

# Ideas that work

Truth, knowledge, justice – to understand how our loftiest abstractions earn their keep, trace them to their practical origins

‘Ideas, Mr Carlyle, ideas, nothing but ideas!’ scoffed a hard-headed businessman over dinner with Thomas Carlyle, the Victorian essayist and historian of the French Revolution. The businessman had had enough of Carlyle’s endless droning on about ideas – what do ideas matter anyway? Carlyle shot back: ‘There was once a man called Rousseau who wrote a book containing nothing but ideas. The second edition was bound in the skins of those who laughed at the first.’ Ideas have consequences.

Of course, Carlyle picked an easy case. He was referring to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *On the Social Contract* (1762), a book brimming with incendiary political ideas that went on to fire up the leaders of the French Revolution. But the case for the practical importance of ideas is much harder to make for ideas that are more redolent of idle magniloquence than of revolutionary action. What of grand abstractions, with which our minds are stocked, such as knowledge, truth or justice? These are so entrenched that we can find it difficult to imagine doing without them. Yet it’s even more difficult to pin down just what useful practical difference they make to our lives. What exactly is the point of these ideas?

Unlike ideas of air, food and water that allow us to think about the everyday resources we need to survive, the venerable notions of knowledge, truth or justice don’t obviously cater to practical needs. On the contrary, these exalted ideals draw our gaze *away* from practical pursuits. They are imbued with grandeur precisely because of their superb indifference to mundane human concerns. Having knowledge is practically useful, but why would we also need the *concept* of knowledge? The dog who knows where his food is seems fine

without the concept of knowledge, so long as he's not called upon to give a commencement address. And yet the concepts of knowledge, truth or justice appear to have been important enough to emerge across different cultures and endure over the ages. Why, then, did we ever come to think in these terms?

Friedrich Nietzsche grumbled that, when it came to identifying the origins of lofty ideas, philosophers had a tendency to be led astray by their own respect for them. In dealing with what they felt were the 'highest concepts', the 'last wisps of smoke from the evaporating end of reality', they had reverently placed them 'at the beginning as the beginning', convinced that the higher could never have grown out of the lower: Plato's eternal Forms, the mind of God, Immanuel Kant's noumenal world – they had all served as cradles to higher concepts, offering them a suitably distinguished pedigree.

But to insist that higher concepts were bound to have higher origins, Nietzsche thought, was to let one's respect for those ideas get in the way of a truthful understanding of them. If, after the 'Death of God' and the advent of Darwinism, we were successfully to 'translate humanity back into nature', as Nietzsche's felicitous rallying cry had it, we needed to trace seemingly transcendent ideas such as knowledge, truth or justice to their roots in human concerns. Their origins weren't empyrean (to be sought in the highest spheres) but distinctly sublunary (found in lowly practical needs). Nietzsche encouraged us to ask: what necessities might have been the mothers of those inventions? And what, if anything, do they still do for us?

There are two fundamental difficulties in answering these questions. One is that, just because the concepts of knowledge, truth or justice are as old and ubiquitous as they are, there's no particular moment in the historical record to which we could turn to find out why they were originally introduced. Wherever we look, people always had these concepts already.

Moreover, the fact that people have been using these concepts for so long gives rise to the second difficulty. Over time, our concepts are likely to have accumulated such an overwhelming multiplicity of functions that it's hard to

know how to go about untangling them. The idea of truth as something valuable, for example, might have played an important part in the advent of non-mythological historiography in ancient Greece – but it also figured prominently in the rise of early modern science, Romanticism and liberal institutions such as the fourth estate, to name but a few of the historical developments to which it gave shape. In giving shape to these developments, the value of truth was shaped and elaborated by them in turn. If we now look at the resulting outgrowth of so much history, we can no longer simply read off what the function of the value of truth is. Where to begin? It is overladen with functions of all kinds, scrambled together over the course of history, defying any simple hypothesis.

However, in recent decades, philosophers have rediscovered an old method capable of overcoming these difficulties. This is the method of telling pragmatic genealogies of ideas – ‘genealogies’ because the method involves tracing ideas to their origins, and ‘pragmatic’ because it specifically seeks to understand their origins in practical concerns. Just as archaeologists who dig up a puzzling artefact will try to reverse-engineer its role in a lost civilisation by imaginatively reconstructing the kind of life it was woven into, pragmatic genealogists take an idea whose practical value is in doubt, or elusive, and try to reverse-engineer the idea’s function in human affairs by figuring out what practical concerns, if any, it answers to. In particular, the genealogical approach exploits one especially powerful way to get a sense of what an idea does for us: consider a community of human beings in which the idea is still lacking, and explore why they might be driven to invent it.

To get around the difficulty that the historical record starts too late when the idea in question is so fundamental to human life that every documented society already has it, pragmatic genealogists construct a model of a community of human beings lacking the idea: typically, a small community of human beings who share a common language, but do not yet have more elaborate forms of technology such as writing.

The State of Nature is not something you find out about. It is something you construct

Contemporary genealogists often label this model the 'State of Nature', in a nod to philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, David Hume and Rousseau, who likewise explored the origins of ideas and institutions using state-of-nature stories. Nowadays, however, genealogists setting out from a State of Nature emphasise that this starting point carries no claim about 'the natural state of human beings' (whatever that might mean). Nor is it a speculation about what human life was like before historical records began. The State of Nature is an expressly fictional idealisation. The State of Nature is not something you find out about. It is something you construct.

This sets pragmatic genealogies apart from evolutionary psychology's conjectural depictions of hominin life in the Pleistocene. Pragmatic genealogies prove themselves not through the detailed accuracy with which they depict the actual historical development of our concepts, but through the way in which they help us grasp connections between our practical needs and our concepts. Imagine having to explain to an alien why your car has the shape it does. Instead of painstakingly walking the alien through the stages of the assembly line on which the car was actually constructed, you could explain how its shape answers to a combination of practical needs: the need to move from A to B, the need to stay warm and dry, the need to steer and break, the need to have a good view of your surroundings, the need to see and be seen in the dark, etc. The best way to show how the car's shape is responsive to our needs isn't to work through the distractingly intricate causal process through which the car was actually constructed, but to reconstruct the car's shape as a response to a series of needs – perhaps through a narrative or an animation showing how, if we start from some primitive shape and successively warp it to meet a series of needs, we end up with something recognisably car-like. The State of Nature does the same to help us understand the shape of our concepts and their relation to our needs. It offers us an idealised, uncluttered model that we can tailor to our interests and tinker with in our imagination.

And because it's an idealised model that we can tailor to our interests and tinker with in our imagination, the State of Nature also helps us overcome the second difficulty, of knowing where to begin to unscramble the inscrutable multifunctionality of our ideas. The State of Nature gives us a way into the problem: we start with the most basic and generic needs that human beings can be safely assumed to have anyway, in just about any environment, and see if we can identify some way in which seemingly idle concepts would be of assistance in responding to those needs. This fictional starting point gives us a helpfully stripped-down heuristic device for explorative reflection on the problems we face and how certain concepts might help us solve them.

Though pragmatic genealogies using such State of Nature models do not primarily aspire to represent conceptual history exactly as it unfolded, the hypotheses suggested by these models are still empirical hypotheses. We can check them against our best understanding of what needs people really have, what needs they really acquired or lost in the course of history, whether the concepts we really find are as the model leads us to expect, and whether those concepts really do help us meet those needs. The point is that these are questions we didn't know to ask before exploring the State of Nature.

Imagine yourself in the State of Nature. You have very basic needs, such as the need for food or the need to steer clear of danger, but you don't yet have the concept of knowledge. You clearly need some information about your environment, in particular about the opportunities and risks it presents. Are the berries on the far side of the mountain ripe yet? And where has that bear gone? To gather this kind of information, you can, up to a point, rely on your 'onboard' sources of information – your senses, memory and reasoning faculty. But you'd be far better off if, in addition, you could tap into other people's stores of information. After all, people are in different places at different times and, as a result of such purely positional advantages, someone else might have already seen something you have not. To come by the information you require, but did not get through your onboard sources, you need to rely on informants – people who can tell you, say, whether the berries on the far side of the mountain are

ripe yet. But, of course, not just anyone will do. You need good or reliable informants, people whose opinion will actually help you satisfy your needs. So now you face a problem: how do you recognise a good informant on a given question?

What you need to develop, at this point, is some kind of thinking technique that will allow you to recognise a good informant when you see one. Much as a smartphone's capabilities can be extended by adding an app, you need a piece of mindware that will enable you to identify good informants as such. And the same is true of the other people in the State of Nature. You all have an interest in engaging in what philosophers call an epistemic division of labour (after *epistēmē*, ancient Greek for 'knowledge') whereby information is pooled.

This is where, [according](#) to Edward Craig's *Knowledge and the State of Nature* (1990), the concept of knowledge emerges to fill a need. It serves to flag good informants. This is no mean feat, because the property of being a good informant is not immediately observable like the property of being tall or dark-haired. There's an art to identifying good informants on a given question. The concept of knowledge therefore needs to track a variety of indicator properties – properties that are observable and that correlate well with and hence indicate the property of being a good informant on a given issue. For example, being able to offer a justification for one's opinion might serve as such an indicator property; or having a good track record on this type of issue; or standing in the right causal relation to the state of affairs in question (by having looked at the berries earlier today, for instance). The concept of knowledge you need is one that tracks these and other properties that reliably indicate a good informant.

According to Craig's pragmatic genealogy, then, the concept of knowledge is rooted in practical needs: its salient contribution to life in the State of Nature is that it renders you sensitive to the presence of people who know something you're trying to find out. And as the genealogical story shows, this is a need deriving from needs so basic that we today are likely to share those needs in some form, so that, for us as well, the concept of knowledge earns its keep

notably by helping us identify good informants. Though abstract and seemingly idle, the concept of knowledge thus turns out to be a true game-changer because it makes knowledge social: it transforms the solitary business of information acquisition into a joint enterprise, where we don't have to see everything with our own eyes, but mutually rely on each other to pool far more information than any one of us could ever gather by themselves.

For a community to pool information, it must cultivate accuracy and sincerity in its members

Having come this far in the genealogy of the concept of knowledge, we can explore the same scenario further to make sense of the idea of truth as a value. The Latin word for 'truth', *veritas*, adorns the blazons of countless institutions, and yet it can seem that, strictly speaking, truth is just a property of certain sentences, and not really the kind of thing that can carry value. As Bernard Williams remarked, when a mother finds out against all evidence to the contrary that her child survived the crash, this is of great value to her; yet this isn't the value of truth, but the value of survival. That is why Williams, in *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (2002), [proposes](#) to think of the value of truth as shorthand for various human attitudes towards truth – paradigmatically, the attitudes involved in seeking the truth and telling it to others. To value the truth, on this view, is to value being accurate and being sincere.

In order to understand why we ever came to value accuracy and sincerity, we can tell another pragmatic genealogy that begins right where Craig's genealogy left off. If the members of our imaginary community in the State of Nature are going to pool information by relying on each other as informants, they also need to cultivate whatever traits make good contributors to the pool of information. Otherwise, the pool of information is going to be vitiated by misinformation. What are the characteristics of good contributors to the pool of information?

There are basically two: first, in acquiring new information, good contributors should be disposed to get it right, with all that this implies in terms of their perseverance in the face of obstacles demanding investigative effort, their ability

to cope with uncertainty, and their willingness to forsake comforting illusions, otherwise they either fail to contribute to the pool or, worse, introduce misinformation into it. Second, once they've acquired information, good contributors should be willing to pass it on to others, with all that this implies in terms of being open with others, being genuinely helpful in what they say and how they say it, and resisting the temptation to withhold information or even mislead others for gain. We can thus see why, if a community is going to pool information, it needs to cultivate the character traits of accuracy and sincerity in its members.

But if you imagine yourself as a member of that community in the State of Nature, you can see that there remains a problem. As long as you value accuracy and sincerity only instrumentally, as characteristics that it's useful for members of your community to have in order for you to get at the information you need, there's nothing to stop you from being inaccurate or insincere when you stand to gain from it. You will not go the extra mile to see about those berries when you have eaten to your fill already; you will keep your high-yielding mushroom spot to yourself; and, perhaps most devastatingly for the enterprise of pooling information, you will lie whenever it suits you. Of course, what is true of you is true of every member of the community. People will be accurate or sincere only on the rare occasion when it suits them anyway, while most of the time they will prove terminally unfit contributors to the pool of information. Each will try to benefit from the pool without doing their bit, and the result will be that nobody benefits.

The salient solution to this problem is to cultivate in the members of the community a disposition to value accuracy and sincerity for their own sake, and not just for what else it gets them. If people see accuracy and sincerity as worthwhile traits for their own sake – as virtues – then exhibiting those traits will have its own weight in the balance of their deliberations, since virtues can be their own reward. People who value the truth intrinsically rather than just instrumentally think that manifesting accuracy and sincerity is in itself a good thing, and they will therefore sometimes try to get things right or refrain from

lying simply for that reason. Valuing the truth for its own sake does not make selfishness disappear, but it stakes a claim against selfishness. That might not be enough to overcome selfishness every time. We know that we can tell the occasional lie without making the heavens fall (as Williams notes, ‘if the heavens were going to fall, they would have fallen already’). But it does get the joint enterprise of pooling information off the ground.

The upshot of this genealogy is that the value of truth earns its keep notably by helping people gain and share information far more effectively than they otherwise could. The genealogy also brings out that the value of truth can accomplish this only insofar as it is not understood simply in instrumental terms. Accuracy and sincerity need to be valued for their own sake if they are to be instrumentally valuable in gaining and sharing information – the value of truth needs to outrun its function in order to be functional at all. Again, the needs we derived this need from are so basic that it would be hard for us not to share them, which suggests that valuing the truth for its own sake does something for us, too.

The State of Nature we have constructed holds yet more insight. Besides the need to identify good informants and cultivate good contributors to the pool of information, our imaginary model also alerts us to a fundamental need to cultivate the characteristics that make good recipients of information. This comes out if we de-idealise our model just enough to acknowledge that human communities are typically not completely homogeneous but divide into subgroups. For with differences in group identity comes the risk of prejudice against groups that are not your own. That’s a problem for the epistemic division of labour because, if you are so deeply prejudiced against certain groups within your community that you will undervalue or disregard their opinion no matter how many marks of the good informant they exhibit, you make a poor conduit of information. And again, the same is true of any other participant in the epistemic division of labour. Accordingly, there is a need for the community to cultivate whatever character traits will enable recipients of information to neutralise their own prejudices.

As Miranda Fricker [argues](#) in *Epistemic Injustice* (2007), the State of Nature thereby brings out the value to us of a certain kind of justice, which she calls ‘testimonial justice’: the justice involved in giving everyone the credibility they deserve when they convey beliefs to you (when they ‘testify’, in philosophers’ technical sense of the term). Fricker finds a poignant illustration of a lack of testimonial justice in Anthony Minghella’s screenplay for *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1999). Although the wealthy businessman Herbert Greenleaf deploys all his resources to discover who murdered his son, he is tragically defeated by his own sexist prejudice in his search for the truth: when his son’s fiancée, Marge Sherwood, voices her well-founded conviction that the killer is the eponymous Mr Ripley, Greenleaf brushes her off with the line: ‘Marge, there’s female intuition, and then there are facts.’

The advent of ‘post-truth’ politics has only confirmed that the value of truth wants defending

Much as Williams’s genealogy showed that everyone in the State of Nature has an interest in cultivating the virtues of accuracy and sincerity, Fricker’s genealogy shows that they also have an interest in neutralising prejudice by cultivating the virtue of testimonial justice. This is true even of the most dyed-in-the-wool sexist like Greenleaf. Insofar as people need to pool information effectively, they need everyone in the community to value testimonial justice for its own sake, because only then can the confounding influence of prejudice be resisted. If Craig’s and Williams’s genealogies were about the ideas we need to extend human capacities to get things right, Fricker’s genealogy is about the ideas we need to counter human tendencies to get things wrong.

Nietzsche chastised the ‘English genealogists’ of his day for ignoring the long history that lies between the ‘Darwinian beast’ and the ‘modern, unassuming moral milquetoast’. His own genealogy of Christian morality aimed to be more mindful of how our present ideas reflect a specific cultural history as well as generic anthropological needs. Craig, Williams, and Fricker – the modern-day English genealogists – should not be accused of repeating the same mistake. As

we saw, they precisely do not set out from our environment of evolutionary adaptation. But they too have a gulf to bridge, namely that between the simple dynamics of the State of Nature and the historically conditioned complexities of our actual situation.

To understand how our ideas reflect the demands not just of the highly general needs we considered, but also of many further and more historically local needs, we would need to continue our three genealogical narratives, bringing the State of Nature model ever closer to our actual situation by factoring in increasingly socio-historically local needs. Williams, for instance, continues his genealogy of accuracy and sincerity by exploring why, since Thucydides, accuracy has been extended to apply not just to descriptions of the recent past, but to the apparently less practically relevant distant past as well. He also explores why, since the 18th century, sincerity has been elaborated into an even more demanding ideal of authenticity, and he finally discusses why, in an even more socio-historically local development, accuracy and sincerity also came to serve the needs of liberal democracies, whose proper functioning is specially dependent on the cultivation of the virtues of truth in politics. Williams wrote this at the turn of the millennium, but the advent of 'post-truth' politics has, if anything, only confirmed his sense that the value of truth wants defending.

By gradually tailoring a genealogical model to the cultural situation that is more distinctively ours, then, pragmatic genealogists can capture and place the multiplicity of functions that our ideas perform for us, displaying how originally single-purpose tools have become Swiss Army knives that meet several needs at once. The resulting genealogical narratives provide neatly structured and perspicuous representations of the variety of needs our ideas answer to.

In so doing, genealogical narratives not only explain why we ever came by certain ideas, but also affect our attitude towards them going forward. But while Nietzsche's genealogy of Christian morality was extremely unflattering, the three pragmatic genealogies we considered are not meant to be destabilising. They illustrate that genealogies can also be vindicatory: they can strengthen our

confidence in what they explain by showing that it makes sense for us to have these ideas and why we continue to need them. These are ideas worth having.