though the way the genealogy is told by the genealogist of course affects what evaluative response is elicited from the addressee.

The addressee also comes into play in two further respects. One is that a genealogy's effect is a function of the addressee's *prior knowledge*. A genealogy is at its most powerful when the connection it uncovers between the higher and the lower is one that the addressee had either forgotten or never realized. A genealogy might transform someone from being suspicious of the intrinsic value of truth to being a staunch advocate and proselytizer of it, but only if it manages to show the addressee something he or she did not already know. This is not to deny that there is a role for genealogies that merely rehearse something familiar (and not just because human beings are notoriously fond of hearing stories they already know); there is a role for genealogical narratives in forming and maintaining a sense of community or shared identity[32]—Lorenzini (2020, 3) aptly refers in this connection to the 'we-making' dimension of genealogy. But insofar as a genealogy carries evaluative force, it is at its most powerful when it is revelatory of something, and this makes its evaluative

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[32] Although that function is not specific to genealogical narratives; see Meretoja (2018) for a discussion of how narratives can bind people together and contribute to individual and cultural self-understanding.

force dependent on the prior knowledge of its addressee.

The last respect in which the addressee comes in, finally, is in bringing certain *normative expectations* to the genealogy—expectations about what kinds of origins something *ought* to have if it is to merit confidence (as opposed to *descriptive* expectations about what kinds of origins something is in fact likely to have). Normative expectations can be represented as taking the form of a conditional and its contrapositive: *if* some higher element of such-and-such a kind merits confidence or respect, *then* it has such-and-such origins; *if* it lacks such-and-such origins, *then* it does not merit confidence or respect.

These normative expectations also contribute to determining whether a genealogy is experienced as vindicatory or subversive by its addressee, and when these expectations take a particularly demanding form (as they would in someone with a Platonic sensibility, for instance), then even genealogies aiming to be vindicatory, like those of Craig, Williams, and Fricker, will be experienced as subversive: if the value of truth needs to be traceable to a Platonic Form to merit confidence, then a pedigree showing it to have merely grown out of a set of mundane practical needs—however pressing—will fall short of the addressee's normative expectations and discredit the value of truth.

This is where we encounter the ethical demand on a genealogy's addressees to be *realistic* in their normative expectations. For if truthful genealogical inquiry takes place against the disenchanted, naturalistic *Weltbild* that forms its characteristic backdrop, Platonic normative expectations make a universal acid of genealogical reflection: *all* values, once truthfully and naturalistically genealogized, will fall short of *those* expectations, and nihilism—the dissolution of all values—beckons. And if the consequence of having such high normative expectations is indiscriminate

genealogical subversion, then the needle of our moral compass should jump from *modus ponens* to *modus tollens*. Since we cannot reasonably want genealogical reflection to be indiscriminately subversive and issue in nihilism, we have reason to adjust our normative expectations so as to resituate the contrast between vindicatory and subversive origins *within* the range of origins that our values might realistically be expected to have. Our normative expectations cannot properly remain entirely independent of our descriptive expectations. The realization that certain normative expectations issue in indiscriminate subversion and nihilism itself yields an ethical reason to engage in expectation management.[33] Much as genealogical reflection can lead us resituate the contrast between reason and power within a world in which everything is persuasion, therefore, it can lead us to resituate the contrast between vindicatory and subversive origins within a naturalistic worldview. In this sense, there is an ethical demand on the genealogy's addressees to have realistic expectations.

This triadic model thus allows us to make sense, in highly general terms, of the fact that a genealogical connection to the lower can be non-fallaciously used to inform an *evaluation* of the higher. But if we push further the question of what form this evaluation takes and what it can lead to, it begins to matter what exactly we plug into the lower place of the genealogy and what its relation to the higher is. This is why I have found it useful to carve off, under the heading of 'pragmatic genealogy', those genealogies that seek to explain the emergence of some higher phenomenon in terms of its *practical effects* by showing that those practical effects tend to be instrumentally subservient to the satisfaction of some *concern* (e.g., a practical need,

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[33] I have argued elsewhere that something like this line of reasoning can be found in Nietzsche. See Queloz and Cueni (2019).

interest, or desire) that explains the higher phenomenon's retention.[34] Insofar as the practical effects are nefarious in the eyes of the addressee and at risk of being realized going forward, the genealogy will be subversive. On the other hand, insofar as the practical effects are beneficial because subservient to a concern that the addressee wants to see satisfied and promise to continue to be beneficial going forward, the genealogy will be vindicatory. The genealogies of Craig, Williams, and Fricker are pragmatic genealogies of the latter kind. They reveal the continued subservience of their objects to concerns that are widely recognizable as important practical needs, thereby showing their addressees that these are ideas that help us to live.

## 3. Genealogy as a Guide to Engineering

This brings us, finally, to the second claim, that genealogical evaluation can also *guide* us in moving forward as we extend, revise, or improve our conceptual practices. Here an asymmetry emerges between subversive and vindicatory genealogies. While subversive genealogies tell us to *move away* from something without giving us any guidance as to what to move *to*, vindicatory genealogies do offer positive guidance in that regard. In a slogan: vindicatory genealogy is indicatory (of where to go from here).

The reason for this is that by presenting a cultural phenomenon—say, a concept—as performing some function that we want to see performed, a vindicatory genealogy hands us a normative standard that can guide further elaborations of our conceptual apparatus. It tells us what work the concept can do for us, and this covers not just the work it *already* does for us when it functions well, but also the work it *could* do for us if it functioned better, or more often, or more widely.

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[34] See Queloz (2017, 2018, 2020a, b, 2021b).

Fricker's genealogy of the virtue of testimonial justice offers an example. Rather than to begin with something that is already ubiquitous and to account for its ubiquity by showing that it answers to utterly basic human needs, Fricker does the reverse, arguing that the virtue of testimonial justice answers to utterly basic human needs and *should* therefore be ubiquitous, even though, at this point, it is clearly not; her genealogical derivation of testimonial justice presents it as something that we have only patchily achieved, and that "remains for the most part … something that we can and should aim for in practice" (2007, 98–9). This vindicatory genealogy guides us going forward, because it suggests that the virtue of testimonial justice is worth promulgating more widely than it has been.

Most basically, then, genealogy can guide the forward-looking project of improving our ways by helping us determine what we want from given concepts, values, or practices, and what it would mean for them to be better. Evidently, genealogy's guidance in that regard is called for only when we do not yet know what we want from them; William Bateson did not need a genealogy of the concept of *gene* to know that he wanted the concept to help him explain and predict patterns of inheritance.[35] But with many of our concepts, we are not necessarily clear about what work, if any, they do for us. A good illustration is the concept of *knowledge.* It is ubiquitous in every sense of the term, but we are typically not in a position to rattle off the manifold functions it no doubt fulfils. And then a project in normative epistemology that wanted to ameliorate our concept of knowledge might take its guidance from a genealogy of the concept revealing what functions it performs. As

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[35] See Weber (2005, 195–96) for an illuminating account of the development of the concept of a *gene*, and see Brigandt (2010) as well as Brigandt and Rosario (2020) for a discussion of how changes in the concept appear rational in light of the concept's aim.

Sally Haslanger writes: "the best way of going about a project of normative epistemology is first to consider what the point is in having a concept of knowledge: what work does it, or (better) could it, do for us? and second, to consider what concept would best accomplish this work" (2012, 352).

But genealogy can also guide conceptual innovation that goes beyond optimizing the concepts we have inherited for the kind of work they already perform. More innovative conceptual engineering may be called for in adapting our conceptual apparatus to changing circumstances or novel challenges, especially when these challenges are not best addressed using our existing concepts.

One of the best examples of this is the demand for conceptual innovation created by the increasing emergence and power of international institutions. Within liberal democratic nation states, there are long traditions of thinking about how to reconcile rule by state power with individual and collective freedom. There are concepts such as *democracy*, *the rule of law*, or *the separation of powers* that allow citizens to differentiate between *legitimate* exercises of state power and mere coercion. But these conceptual resources do not always travel well beyond the context out of which they grew and to which they are tailored. Transpose the concepts of *democracy*, *the rule of law*, or *the separation of powers* from the domestic context in which they originated into the international realm of the United Nations Security Council, the World Trade Organization, and the European Court of Human Rights, and you soon find that these understandings of what renders exercises of power legitimate are, at best, only very partially applicable and realizable in this novel context. The resulting predicament is not just that the forms of power exercised by these institutions risk being experienced as insufficiently legitimated, but that these forms of power are held to a standard of legitimacy that they have little

prospect of meeting, since it is a standard tailored to the nation state.

Hence, Damian Cueni (2020, manuscript) has argued that instead of trying, with limited success, to get international institutions to live up to our domestic concepts of legitimacy, we should genealogically reverse-engineer what it is that these concepts *achieve* for us in the domestic context to begin with, and then aim to *recreate these achievements* in the international sphere. Genealogical reflection on why we care so much about democracy, the rule of law, or the separation of powers *within* the nation state can then guide us in recreating what we care about *beyond* the nation state, but not necessarily *in the same terms* or *along the same lines*. This is to use pragmatic genealogy as a helpful guide to conceptual innovation. It is conceptual engineering guided by conceptual reverse-engineering.


## 4. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued for three main claims: that although genealogies, true to their Enlightenment origins, tend to trace the higher to the lower, they need not identify the higher with the lower, but can elucidate the *relation* between them and prompt us to think more realistically about both *relata*; that if we think of genealogy's normative significance in terms of a triadic model that includes the genealogy's addressee, we can see that in tracing the higher to the lower, a genealogy can facilitate an evaluation of the higher element, and where the lower element is some important practical need rather than some sinister motive, the genealogy can even be vindicatory; and finally, that vindicatory genealogies, unlike subversive genealogies, can offer positive guidance regarding where to move to from there. All three claims are ways of highlighting under-appreciated aspects of the potential and power of genealogy against those who would either identify it with reductive

genealogical debunking or deny it any evaluative and action-guiding significance. And yet none of these claims should be particularly controversial. It should be a platitude that the cultural devices organizing human affairs have a history, and that when genealogically reconstructed in a suitably non-reductive form, that history can help us evaluate how these devices relate to our concerns, and how they might be improved going forward.

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