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How far can genealogies affect the space of reasons? Vindication, justification and excuses

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ABSTRACT


Pragmatic vindictory genealogies provide both a cause and a rationale and can thus affect the space of reasons. But how far is the space of reasons affected by this kind of genealogical argument? What normative and evaluative implications do these arguments have? In this paper, I unpack this issue into three different sub-questions and explain what kinds of reasons they provide, for whom are these reasons, and for what. In relation to this final sub-question I argue, most importantly, that these arguments are ambiguous about what they give us reasons for, meaning that they can be interpreted both as justifications for recognizing the normative standing of certain norms, values, and practices – and thus for living by them – *and* as excuses for those that do so. I illustrate this point by reference to the genealogical vindication of honor cultures, showing how the vindictory argument can illuminate such case as one of excusing moral ignorance. Drawing on legal theory and moral philosophy, I show that different evaluative and normative implications hang on the result of the interpretation as either justification or excuse, and show that this ambiguity is a virtue rather than a limitation.

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1. Introduction

A genealogy reconstructs the causal process that brought its target of inquiry into existence, and it can feature in debunking or vindictory arguments, i.e. arguments that respectively weaken or strengthen one's confidence in the normative standing of the target¹.

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There are several ways in which genealogies can do so. Most scholars focused on epistemic forms of genealogical debunking and vindication – of certain sets of moral beliefs or moral beliefs in general. By attending to the processes through which such beliefs form, and by controlling whether they are epistemically reliable or not, the degree of confidence in the justification of such beliefs is either increased or decreased – some of these philosophers argue.²

Other scholars have explored another, ‘pragmatic’ or ‘ethical’ mode by which genealogies can debunk and vindicate (Queloz 2023). This is the approach to genealogy that I shall examine in this paper. Its most notable example is the work of Matthieu Queloz on the pragmatic genealogy of concepts (2021). According to Queloz, genealogical reconstructions of how certain concepts came into being can provide practical reasons to uphold them, and they can do so, primarily, by casting light on their enduring instrumental value. Attending to the origin of a given concept – according to Queloz – one may succeed at explaining, abductively, its emergence by appealing to the function it fulfilled and the fundamental human needs it helped to satisfy. Once this original instrumental link is illuminated, one can then assess whether the object of inquiry retains its instrumental value: as far as its instrumental value is maintained in current circumstances, the concept is vindicated (Queloz 2021, 212–242). Edward Craig’s (1990) genealogy of the of knowledge, Bernard Williams’s (2002) genealogy of truthfulness, and Miranda Fricker’s (2007) genealogy of testimonial justice, for Queloz, are all recent examples of how pragmatic genealogy can strengthen our confidence in the value of its target of inquiry.

Another prominent example is Victor Kumar’s (2019) genealogical vindication of resultant moral luck, that phenomenon by which agents are held responsible (and thus blameworthy and punishable) for downstream effects of their action that are beyond their control.³ Against critics, who are puzzled by this phenomenon in virtue of its contrast with the well-known principle that one should be held responsible only for what lies within one’s control, Kumar provides a genealogical argument analogous to those analyzed and systematized by Queloz. The genealogical argument takes its cue from evolutionary insights about punishment and moral learning and claims that the ‘rigid’ forms of blame and punishment associated with resultant moral luck (i.e. blame and punishment mostly

²See for instance Joyce (2006), Street (2006), Kahane (2011), Nichols (2014). Cf. Mogesen (2016) and Vavova (2021).

³Cf. Statman (2019). See also Kumar (2017) for other examples of genealogical vindications.

based on outcomes rather than only on intentions, and insensitive to the consequences that blaming and punishing might have) were and still are necessary to secure the social learning conditions that favor pro-sociality in human groups.

On such a pragmatic view of genealogy – shared by Queloz, Kumar, and other scholars – genealogical arguments can pragmatically increase one’s confidence about the normative standing of their targets of inquiry by bringing to light their instrumental value, thus providing practical reasons in their favor.⁴ Genealogies, on this view, are thus said to be able to provide ‘both a cause and a rationale’ (Kumar 2017, 124) and thus to ‘affect the space of reasons’ (Queloz 2020).⁵

What I intend to do in this essay is to determine the extent to which these claims hold. How far is the space of reasons affected by this pragmatic kind of genealogical argument? Or, in other and plainer words, what evaluative and normative upshots do these vindicatory arguments have? This is the fundamental question I will be concerned with, and I shall refer to it as the ‘extent question’. To answer it, I propose to unpack it in the three following sub-questions:

- (1) Reasons of which kind?
- (2) Reasons for whom?
- (3) Reasons for what?

Question 1 has already been answered quite satisfactorily in the literature. Virtually all the scholars involved in the debate indeed recognize that genealogies offers pro tanto and prima facie reasons for their target of inquiry. Such labels refer to two different ways in which these reasons might be defeated. The former signals that a reason might be *outweighed* by other reasons and other relevant considerations, whereas the latter signals that a reason might be *undermined*, i.e. rendered completely inoperative after further assessment.⁶ I have nothing to add to this. So, after elucidating the logical structure of pragmatic genealogical arguments and presenting an illustrative case study of pragmatic genealogical vindication in section 2, I shall tackle the remaining two sub-questions. By addressing them, I will delimit the evaluative and normative reach of these pragmatic, genealogical, and vindicatory arguments in two

⁴Among the scholars that highlighted the pragmatic dimension of genealogical arguments are Philip Pettit (2018), Nicholas Smyth (2020), Francesco Testini (2022a; 2022b), and Krista Lawlor (2023).

⁵Cf. Longworth (2022) and Smyth (2023, 167–169) for resistance to these claims.

⁶I am here adapting to reasons Reisner’s (2013) account of prima facie and pro tanto oughts.

important respects (for the sake of brevity, from now on I will often use the term ‘vindication’ to refer to these arguments and the term ‘vindicatory reasons’ to refer to the reasons they provide).⁷

In section 3 I tackle the second sub-question (‘reasons for whom?’) and confront Queloz’s view, according to which whether a pragmatic genealogical argument turns out to have a vindicatory effect ultimately depends on the expectations of the argument’s addressees – a view that I interpret as claiming that the actual justificatory power of vindications is conditional on the addressees believing that the sort of practical, instrumental reasons stemming from such arguments are among the right kinds of reasons to justify the target of inquiry. I here argue that such a claim misses an important distinction between two ways in which pragmatic genealogies can vindicate, namely a justificatory and an excusing way. My hypothesis here is that even when they fail to vindicate in the first way because of the expectations of the addressee, pragmatic genealogies are not thereby neutralized from an evaluative and normative point of view, for they may still vindicate in the latter. This means that pragmatic genealogy may fail to justify the use of certain concepts, the participation in certain practices, or the compliance with certain norms (all possible and appropriate targets of pragmatic genealogy, as I shall argue in a moment), but they can still excuse those that use such concepts, participate in such practices, and abide by such norms.

In section 4 – the most substantial one – I offer argumentative support to this hypothesis, which constitutes my answer to the third sub-question, i.e. ‘reasons for what?’. According to the hypothesis, vindications can be seen both as providing reasons to uphold certain concepts, practices, or norms and as providing reasons to excuse those who do so. The argument here comes in three steps. First, I elucidate the justification/excuse distinction drawing on legal theory and moral philosophy, where the distinction has been the object of an extensive debate (section 4.1). Then, I explain how vindications can be legitimately interpreted as providing excuses and, more specifically, how they can show that certain cases of moral ignorance are excusing (section 4.2). Finally, I illustrate how – depending on whether they are taken as justifications or excuses – different sets of evaluative and normative implications ensue (section 4.3).

⁷As far as I know, the first occurrence of the term ‘vindication’ in such a pragmatic key dates back to Herbert Feigl (1950). Beside a reappearance in the philosophy of David Wiggins ([1987] 2002, 200–209; 344–348), the notion re-emerged with Bernard Williams (Williams 2002, 36, 238). For a different usage of the term, see Owen (forthcoming).

2. Theoretical framework and case study.

Genealogical arguments are best described as comprising a causal premise (CP) outlining the origin and evolution of their target of inquiry, and a normative premise (NP) evaluating such a formation process. Here is the basic structure of vindicatory genealogical arguments for a token belief (or set of beliefs), *p*, and a belief-formation process *P*:

CP) *p* is formed on the basis of *P*.

NP) *P* is epistemically reliable (in some way).

C) *p* is to that extent justified.⁸

For most scholars who focused on evolutionary genealogical arguments in ethics, the kind of normativity at play in the normative premise – that is, the sense in which *P* is reliable – is epistemic, and the literature on the subject indicates a variety of ways in which belief-formation processes can be epistemically reliable or unreliable.⁹

The kind of pragmatic genealogical arguments I am concerned with displays the same basic structure, combining empirical and normative premises, but it departs from the scheme above in two crucial and related respects, namely in that these arguments do not primarily target beliefs, but different aspects of what I shall call ‘practices’, and in that they do not tap into epistemic normativity to substantiate the normative premise, but rather in moral normativity.

By practices, I mean patterns of behavior supported by the pro-attitudes of participants (Sangiovanni 2016).¹⁰ This concept is a term of art, and I resort to it because its elasticity allows us to capture several typical targets of pragmatic genealogical arguments. Consider, for instance, Williams’s vindicatory genealogy of truthfulness (2002), in which he trace back the point and purpose of truthfulness to the mundane, human need of pooling reliable information about the environment. Fundamentally, what Williams’s genealogy tries to vindicate is a pattern of behavior, namely the practice of carefully finding out the truth (accurate inquiry) and communicating it honestly (sincere communication). By doing so, however, he also gives reasons to cultivate the constitutive *values* and *virtues* of truthfulness (namely accuracy and sincerity), to abide by certain

⁸Sauer (2018, 212).

⁹See Sauer (2018, 30–41) for a typology.

¹⁰I shall not address the question of what the pro-attitudes are grounded in. Explicit rules, implicit norms, mere convention and so on are all possible candidates.

norms (i.e. the norms one ought to abide by to be accurate and sincere), and to keep the corresponding *concepts* ('accuracy' and 'sincerity' qua ethical concepts) in our moral vocabulary. In other words, there are several things that might be vindicated by pragmatic genealogical arguments, (such as values, virtues, and concepts) and all of them – I contend – can be understood as different aspects, or elements, of given practices.

It is such a focus on practices that allows pragmatic genealogies to make room for non-epistemic forms of vindication and debunking, tapping into moral normativity rather than epistemic normativity. Indeed, when beliefs are the target of genealogical inquiry (as it is the case in the bulk of the literature about evolutionary debunking arguments), epistemic considerations are arguably the only ones that matter for their justification.¹¹ Beliefs can be true or false, and thus many scholars plausibly maintain that truth is their constitutive standard of evaluation. Practices, in contrast to beliefs, do not have a truth-value, and practical reasons for and against them are thus legitimate considerations in their evaluation. In pragmatic genealogy, one important class of such considerations is expressed through the moral notion of 'needs'.¹²

As outlined in the introduction, pragmatic genealogies start by identifying the functions that their target practice conceivably emerged to fulfill and express such functions in terms of needs satisfaction. By going back to a simple and more or less hypothetical situation of origin in which the target of inquiry – say, a given concept – is lacking, and considering what might have driven someone to introduce it, the genealogist can hypothesize what need the concept most basically answers to, and what concatenation of concerns and circumstances engenders that need.¹³ This functional perspective opens the target to moral evaluation along two dimensions. First and foremost, from such a point of view, one can ask

¹¹In principle, it would be possible to offer a pragmatic genealogy of beliefs as well, but for it to claim any evaluative import one would also have to follow Schmidt (2022) and the few others defending the relevance of practical reasons for beliefs. Taking practices, as opposed to beliefs, as the primary target of genealogy allows to avoid committing to this view.

¹²On this point, an important distinction between Queloz and Kumar is worth noting. Indeed, whereas Queloz adopt an unapologetically pragmatic perspective, Kumar does not fully abandon an epistemic framework. The latter maintains that certain practices, like the rigid ways of blaming and punishing connected to resultant moral luck, have practical reasons going for them, but he also brings these reasons to bear on the epistemic issue of whether resultant moral luck is real and whether at least some its justifications are true. The way in which he does so is by arguing that having an indirect-consequentialist justification for moral luck incorporated in the causal history of this very phenomenon increase one's confidence in the reality of the phenomenon, because it makes this justification less likely to be a mere ex-post rationalization of an otherwise unjust practice (Kumar 2019).

¹³Another difference worth noting between Queloz and Kumar is that the former relies on, and defends the legitimacy of resorting to, declaredly fictional state of nature models, whereas the latter only draws on evolutionary insights.

whether the need that the concept is traced back to is one we now embrace and share. Although the realization that a concept serves a certain need is vindicatory when the need is one we identify with (say, a basic human need such as the need to pool reliable information about the environment, as in the case of Williams's genealogy of truthfulness), the same realization can be incriminatory when the need is one we are opposed to.¹⁴ Secondly, if the need is one we now embrace and share, one can then ask whether the concept still satisfies such need, i.e. whether it still serves the identified function. If this is the case, we have reasons to uphold the concept, and it will thus be vindicated.¹⁵

Henceforth, we might render the basic structure of pragmatic genealogical arguments of a vindicatory sort in the following way. For a practice *p* emerged to fulfill function *F* in circumstances C_1 - C_n :

(CP) *p* emerged to fulfil *F* in C_1 - C_n

NP1) *F* is a function we have reasons to see fulfilled

NP2) *p* still fulfils *F* in current circumstances C_1^* - C_n^*

(C) *p* is to that extent justified.¹⁶

Let me now present a detailed example, already discussed by Kumar (2017, 129–131), which will serve as an illustrative case study for the rest of the paper, namely that of honor. The problematic moral status of such a concept and the underlying practices, I believe, will prove useful in bringing to light the potentially excusing (as opposed to simply justificatory) potential of pragmatic genealogical arguments.

Honor is a common value concept in several ethical codes, but it is pivotal in so-called 'honour cultures', which emphasize the importance of a person (most often, a man) as willing and able to violently retaliate against anyone who insults him.¹⁷ For members of such cultures, the fact that something

¹⁴Queloz and Cueni offer a good example. A genealogy of the concept of chastity, they argue, 'might reveal it to serve needs, but ones we do not share. As Michael Smith argues, it is primarily those who feel the need to restrain women's sexual behavior (Smith 2013, 103–104) who have reason to use the concept chastity. To the extent that this is indeed what the concept does, and that we no longer share the need to restrain women in this way, we will have no reason to use the concept of chastity and will be vindicated in moving away from thinking in these terms' (Queloz and Cueni 2020, 768).

¹⁵For a more fine-grained exposition of this evaluative matrix, and of the role of needs within it, see Queloz (2021, 213–227).

¹⁶This is a simplified version of the more complex argumentative scheme of vindications Queloz offers (cf. Queloz 2021, 230–231). For a detailed scheme of its debunking counterpart, see Testini (2022b, 293–294).

¹⁷Honour cultures may vary in terms of which reactions to perceived attacks to one's honour they deem appropriate. The highly ritualized practice of duel in XVII–XVIII century Europe and the many rules for scorekeeping and pacifications at work in tribal Montenegro vengeance-killing are good examples of these variations. On the former see Appiah (2010), on the latter see Boehm (1986).

constitutes or appears as an attack on one's honor is seen as a reason to react more often and more violently than it would be for subjects with different cultural backgrounds,¹⁸ and experimental evidence shows that members of honor cultures display a higher level of anger and stress when facing actions and behaviors perceived as attacks on one's honor (Cohen et al. 1996).

Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen (1996) proposed the following explanation for this phenomenon, which can aptly feature as the causal premise of a vindicatory argument.¹⁹ According to their theory, honor cultures are likely to arise under specific social circumstances, especially where property is portable and there are no reliable institutions enforcing rules and property rights – two traits that characterized many traditional herding societies (Boehm 1986) and still characterize impoverished neighborhoods in today's urban environments (Anderson 1999). Under these circumstances, so the theory goes, honor serves a vital deterring function. By inducing individuals to react with violence, even in the face of relatively minor offences and even when doing so comes at quite a cost, it endows these individuals with a reputation as difficult targets for predation, which in turn helps them to satisfy basic human needs for safety, for retaining one's property, for providing for one's family, and so on.²⁰

As these needs are basic and fundamental, shared by virtually every human being, the first normative premise of the argument is arguably provided. Regardless of whatever else we may need or want, there are good reasons for wanting the function of protecting individuals from predation and dispossession fulfilled.

But what about the second normative premise? For the argument to be vindicatory, the instrumental link highlighted must hold not only in the circumstances for which the explanandum originally had a point but also in the circumstances under which the explanandum is now evaluated (Smyth 2017). This imposes a distinction between two possible scenarios. On the

¹⁸Doris and Plakias (2008), like most of the scholars that see honour cultures as an important example for the so-called 'argument from disagreement' against moral realism, take these cultures as embracing moral norms genuinely different from, and incompatible with, those of broadly liberal and egalitarian societies. But this may not be true for all honour cultures. Some honour cultures might couch the value of honour in purely social norms. In contrast with moral norms, which are internalized by individuals and exert their motivational pull independently of what others think and do, social norms are backed up by empirical expectations (beliefs about how others will behave) and normative ones (beliefs about what others believe is right or wrong behavior) (Bicchieri 2016, 12–25). I will come back to this distinction in section 4.2. On how to classify honour norms, see Handfield and Thrasher (2019).

¹⁹For criticisms to this theory, see Demetriou (2014).

²⁰This theory fits quite well with the evidence available and, although its original proponents did not present any specific causal mechanism to account for the functional adaptation of the group's axiology to social circumstances, there is no shortage of promising ones on the shelves of the social sciences. See Kumar (2017, 130) for an interesting hypothesis.

one hand, there are groups for which this continuity clause is violated, like contemporary US Southerners – the population originally studied by Nisbett and Cohen. Indeed, as many parts of the US can nowadays rely on pervasive law-enforcement institutions, honor norms not only do not make any positive difference but arguably make a negative one. As Kumar notices, ‘when honour persists in conditions for which it is not suited, we have an explanation that debunks it’ (Kumar 2017, 131). On the other hand, there are groups for which the continuity condition is plausibly respected now or was respected at some point in the past. The Moraca tribe in Montenegro (Boehm 1986) is a good example, and a less exotic one is represented by several inner-city neighborhoods in the United States and elsewhere, where criminal behavior is widespread and people can hardly rely on the police – but only on their capacity to command respect – to protect themselves from violence (Anderson 1999). Other traditional societies might face social and material circumstances that still make honor a pointful response to the problems and needs it conceivably emerged to solve. If that is the case, the genealogical argument is vindicatory.

3. Reasons for whom?

Matthieu Queloz recently suggested that the scope of genealogical arguments is limited in an important respect. According to him, genealogies can only *aim* at being vindicatory; ‘whether they in fact are depends on [...] the addressee of the genealogy’ (Queloz 2022, 445). This audience-dependence, according to Queloz, is due to the fundamental strategy pragmatic genealogical arguments rely on. Indeed, these arguments trace connections between a higher element (e.g. a concept, a norm, a value) and a lower element (i.e. human needs). For this connection to prove vindicatory, the expectations of the argument’s addressees about the nature and the proper justification of the former are determinant. Taking Williams’s genealogy of truthfulness as an example – a genealogy in which, as mentioned before, Williams vindicates the value of truthfulness by tracing it back to the basic human need of pooling reliable information – Queloz claims the following:

if [someone holds that] the value of truth needs to be traceable to a Platonic form to merit confidence, then a genealogy 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. (Queloz 2022, 445)²¹

²¹For further back up to this idea see Queloz (2021, 218–220).

One may interpret this view as expressing a puzzling form of normative relativism, but there is a better way to make sense of it. On such a relativistic reading, there being reasons (for someone) to affirm the authority of certain norms or values depends on certain normative expectations or, as I suggest this expression is best interpreted, on certain background metaethical beliefs about the nature and the proper way of justifying the values, concepts or practices under assessment.²² This reading is puzzling, however, because reasons (on many accounts) do not depend on existing beliefs, but on facts: if you are planning a camping trip, you have a reason to check up on weather forecasts, even if you hold the absurd belief that the weather depends on the gods will. You simply cannot see considerations about the reliability and accuracy of weather forecasting models as the reasons they are. Something similar, perhaps, might be said about the Platonist. However, there is no need to interpret Queloz's qualification about the scope of vindications as implying this form of normative relativism. We should rather see it, I contend, as a statement about the likely effects of genealogical vindications on the attitudes of the addressees *given* the background expectations they have, taken at face value.²³ On this reading, the reason a vindication provides remains in place irrespectively of what the addressee expect. However, depending on his or her expectations, it may not be considered the right kind of reason to justify the target of the vindication.

²²As an anonymous reviewer has pointed out, there is an ambiguity in the very notion of normative expectations. The notion is ambiguous because it is unclear whether it can be seen in purely cognitive terms, i.e., in terms of beliefs (as I suggest) or whether there are conative aspects of it, that is, whether desires, preferences, and so on can count as normative expectations too. I believe there are two reasons why we should go for a cognitive interpretation. The first is strictly semantic and conceptual: an expectation is, first and foremost, a belief about events that have yet to occur, and does not normally involve a desire that the expected events occur. I can expect rain without desiring it. The second reason is theoretical. Sure, reasons (for action, at least) can arise from desires too. The fact that I want a gin and tonic is a reason not to order a whisky sour, for instance. But this point does not seem to translate well when applied to the case of the Platonist. Whereas one's desire that truthfulness has a Platonic justification might certainly be a *cause* of one's rejection of Williams's genealogical account as a justification of truthfulness, such desire cannot be a *reason* to reject it – or, in other words, whereas it is psychologically possible that one's desire that truthfulness be justified Platonically leads to denying the justificatory potential of pragmatic genealogy, such denial would be irrational. For a desire is not a legitimate ground to reject a belief or a theoretical position, such as the belief that pragmatic genealogical arguments can count as justifications (my desire that my football team wins this match, after all, is not a reason to deny that the other team should win the match if, say, the latter is playing better). This is why I think that, for normative expectations to rationally prevent the Platonist from taking Williams's account as justificatory, there needs to be a belief that Platonism is true, not just a desire that Platonism is true.

²³This offers a layout to clarify the content of the previous note. A more thorough formulation of its final sentence would indeed read 'for normative expectations to prevent the Platonist from taking Williams's account as justificatory, there needs to be a *justified* belief in the truth of Platonism'. Taking such beliefs at face value, however, precisely means to leave aside whether these beliefs are justified or not and to treat them as given.

Several background beliefs and ‘normative expectations’ – to stick to Queloz’s phrasing – could make this the case. Metaethical beliefs about the metaphysics and the epistemology of morality are, arguably, an example, as Queloz’s reference to Platonic forms seems to suggest. What specific metaethical views would make this the case is an interesting question, but one I cannot take up here. What matters, for my purposes, is that there seem to be cases in which pragmatic genealogical arguments will fall on deaf ears. This means that the scope of a vindication, and thus the range of its evaluative and normative implications, is apparently limited by the background expectations of the addressees.

Although partially correct, I want to suggest that this view fails to notice an important point about the scope of vindications. In the remainder of this section, I will spell out the point being missed and, in the next one, I shall further elaborate on it, providing argumentative support. I agree with Queloz’s view that the scope of a vindication can be limited by the background expectations of the addressees. But only insofar as this means that vindications, because of such expectations, can fail to be seen as justificatory. Indeed, I intend to argue that vindications can also be interpreted as excusing and that their excusing power – in contrast with their justificatory one – is not hostage to the background expectations of the addressees.²⁴ In other words, the audience’s prior beliefs and expectations cannot determine alone whether the argument proves vindicatory or not, but only the specific sense in which it vindicates: either by justifying the target norms, values, or concepts or by excusing those that live by them.

This ambivalent nature of vindications is already at play in the ordinary meaning of the verb ‘to vindicate’. The Cambridge Dictionary indeed provides two alternative definitions, namely ‘to prove that what someone said or did was right or true, after other people thought it was wrong’ and ‘to prove that someone is not guilty or is free from blame, after other people blamed them’.²⁵ The distinction I propose follows a similar line. In my view, on the one hand vindications provide normative reasons and thus contribute to the justificatory task of showing that their target norm or value is not wrong (or not as wrong as it may have first appeared) but right or otherwise permissible

²⁴This point holds even if, contrary to what I previously suggested, desires and other conative states count as normative expectations. Nothing in the forthcoming argument for the excusing valence of pragmatic genealogy hangs on such an issue.

²⁵<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/vindicate>

– at least to some degree. On the other, vindications can also illuminate the existence of strong causal and practical pressures that contributed to bringing their target into being, and when the target is a morally puzzling norm or value, like in the case of honor, this can contribute to excuse those that live by it. Most importantly, vindications can do so even when they fail to justify, i.e. when the background expectations of the addressees do not allow them to recognize the vindicatory reasons provided as the right kind of reasons to justify the target of inquiry.

4. Reasons for what?

As I shall argue in this section, depending on whether they are interpreted as justifications or excuses, vindications come with different sets of normative and evaluative implications (section 4.3). But before delving into this aspect of the issue, allow me to briefly clarify the distinction between justifications and excuses (section 4.1) and how it applies to the notion of vindication (section 4.2).

4.1. Reasons to justify, reasons to excuse

What exactly separates excuses and justifications? The topic has been hotly debated in legal and moral philosophy, but there is considerable convergence around the idea that justification and excuses play a similar defensive role, in that they both protect the agent from blame, but in two different ways (Botterell 2009).

On this view, justification concerns the action in the sense that it defends the agent from blame by showing that *her action* was not wrong, but morally permissible or morally required. Excuses, in contrast, regard the agent, in the sense that they protect from blame by only showing that her agency was, in some sense and at least to some extent, constrained at the time of the wrongful act (Baron 2007).²⁶ If an agent is excused, it thus means that there was something about her capacities, or the circumstances in which she acted, that made it difficult for her to avoid doing what she did. As a result, the agent is fully or partially protected from blame, but the excuse does not make her action less wrong. A justification, in contrast, aims precisely at

²⁶This way of drawing the distinction is inspired by Austin, who wrote that in 'one defence [justification], briefly, we accept responsibility but deny that it was bad: in the other [excuse], we admit that it was bad but don't accept full, or even any, responsibility' (Austin 1956, 2).

showing that the agent's action was right and permissible (or, at least, not as wrong as it may have first appeared).²⁷

As excuses are essentially blame-deflecting devices, to get a better grip on the notion of excuses it is necessary to get a better understanding of how blame works. Blame is a response to wrongful actions that others have performed, but blaming judgments are different from judgments simply expressing the wrongful character of certain actions – as we just saw, one may perform a wrongful action without deserving to be blamed for it. In a popular view, blame is indeed a response to the perception of a morally objectionable motive or attitude – a bad quality of will – behind a wrongful action. An agent is thus blameworthy, on such a widespread view, when her wrongful action displays ill will (i.e. some sinister motivation) or a lack of goodwill (i.e. a callous indifference to the interests of others, or a lack of concern for the de facto morally relevant considerations at play).²⁸

Blaming thus amounts to making a negative assessment of someone's moral attitudes. On most current accounts, blame also involves something else in addition to this. According to Strawson (1962), Wallace (1994) and Wolf (2011), blame calls for other reactive attitudes such as resentment, guilt, and indignation. According to Scanlon (2008), it commands some changes in the way in which we understand our relationship with the blamed party. On a third view, supported by Sher (2006), it entails a disposition to anger and to express one's disapproval. Yet whatever blame may entail on top of the negative assessment of someone's moral attitudes, it remains – fundamentally – a negative attitude based on an assessment and, as such, it can be justified or not. I submit here – following Lewis (2016) – that to be justified in blaming someone we must have good evidence of a bad quality of will. In other words, our beliefs about the quality of the will of an agent must be justified for us to be justified in blaming that agent. 'If X's belief that Y performed an action Ψ out of ill will is itself unjustified, then there is a procedural

²⁷For the sake of explicitness, I am here embracing scalar notions of both justifications and excuses. On this view, any statement offering a normative reason (of the right kind) in favor of an option counts as a justification. The justification can be partial or full depending on whether it simply contributes to show that the option is permissible or required, or whether it actually shows that this is the case (this depends on the context and on the other relevant considerations at play). Excuses, on this view, also comes in degrees, just as blameworthiness does. See Sliwa (2020) for a compelling argument in defence of the scalar nature of excuses.

²⁸A thorough defence of my claims to follow would require testing them against other views of moral responsibility and blameworthiness, such as volitionism, as expressed in Rosen (2003) and Zimmerman (2008), but this would require too much space.

sense in which X's blaming Y for Ψ -ing is also unjustified' (Lewis 2016, 159).

Now, when agents performing a wrongful action are constrained in their agency, the way and the degree to which their agency is constrained should affect the justifiability of our beliefs about the quality of their will, and thus the intensity with which we are justified in blaming them. Compare, for example, these two cases. Imagine two agents, Selim and Tom, virtually identical to one another and acting in virtually identical settings. Both commit the same wrongful action, say, punching another person in the face. The only relevant difference is that Selim acted after being provoked, whereas Tom was not provoked at all. In Selim's case, we do not have as much evidence to infer that he harbored an ill will, or a morally objectionable attitude, as we have in the case of Tom, for it was arguably harder for Selim to do the right thing. Tom was not acting in the heat of the moment and did not have to repress the anger Selim was experiencing, and this contributes to explaining why we deem Tom more blameworthy than John.

Excuses typically cast light on this sort of constraints on one's agency, in morality as well as in criminal law, and as such they are crucial to determine the intensity with which we can justifiably blame an agent, the amount of anger we are entitled to express, or the extent to which we should revise our understanding of our relationship with her.²⁹ Typical textbook excuses are provocation, intoxication, duress, reasonable mistake of fact, and automatism, whereas self-defense is arguably the paradigmatic form of justification. As an illustration, imagine learning that Anna shot Bashir at the shooting range, wounding him. She might have done this under the effect of a generous dosage of LSD that someone dropped in her glass of water (involuntary intoxication), because Bashir's worst enemy had a gun to her head and compelled her to shoot (duress), or because she had reasonable grounds – whatever they might be – to believe that what turned out to be Bashir was just a cardboard target (reasonable mistake of fact). In any of these cases, Anna could plausibly claim that her agency was impaired at the time of the deed, and thus that her responsibility and blameworthiness are thus limited. In contrast with the case in which she shoots Bashir to prevent him from shooting her, in none of these cases she could argue that what she did was right or permissible. She will be only excused.

²⁹On the differences between excuses in everyday moral life and criminal law, cf. Baron (2007) and Duff (2007).

As responsible agents are generally conceived as possessing the cognitive and volitional capacities that make them responsive to moral considerations (Nelkin 2011; Vargas 2013; Wallace 1994), we can distinguish between two possible ways in which excuses can work, namely by illuminating volitional and cognitive constraints on agency (Pleasant 2021). Volitional constraints establish that an agent's ability to have acted differently was limited (as in cases of duress and automatism, where the agent's beliefs about the impermissibility of her actions are correct, but she cannot act accordingly). Cognitive constraints, on the other hand, impair an agent's ability to understand the wrongfulness of her actions (as in cases of reasonable mistake of fact and unwilling intoxication, in which the agent is inculpably prey of false beliefs about the permissibility of her action).

With this distinction in mind, let me now address how vindictory arguments may excuse.

4.2. Vindications as excuses

I take it as uncontroversial that vindications can be justificatory. After all, they provide normative reasons, and one can refer to such reasons to show that her action was right, or at least not as wrong as one might have thought. However, can vindictory arguments also excuse? And if so, how? My answer is that, depending on the specificities of the case at hand, a vindictory argument of the sort we have considered in the case of honor can be interpreted as illuminating both volitional and cognitive constraints.

To see how vindications can illuminate the presence of volitional constraints, turn back to the honor case and imagine a situation in which a member of an honor culture knows that reacting with violence to an offence is morally wrong, but proceed to do so anyway because he knows that if he fails to uphold his honor in his social context he might lose a valuable tool to safely navigate such context, namely his reputation, and thus later on fall prey of aggressions. In this case, honor wears its function on its sleeve – as it were – and the members of the honor culture are aware of its instrumental value.

Imagine for instance Tony, who lives in an area stricken with violence and poverty. One afternoon, coming out of the drugstore two blocks from his house, he is publicly mocked in front of a crowd by a group of youngsters and reacts by beating up their leader to protect his reputation. Now compare this case with a virtually identical one involving a less hostile

social environment and a middle-class offender, Jason. Tony, in contrast to Jason, has a significant excusing factor to cite in his favor, and this excusing factor is encapsulated in the vindicatory argument illuminating why he behaved as he did. He can cite a volitional constraint as an excusing factor by referring to the adverse social circumstances in which he was acting. By explaining the importance of reputation, and of upholding one's honor in his social milieu, he can plausibly claim that doing the morally right thing (i.e. abstaining from violence) would have been costly and risky – certainly more costly and risky than it would have been for agents, such as Jason, in more favorable social circumstances.³⁰ This provides reasons to think that his will may not have been as ill as it may have first appeared and that our evidence of morally objectionable attitudes behind his action is not as solid as we may have thought. If there were no vindicatory argument in favor of honor, we would not have had a reason to mitigate our blame. The vindication seems to excuse him, at least to some degree.

But vindicatory arguments can also be interpreted in relation to the idea of cognitive constraints, i.e. to cases in which agents do something morally wrong because they fail to realize the wrongness of their actions. Two kinds of ignorance can be the cause of such a failure, namely factual ignorance (concerning empirical facts) and moral ignorance (concerning norms, values and, more generally, moral facts). In cases of factual ignorance, agents end up performing morally wrong actions because they ignore some empirical facts that make their conduct morally bad. In cases of moral ignorance, instead, agents end up performing morally wrong actions because they either believe it is false or because they fail to believe that it is true that their action is wrong. As far as honor cultures are concerned, I believe that we are dealing with moral ignorance. Indeed, certain honor cultures might take honor as part and parcel of morality itself, and their members may thus comply with its overly permissive norms of engagement because they think those norms are morally commendable or permissible, irrespectively of their expectations about how others will react. In such cases, members of honor cultures might simply ignore the functional value of honor and its real moral costs.

How do vindications excuse in such cases? I purport to show how they can do so by confronting three increasingly specific objections to the

³⁰I am here indebted to Lewis (2016, 166), who offers two very similar cases in mounting his defence of the claim that we should mitigate blame toward disadvantaged offenders.

claim that vindications can excuse at all. Recall that vindications are here conceived as genealogical explanations of a vindictory sort. These three objections, taken together, purport to show that none of these features of vindications (their explanatory dimension, their genealogical character, and their vindictory outcome) are relevant for excusing purposes.

The first objection is that, on the view of blame I have embraced, any explanation of why moral ignorance obtains is irrelevant, for the allegiance to bad moral norms and thus the possession of morally ignorant beliefs always imply a lack of goodwill, that is, an attitude displaying a failure to care enough for others or the *de facto* morally relevant considerations. On this view, moral ignorance thus hardly excuses, for ignorance of this kind is itself evidence of ill will and of an insufficient concern for the *de facto* relevant moral considerations (Harman 2011).³¹

However, in the debate about the epistemic conditions of blame, this unforgiving aspect of quality of will accounts of blame has been put under considerable pressure. Several scholars have drawn attention to the fact that, whereas such accounts are utterly dismissive of the relevance of the circumstances under which ignorant beliefs form, these circumstances do seem to make a big difference to how we evaluate agents for holding those beliefs.³² One case where circumstances seem to make a difference is when they are such as to make it difficult to come to the right moral beliefs (Björnsson 2017; Hartford 2022; Nelkin 2016). In cases of this sort, where the relevant difficulties are external to the agent, there seems to be less evidence available to make reliable inferences about the agent's quality of the will, and thus about her degree of blameworthiness, than there would be in more favorable circumstances. As Hartford has put it, a homophobe brought up in XIX century England, where prejudice was enshrined in laws and was widespread even among decent people, is less culpable than a homophobe brought up in contemporary America. In the first case, a difficulty external to the agent generates an objectionable attitude, and excuses it, whereas in the latter it is the objectionable attitude of the agent that generates the difficulty – and this does not, plausibly, excuse (Hartford 2022, 150–154).

Vindications, I submit, can partially excuse precisely by explaining some cases of moral ignorance in terms of adaptation to external difficult circumstances. To see this point in connection with socio-scientific explanations,

³¹With some qualifications, the thesis is also embraced by Arpaly (2003), Guerrero (2007), Fitzpatrick (2008), Arpaly and Schroeder (2014).

³²See the experimental work of Faraci and Shoemaker (2014) and the philosophical contributions of Wieland (2017), Hartford (2019), Sliwa (2020) and Miller (2021).

compare the case of honor cultures with the explanation of why so many Germans actively supported and took part in the genocidal endeavors of the Nazi regime. Why so many Germans did so is of course a complex and unsettled question over which historians are still debating. But let's assume, for the sake of the argument, that something like Daniel Goldhagen's (1996) explanation of this phenomenon is the best one available, at least for some portion of the German population.³³ Let's suppose, then, that many Germans supported the Nazis' genocidal endeavor not because they lacked awareness about its scale and atrocity, nor because of various forms of peer pressure, but because they thought such endeavor to be permissible or even commendable as they harbored, well before Hitler came to power, a vitriolic form of antisemitism framing Jews as wicked and the German race as superior.³⁴ This explanation is far from being excusing, for it reveals (if correct) that many Germans' moral ignorance was itself due to morally objectionable attitudes expressing a form of wickedness or, at the very least, a morally objectionable and callous indifference. One may plausibly argue that, if Goldhagen's is right, then many Germans' moral ignorance might itself be morally culpable and thus does not excuse their actions.³⁵

In contrast with the Nazi case, the moral ignorance affecting members of honor cultures does not appear to be grounded in comparably objectionable moral attitudes. These people's allegiance to honor does not emerge from Nisbett's and Cohen's explanation as the direct upshot of a lack of concern for the de facto relevant moral considerations, but more as the result of the practical pressures posed by their difficult social circumstances – as a quasi-necessary adaptation to adverse and difficult structural conditions.³⁶ As a result, we do not have as much evidence to attribute them an inappropriate quality of the will: their moral ignorance (and hence, indirectly, their actions) do not seem as blameworthy as in the Nazi case. To be sure, a deep-seated racial prejudice

³³The most heated point of the debate – known in Germany as the *Historikerstreit* – was in the eighties, but no consensus has been reached. For a review of the many positions at play in such a debate, see Heuser (1988). For a review of the many criticisms moved to Goldhagen's theory, see Rosenfeld (1999)

³⁴For the sake of the argument, I shall not examine here whether their moral ignorance might be reducible to a form of factual ignorance concerning the idea of race, the alleged nature of Jews, and so on (even if it was, I doubt it could be a case of excusing factual ignorance).

³⁵In his own take on the relationship between social-scientific understanding, justifications, and excuses, Nigel Pleasent (2021, 347–348) – who also employs Goldhagen's thesis as an example and notices Goldhagen's refusal to consider his explanation as excusing to any degree – misses this point.

³⁶It is worth highlighting that pragmatic genealogical arguments are similar, in this respect, to a peculiar legal defense, namely the defence of necessity. Whether such a defence is best understood as a justification or an excuse is a debated subject in legal theory (Bickenbach 1983; Morgan 1984), on which I do not have to take a position here. Indeed, I can concede, as I did in section 3, that this might depend on the normative expectations of the addressee.

might be just as hard to overcome as the sort of practical pressures exerted in the anarchic social context of honor cultures. But the sources of such difficulties are importantly different from one another. In the Nazi case, the difficulty stems from a prejudiced view that itself reveals something bad about the quality of will of those embracing it. It is, to put in Hartford's (2022) terms, a case in which objectionable attitudes generate difficulty, and this seems hardly excusing. In the honor case, the difficulty posed by the social circumstances is not as revealing of the quality of the will of the agents, for it is external. It is a case in which difficulty generates objectionable attitudes rather than the other way around and, in contrast to the Nazi one, it seems excusing to some degree.³⁷

The second objection is that the pragmatic and genealogical character of vindications is irrelevant for excusing purposes, for what truly matters is the diversity of the culture at hand and the epistemic hurdles its members face in overcoming their ignorance (Rudy-Hiller 2023).³⁸ How conducive are the culture-specific moral resources in the agent's context to her perceiving the wrongness of his beliefs and actions? How frequently has the agent been exposed to the characteristic experiences that arouse moral reflection? To what extent do political and legal institutions obscure or visibilise the wrongness of the relevant beliefs and actions? How available is dissident criticism of them? (Rudy-Hiller 2023, 843). These are the relevant questions to ask, and answering them does not require a genealogical outlook, much less a pragmatic one, but rather a focus on the epistemic conditions obtaining here and now.

I concur that these are relevant factors to consider in deciding how far the relevant agents are excused, and that these are importantly different and independent from the environmental selective pressures highlighted by vindications. However, granting their relevance is not in contrast with claiming that the presence of the sort of selective environmental pressures that vindications point to (or their lack thereof) *also* matters for excusing purposes. Indeed, when these pressures are operative, there

³⁷Hartford's distinction offers a counterargument to Guerrero's claim that difficulties in believing the moral truth are revelatory of the agent's objectionable moral attitudes and thus do not lessen responsibility and blameworthiness (Guerrero 2017). Hartford (2022, 152–154) also offers valid counterarguments, to which I gladly defer, against other objections that quality of will theorists move against the potentially excusing valence of moral ignorance, such as the appeal to moral luck (Arpaly 2003, 169–173).

³⁸Rudy-Hiller does not express the objection, but offers the resources to substantiate it. On his view, the allegedly transcendent and universal capacity to respond to morally relevant considerations is socially construed – thus simply 'a measure of the way in which morality is socially articulated in [the] social context [of the agent] and of the expectations-generating factors prevalent in it' (2023, 843).

seems to be a plausible ground for believing not only that it was probably difficult for the relevant agents to question their culturally specific, morally wrong beliefs, but also that it would have been difficult for them to have a different culture in the first place – and thus to believe and act otherwise. This means that, other things being equal, morally ignorant members of two cultures facing the same epistemic hurdles but different degrees of practical pressures from their environment are not culpable for their moral ignorance and the resulting behavior to the same extent: the ones for which the culture is adaptive and plausibly explained in functional terms, i.e. in virtue of its positive effects on the satisfaction of vital human needs, is plausibly less so.

To illustrate this point we can resort to a comparison that also happens to counter the third objection. This is the objection that the vindicatory outcome of genealogical explanation is irrelevant to their excusing power. One may indeed object that, on the view I have been sketching, Nisbett and Cohen's explanation of honor would be excusing even if the argument incorporating it was a debunking one, e.g. if we imagine that honor was functionally adaptive in the past but not at the time of the evaluation – as in the case of contemporary Southerners from the U.S. However, if we compare vindicatory and debunking cases carefully enough, I believe this objection is not warranted.

What the objection rightly points out is that it is not the normative dimension of the vindication that is doing the excusing work, but rather the strength of the external causal pressures that the vindication illuminates: vindications have both a justificatory and an explanatory upshot, and the latter is the relevant one as far as excuses are concerned. This implies that a similar excusing potential might be shared by other explanations – if they reveal similar pressures and difficulties. However, two aspects of the issue are worth pointing out to address the objection. First, conceding this much does not make my claim about the excusing valence of vindications false: it simply entails that the claim holds for other kinds of arguments and explanations too. Secondly, and most importantly, although the debunking version of the argument retains some excusing potential, the vindicatory version seems excusing to a greater extent. Indeed, if the argument is vindicatory, then the causal pressures that contributed to the formation of the morally ignorant beliefs are still operative at the time of the evaluation, and this plausibly means that the relevant agents are facing more substantial difficulties in overcoming their moral ignorance. For one thing, the dysfunctional effects of honor in cases where its explanation turns out to be debunking

should provide the relevant agents with an opportunity for critical reflection that agents living in circumstances that maintain honor as functionally valuable lack.³⁹ Members of quasi-anarchic traditional herding societies sharing a culture of honor – like the Moraca Tribe of Montenegro in the XIX century, for instance – are in this sense more excused than contemporary U.S. Southerners, who live under a centralized State and benefit from the presence of law enforcement institutions.

In conclusion, one may object that my view regards people from different cultures as somehow less than reflective agents, i.e. as incapable of engaging in a critical reflection over the merits of their inherited moral codes and of standing up to the structural influences molding their views. It means, to quote Strawson (1962), to interpret these persons in an ‘objective mode’ – as passive objects of social influences and as sheer products of their social environments rather than responsible agents.⁴⁰ But recognizing that structural factors can impinge on one’s beliefs and on one’s capacity to act freely does not mean that one’s agency is, thereby, lost. It simply means to recognize the obvious truth that one’s agency can be partially constrained in various ways and in varying degrees, and that the degree to which one’s agency is constrained – depending on the sources of such constraints – should affect the severity of our blame, for it affects the weight of the evidence we have of morally objectionable attitudes.

4.3. Justifications and excuses: evaluative and normative relata

So far, I focused my discussion on the different ways in which justification and excuses perform their defensive function, arguing that vindications – providing both a reason and a cause – can fulfill this function in both ways. It is now time to show the relevance of this point for the extent

³⁹The case of punishment in transitional justice contexts nicely illustrates how relevant dysfunctionalities can be to spur reflection on the normative standing of the practice itself. See Testini (2022b).

⁴⁰This is a point on which Michelle Moody-Adams (1994) insisted on. According to her, ‘what is wrong with blaming culture [and thus excusing wrongdoers for their allegedly non-culpable moral ignorance] is that such blame ignores the ways in which cultural conventions are modified, reshaped, and sometimes radically revised in individual action’ (1994, 306). There are two points worth highlighting with respect to such position. First, my view does not entail that all wrongdoing stemming from moral ignorance due to culture is excusable. Only when the sort of ignorance embedded in the culture was hard to avoid there are grounds for excuses (and the degree of excusability is a function of the degree of hardship). Second, and relatedly, although Moody-Adams is right in pointing out that individuals have sometimes changed and successfully stood up critically to their culturally-inherited values, we should not thereby assume that all individuals belonging to any culture in whatever circumstances have the resources to do so. My argument up to this point should have showed that this is an unduly generalization.

question and thus to clarify the evaluative and normative implications that justifications and excuses respectively have. This requires considering two further differences between justifications and excuses.⁴¹

The first difference is a direct upshot of the account I started from. The basic idea is that having a full justification, as opposed to having a full excuse, matters from an *evaluative* perspective because having a full justification typically means that one is protected from a wider array of negative responses than if he only had an excuse (Morse 1998, 333–335).

To substantiate this idea, consider once again the case of Anna. Anna might have shot Bashir out of personal defense, and this would provide her with a justification for what she did. Having a justification, in this context, means that most (if not all) of the negative responses that are typically elicited by murder and aggression are deflected. Both third-personal reactions such as moral disapproval, disapprobation and disesteem, *and* second-personal reactions like blame, guilt, and resentment, are blocked.⁴² By contrast, assume now that Anna is only excused for shooting Bashir. Assume, for instance, that she was temporarily mentally insane at the time of the deed, or that she fell prey of a reasonable mistake of fact. In the moral domain, as we saw, excuses do not establish that the agent's action was right or permissible. Hence, spectators will still be entitled to express at least some third-personal reactions, e.g. to express their moral disapproval for Anna's shooting of Bashir, to condemn and to censure the act as such as something bad, i.e. as an endangerment of one's life and health, and so on. What they are not entitled to do, if Anna is excused, is to condemn the agent – to condemn and censure her for what she did, to have and express second-personal reactions like blame and resentment.⁴³

⁴¹These two differences are mentioned and discussed by Greco (2021), to whom I am indebted here.

⁴²The distinction between second-personal attitudes (or 'reactive attitudes', as Strawson would have it) and third-personal attitudes is the following, popularized by Darwall (2006, 17) and Wallace (1994, 19), among others. Second-personal attitudes presuppose and imply accountability and the holding of a person to an expectation, whereas third-personal attitudes do not. Guilt and indignation, therefore, count as second-personal attitudes. In the case of guilt, I blame myself for the wrong I did to someone; in the case of indignation, I blame someone for the wrong she did to a third party. In both cases, we are dealing with non-paradigmatic forms of blame (but we are still dealing with blame, which presuppose the second-personal standpoint as I just described it). Third-personal reactions, on this view, are those that do not imply accountability. According to those who think we do not control what we believe, the disapproval we have toward people falling prey of false convictions is of this sort. And the general disapproval we feel for the results of certain actions (which, for example, generate human suffering) is of such sort as well.

⁴³In the legal domain, excuses similarly have a more limited effect on the range of reactions they protect from. As Anna's case shows, an excuse can protect her from punishment, but not from other non-punitive responses. For instance, if she shot Mark out of temporary insanity, a judge may justifiably compel her to be treated for her condition, or cancel her gun license.

The same point holds when we consider the case of honor, and it helps to clarify the potential evaluative implications of its vindication. On the one hand, by offering a normative reason in its favor, the vindication can be interpreted as offering a justification of honor and its related behavior. This should at least mitigate the moral disapproval that outsiders are likely to express in the face of the violence involved in honor cultures. On the other hand, by illuminating the environmental pressure on members of honor cultures to stick to the norms and values they adopt, outsiders may also interpret the vindication as offering an excuse for the violent behavior widespread in such cultures. This would leave their moral disapproval intact, canceling or diminishing only their entitlement to blame or resent members of honor cultures for their allegiance to their values and for the behavior in which this allegiance is expressed.

The second difference between justifications and excuses to consider now has important *normative* implications, as it affects the kind of actions that are warranted in relation to what is justified or excused. I am referring to the idea that justifications transfer to third parties, whereas excuses do not (Robinson 1998).⁴⁴

As previously noted, it is relatively uncontroversial that vindictory reasons can be factored into the deliberations and justifications of those directly involved with the vindicated practice. Members of honor cultures, for instance, can take the vindication as a reason to retain honor as a pivotal value. However, depending on how the vindication is understood, different normative implications for third parties would follow. Consider once again Anna's case and assume she is justified – on self-defense grounds – to fight Bashir back. This implies that she should not be punished nor otherwise blamed for resisting Bashir, her aggressor; but this is not the whole story. Her justification also extends to third parties, and this might mean two things. On a more expansive view, it means that if other people, aware of the nature of the situation, were to come to her help, their actions would be justified as well. On a more minimalistic view, this means that third parties would not be justified in case they hinder Anna's efforts in fighting back. Excuses, in contrast, do not enjoy this kind of transferability. Indeed, if a bystander understands that Anna is not justified in her reaction, but only excused (perhaps because she is acting on the basis of a mistake, or out of temporary insanity), he would be neither justified nor excused if he helps Anna or refrain from stopping her attack on Bashir.

⁴⁴See also Chiesa (2014, 330), quoted in Greco (2021).

Such insight can be applied to the case of honor cultures. If we accept the vindication of honor as fully justificatory, it would follow that outsiders should at least not hinder the honor-expressive behavior of members of honor cultures. On the other hand, if we conceive the vindication as merely excusing, it would follow that outsiders should not aid members of such cultures in complying with their norms. Turning back to Tony's case, this plausibly means that one should at least refrain from aiding Tony in exacting his revenge on the youngsters who mocked him. Or, in the case of a hypothetical humanitarian mission taking place in a country where honor is a pivotal value, this means that people involved in such a mission should not contribute to perpetuating the practices in which honor is expressed. These are plausible implications, and their plausibility should reinforce my contention about the potentially excusing valence of vindications. But what vindications amount to in the light of this way of drawing the justification/excuse distinction is not of vital importance here. What matters, for my purposes, is that different normative implications for third parties rest on it.

5. Conclusion

To what extent, in conclusion, can vindications affect the space of reasons? In this paper, I delimited their evaluative and normative implications by referring to three factors, namely the kind of reasons they provide, the background beliefs and expectations of those on the receiving end of these arguments, and on how these arguments are interpreted.

In the picture I have been painting, vindications are reason-giving. However, the reasons they give are only as weighty as the needs they link their targets with, and as valid as the premises of the arguments they stem from. Furthermore, genealogies can be interpreted both as justifying and as excusing arguments, and this ambivalence is expressed in the different evaluative and normative implications that follow from interpreting them in one way or the other.

In one sense, this ambiguous character represents a further limitation on pragmatic genealogies' normative ambitions, as it implies that they cannot always aspire to retain a justificatory status. In another sense, however, such ambiguity is a virtue, because it excludes that genealogical vindications can ever fall on deaf ears. Even when they fail to be seen as justificatory, they retain an excusing value, and this binds their addressees to a narrower – but still significant – set of evaluative and normative implications.

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