Making Past Thinkers Speak to Us Through Pragmatic Genealogies

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Abstract: Pragmatic genealogies seek to explain ideas by regarding them, primarily, not as answers to philosophical questions, but as practical solutions to practical problems. Here I argue that pragmatic genealogies can inform the formation of philosophical canons. But the rationale for resorting to genealogy in this connection is not the familiar one that genealogy renders the concepts of the present intelligible by relating them to the concerns of the past— the claim is rather the reverse one, that genealogy renders the concepts of the past intelligible by relating them to the concerns of the present: past thinkers can be made to speak to us by revealing how their ideas tie in with our concerns, in the sense of helping us to remedy practical problems we still face in some form.

1. Two Models of How Philosophers of the Past Can Speak to Us

"We should treat those who are great but dead as if they were great and living," Paul Grice insisted, "as persons who have something to say to us *now*" (1986, 66). The question this immediately raises—more so now, perhaps, than in Grice's own time— is how we are to identify "those who are great." [1] Grice's injunction merely recommends a certain attitude to take towards an antecedently established canon: the "great" philosophers should be treated as speaking to *us* rather than contextualised as speaking only to their contemporaries.

But if the concern is that the history of philosophy should be made to speak to

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[1] Grice's own suggestion for how to identify the "great" philosophers was to judge them primarily by their methodological reflectiveness and innovativeness: "By and large the greatest philosophers have been the greatest, and the most self-conscious, methodologists; indeed, I am tempted to regard this fact as primarily accounting for their greatness as philosophers" (1986, 66).

us, it seems only logical that this concern should inform the process of canon formation itself, and not just come in at the stage of deciding how to engage with the canonised. Indeed, the surest way of satisfying Grice's injunction is to turn it around, selecting philosophers for inclusion in the canon according to whether they have something to say to us now. The demand that past philosophers should be made to speak to us will then function not just as an interpretative guide for *how* to read, but as an evaluative criterion for the selection of *what* to read.

This promises to equip us with a criterion of canon formation: past philosophers will be candidates for inclusion in a canon insofar as they *can be made to speak to us*. This formulation is meant to register the fact that while some voices of yore may seem to speak to us *immediately*, radiating timeless actuality and accessibility (even if that impression itself merely reflects affinities between two historically local sensibilities), most thinkers will speak to us only after a great deal of interpretative work on our part. But this will still mark them out as thinkers that can be *made* to speak to us, and once we have suitably regimented that notion to exclude wholesale projections of ideas that are in no sense already there, this will set them apart from thinkers who *cannot* be made to speak to us without radical distortion or hallucination.

But what could it mean for philosophers of the past to "speak to us"? One influential paradigm for thinking about how philosophers of the past could speak to philosophers of the present is what might be called the *discursive question-and-answer model*. It specifies the primary way in which the past can speak to us in terms of a shared "logic of question and answer," in R. G. Collingwood's phrase:[2] we should ask *to what question* a philosopher's ideas articulate an answer, and if that question

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[2] See Collingwood (1939, 35).

turns out to be identical to one that we are now asking, the answers of the past can speak to us by providing answers to the questions of the present. I call this model "discursive" because its focus lies on how the discourse of the past relates to the discourse of the present, and whether the one can profitably be made to enter into discourse with the other.

This discursive question-and-answer model is shared even across radically opposed approaches to the history of philosophy. At one end, we have the contextualist intellectual historian now often associated with the Cambridge School, who approaches the history of philosophy in the spirit of an archaeologist, seeking to situate the ideas of past philosophers within the logic of question and answer that motivated their interventions at the time. At the other end, we have the unapologetically presentist analytic philosopher, who, as Derek Parfit is said to have remarked,[3] approaches the history of philosophy more in the spirit of the grave-robber, despoiling works of the past for answers to questions that seem pressing to us now.[4]

What fundamentally divides contextualist and presentist approaches is a certain view of how the concepts and questions of the past relate to the concepts and

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[3] See Rosen (2011, 716) for this attribution. For balanced discussions of the ways in which analytic philosophy has cultivated an ahistorical self-image and of the many respects in which this self-image is misleading, see Reck (2013) and Lapointe (Forthcoming).

[4] The contrast between the contextualist and the presentist should not be overdrawn, however. To retain its utility, it should remain applicable to real people, and not be turned into that starker contrast between the *antiquarian* and the *anachronist*—two figures now largely confined to academic demonology, at least when interpreted as referring to pure historical interest without any philosophical interest and *vice versa*. These extremes, though sustainable as personal eccentricities, fail to fully make sense as social enterprises, and threaten to become self-defeating by robbing themselves of the capacity to individuate their object, because that object is constituted as much by its historical conditions as by its philosophical content; see also Queloz (2017, 146–47).

questions of the present. Insofar as the presentist analytic philosopher is interested in the history of philosophy at all, it is on the assumption that the voices of yore have something to tell us because they fundamentally tried to answer the same questions we are now asking, which in turn presupposes that they fundamentally shared the concepts in terms of which we now articulate these questions. That assumption of shared questions and concepts *could* in principle be grounded in a very substantial historical commitment to there being something like a *philosophia perennis* in the loose sense in which Leibniz used the term:[5] a fixed catalogue of philosophical questions and concepts, which ensures that philosophers speak to the same issues even when separated by great historical distance. But it is important to note, if we are not to turn the presentist into a strawman, that this assumption of shared concepts and questions *need not* be grounded in a commitment to a *philosophia perennis*. Instead, that assumption can again be recast as a *criterion* of canon formation: philosophers of the past are worthy of continued engagement *if and to the extent that* this assumption is satisfied. The presentist then emerges not as someone who believes in a transhistorical catalogue of philosophical questions, but as someone who is only interested in past thinkers insofar as they can plausibly be read as trying to answer the same questions we now ask.

The contextualist, by contrast, taking care to reconstruct the worlds in which philosophers of the past operated, thereby achieves a vivid sense of how different those world were, and how correspondingly alien to us their concepts now seem. This leads the contextualist to conclude that the voices of yore cannot, for the most part, be expected to provide answers to the questions we are now posing, because

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[5] For a discussion of the development of the concept of *philosophia perennis* from Steuco to Leibniz, see Amberger (2019).

they were not pursuing those questions at all. The historical changes separating us from the philosophers of the past were simply too radical for the presentist's assumption to be satisfied in any but a handful of exceptional cases. In sum, the presentist approach depends on an assumption that the contextualist largely rejects, namely that the philosophers of the past operated within anything like the same logic of question and answer as present-day philosophers.

Despite their taking diametrically opposed views of how the history of philosophy relates to the questions of present-day philosophers, however, the contextualist and the presentist still share an underlying commitment to a discursive question-and-answer model of what it would *mean* for the history of philosophy to speak to present-day philosophers. They both agree that *if* a past philosopher's ideas *were* to speak to present-day philosophers, it would have to be because they answered the same questions, which would in turn require them to share the concepts in terms of which the questions are articulated.

The contextualist of course denies that this condition is in fact fulfilled, and adverts instead to less direct ways in which the past can inform the present (the past can indicate questions we are not asking, for instance, or reveal unquestioned presuppositions of the questions we are asking). But *in denying* that past philosophers speak to us in the way that the presentist envisages, the contextualist continues to *adhere counterfactually* to the discursive question-and-answer model of what it would mean for philosophers of the past to speak to philosophers of the present—much as an atheist remains bound up in a religious outlook if they assert, with Ivan Karamazov, that since God does not exist, everything is permitted. In endorsing this inference, the atheist implicitly endorses the view that, were it not the case that everything was permitted, this would have to be because some things were

prohibited by God; and this is still a religious view of what it would take for anything to be prohibited.[6] In the same way, the contextualist who finds that philosophers of the past do not share the concepts in terms of which our present questions are articulated, and who concludes from this that past philosopher's ideas do not speak to present-day philosophers by answering the same questions we now ask, continues to presuppose the discursive question-and-answer model of what it would take for philosophers of the past to speak to us now.

In contrast to both approaches, I want to spell out a different sense in which ideas of the past can speak to us now, one that does not turn on the question-and-answer model. I propose to spell out in what sense history can speak to us within a *problem-and-solution model*. The problems I have in mind, however, are not *philosophical* problems one faces in virtue of being puzzled by some philosophical question, but *practical* problems one faces in virtue of one's non-philosophical concerns—the rest of one's motivations, desires, or commitments to certain values or projects whose realization makes demands on those who pursue them. This notion of a practical problem is quite different from the notion of a philosophical problem that is often taken to be central to how philosophy relates to its own history.[7]

Of course, even a practical problem can be recast as a question. But the contrast between the question-and-answer model and the problem-and-solution model survives that observation, because the contrast can itself be recast as one between a *discursive* model, where the crucial relation is a *logical* one obtaining *at the level of discourse* between a question and an answer to it, and a *pragmatic* model, where the

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[6] I take the example of the counterfactually religious atheist from Williams (2006c, 187), though he uses it in a different connection.

[7] See, e.g., Glock (2008a, 872; 2008b, ch. 5) and Renz (2018).

crucial relation is a *functional* or *instrumental* one obtaining *in the world* between a problem and a solution to it.[8] Though the problem and its solution can be discursively represented in question-and-answer form, they are situated at the objective, non-discursive level, and their urgency does not depend on their being discursively represented or even appreciated at all.[9] Ideas can help us to solve practical problems we are oblivious to—just because they are continually being solved.

Within this pragmatic problem-and-solution model, the relation I want to focus on is the following: ideas can "speak to us" by *serving our needs* for certain concepts rather than others, and these instrumental relations can obtain, to a significant extent, independently of the questions we ask or the answers we seek. In considering whether philosophers of the past speak to us now, we can step outside the discourse they are intervening in and look at how the ideas of the day relate to the needs and concerns of the day: What practical problems did these ideas respond to? What did these ideas *do* for those who lived by them? From an understanding of the practical point of ideas in their own time, we might hope to derive some sense of how those ideas, or some suitably adapted version of them, could be made to tie in with our own concerns today.

One method which allows us to achieve just that is the method I have expounded elsewhere under the heading of "pragmatic genealogy."[10] Pragmatic genealogies are narratives explaining the development of cultural phenomena such as ideas or

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[8] For a technical account of my preferred way to analyze such functional or instrumental relations, see Queloz (2020b; 2021b, ch. 9).

[9] Which is a much weaker claim than the strong claim, which I reject, that the problems we face are independent of the concepts we use. New concepts beget new problems. For further discussion of this, see Queloz and Cueni (2021, §4).

[10] See Queloz (2020a, 2021b, 2022).

concepts—hence "genealogies"—in terms of the practical point of using them—hence "pragmatic."[11] Pragmatic genealogies typically start from some fictional or at least highly idealized model of a human community to explore what might have driven creatures like us to develop certain ideas. But the more thorough among these genealogies then proceed to lower that idealized model into the stream of history to consider how the generic dynamics represented in the model were concretely realised, elaborated, transformed, extended, and differentiated over time, thereby coming to understand why the idea in question takes the particular form it does now and around here. Pragmatic genealogies are also "histories of the present," but instead of setting out from conjectural depiction of hominin life in the Pleistocene, they approach the present by moving from the sociohistorically generic to the sociohistorically specific and from the explanatorily basic to the explanatorily derivative.

In contrast to genealogies tracing the meaning of words across different historical periods, pragmatic genealogies operate within the pragmatic logic of problem and solution, tracing seemingly idle concepts to their roots in practical needs, and explaining those concepts' historical elaboration and transformation in terms of the elaboration and transformation of those needs.[12] In a slogan, pragmatic genealogies of concepts trace predicates to predicaments, and explain the evolution of predicates

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[11] As I elaborate in Queloz (2021b, 175–76), drawing on Misak (2016) and Misak and Price (2017), the connection to American pragmatism suggested by the label is real: the pragmatic genealogies of Miranda Fricker, Bernard Williams, and E.J. Craig can be traced via Ludwig Wittgenstein, F.P. Ramsey, C.K. Ogden and Lady Victoria Welby to C.S. Peirce.

[12] As Martin Kusch observes in connection with E.J. Craig's pragmatic genealogy of the concept of knowledge: "One of the most valuable aspects of genealogy is its systematic use of the idea that the evolution of concepts and the development of social relations are inseparable. Every step in the evolution from *protoknowledge* to *knowledge* is explicated in terms of changed needs of the group or changed forms of interaction" (2009, 70).

by charting the evolution of predicaments.

In doing so, pragmatic genealogies reveal the practical pressures behind ideas—pressures arising from the combination of certain human concerns with certain socio-historical circumstances; this allows us to see beyond the parochial content of the ideas of the past and view those ideas as distinctive answers to more general predicaments, some of which we may still face ourselves. As a result, pragmatic genealogies can be used to show us how the ideas of the past tie in with our own concerns.

In the simplest case, we may come to grasp an old idea as still serving our own needs given the concerns we now have. But even when past ideas cannot be transposed *tel quel* into the present without losing their point, because the circumstances that conspired to render them pointful have fallen away, we can still learn something about how to solve similar problems in different circumstances; in particular, by coming to understand what made these old ideas effective practical responses to some predicament in their own historical, social, and institutional setting. In grasping what makes a certain elaboration of an idea into an effective solution to a certain elaboration of a problem, we grasp the broader practical dynamics in which the idea is embedded, and can derive, from this dynamic understanding, a sense of how the idea would have to be elaborated *differently* to achieve a comparable effect in another setting.

My suggestion, then, is that we can make history speak to us through pragmatic genealogies. But the rationale for resorting to genealogy here is not the familiar one that genealogy renders the concepts of the present intelligible by relating them to

the concerns of the past;[13] the claim is the reverse one, that genealogy renders the concepts of the past intelligible by relating them to the concerns of the present. That is to say, past thinkers can be made to speak to us by revealing how their ideas tie in with our concerns, in the sense of remedying practical problems that we still face in some form.

I do not mean to suggest that this is the *only* way in which past thinkers can, or even should, be made to speak to us; nor is it a way that is always open to us—it would be Panglossian optimism to assume that all ideas help people solve widely shared practical problems. But there is more than one way in which that optimistic assumption can fail, and not all of them render it pointless to make the past speak to us through pragmatic genealogies. An idea might be shown to solve a problem we no do not wish to see solved, for instance, as when it is revealed to serve an ideological or oppressive function, which only makes it more urgent to recognise how the idea relates to our own concerns.[14]

The point I shall focus on here, however, is that once we stand back from the discursive question-and-answer model and take a more pragmatic view of concepts, philosophers, and their history, it becomes clear that one way in which philosophers can sometimes be made to speak to us is by triangulating onto the most general problems that their ideas offer solutions to and coming to see these ideas as distinctive solutions to problems that we fundamentally still share.

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[13] This more familiar rationale for genealogy is articulated, for example, in Williams (2001, 91; 2006d, 211), Skinner (2009, 326), Dutilh Novaes (2015) and Plunkett (2016), though it has an influential antecedent in Nietzsche's claim that the only things that are definable are those that have no history (1998, II, §13).

[14] For a discussion of how history can be put to more critical uses, see Cueni and Queloz (2022).

2. Distinctive Solutions to Shared Problems

To say that an idea or a concept *answers to a need* is different from saying that it answers to a philosophical question, or contributes to a philosophical debate. It is an instrumental relation, to be discerned by determining to what extent the use of a given concept is conducive to the satisfaction of a given need.

The needs at issue will then be *conceptual* needs, which is to say needs *for certain concepts* as opposed to other tools or goods. Conceptual needs are not *categorical* or "inner" needs, like the needs that human beings simply have for air, food, and water; they are *instrumental* or "technological" needs for something *as a means of satisfying a certain concern*—needs one only has *if* one is to satisfy that concern (though one might soften the contrast between categorical and instrumental needs by thinking of categorical needs as a species of instrumental needs, namely those one has *if* one is to satisfy a concern to avoid serious harm).[15] The relevant sense of "conceptual need" can be set out in the following equivalence:

A has a conceptual need for concept *F*

if and only if

A instrumentally needs concept *F* if *A* is to satisfy some concern *X*

if and only if

It is necessary, given *A*'s capacities and circumstances, that if *A* is to satisfy *X*, *A* have *F*.

This analysis leaves the notion of a conceptual need quite broad, because the

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[15] Here I draw on Wiggins (2002, §6) and Wiggins and Dermen (1987, 64). The contrast between "inner" and "technological" needs hails from Williams (2011, 51).

underlying notion of a concern is a catch-all term: as indicated in §1, I take it to encompass any kind of motivation, desire, or commitment to a value or project whose realization makes demands on those who pursue it. But this is as it should be, since the range of ways in which ideas can speak to people by serving their needs is itself broad.

It will be evident that with such a broad notion of concerns at the root of conceptual needs, the sheer variety of ways in which a given idea can prove needful threatens to be overwhelming. To render this complexity philosophically tractable, pragmatic genealogies start out from constructed model situations isolating one set of philosophically interesting features. Just as logicians home in on minimal inconsistent sets of propositions that are sufficient to generate contradictions, pragmatic genealogies begin by holding up for philosophical inspection a minimal problem-yielding set of facts: a combination of features in a situation that is by itself sufficient to turn it into a predicament. No doubt concept-users everywhere face many other predicaments alongside the one crystallized at the beginning of a pragmatic genealogy. But these can be captured by iterating the process as needed.

Take, by way of example, David Hume's account of the concept of property in Book III of the *Treatise*. Is this a piece of philosophy that can be made to speak to us now? At first pass, it seems unpromising in that regard. Hume's analysis of the concept of property quickly betrays that it owes too much to the property laws of his own day to be straightforwardly applicable in the twenty-first century: his account of the rules governing the use of the concept of property includes such things as the rule of "occupation," whereby "a numerous colony are esteem'd the proprietors of the whole from the instant of their debarkment" (T 3.2.3.8, SBN 507), or the rule of "accession," whereby "the work of our slaves" is "esteem'd our property" (T 3.2.3.10,

SBN 509). This is hardly the concept of property we have been waiting for.

Nonetheless, Hume's account can be *made* to speak to us by situating it within a pragmatic genealogy of the concept of property that presents Hume's particular elaboration of it as a distinctive solution to a shared problem. To this end, we set out from Hume's concept of property and begin by reverse-engineering the most general problem that it plausibly serves to remedy. Hume makes this easy for us (which is one reason why I use him as an example), because he himself hypothesises that the concept of property remedies the problem of *conflict over external goods*—a problem that arises whenever creatures exhibiting some combination of selfishness and limited generosity find themselves in a situation where *external* goods (in contrast to *internal* goods, i.e. what Hume calls the "fixed advantages of mind and body") easily change hands and remain scarce in relation to the demand for them (T 3.2.2.16, SBN 494-5). Whenever creatures like that find themselves in a situation like that, conflict threatens to disrupt whatever degree of social stability and cooperation they have achieved. The concept of property serves to defuse this threat by transforming *mere possessions*, i.e. what one *has*, in a merely causal and non-normative sense, into *property*, i.e. what one *owns*, in a normative sense entailing that others should abstain from taking it. By making certain possessions *count as* property, the concept of property thus answers, at a highly general level, to the problem of conflict over external goods by bestowing some degree of stability on the possession of those goods. This account of how the concept of property offers a solution to a problem does not entail that the concept of property is the only solution to that problem, or that it does not entrain problems of its own—Hume himself notes that it problematically entrenches particular distributions of goods (and his

contemporary Rousseau made rather more of that problem).[16] But the account does highlight that there is a problem here that needs solving, and that the problem—as opposed to Hume's solution to it—is nearly ineluctable for creatures like us, because it grows out of a set of highly general features of human life.

Next, we consider how Hume's specific elaboration of the concept of property tailors the concept to the specific form that this problem takes in his own time and place. As came out in the passages cited above, the concept Hume articulates answers to concerns that are recognisably those of a land-conquering and slave-holding imperial power. Even if we do not recognise our present society in that description, however, placing that concept within a pragmatic problem-and-solution model can still make it speak to a problem that we recognise. This pragmatic contextualisation presents the concept as a particular solution to a local elaboration of a problem, but a problem that it is general enough to have received another elaboration, and to call for a corresponding solution, in our own society as well.

From this pragmatic genealogical perspective, what makes the concepts of the past interesting is not primarily their *content*, but their *function*; not primarily the extent to which they can be matched up with referents in our present world, but the way in which they embody local solutions to local problems that have their analogues and call for corresponding solutions in our own world. Even Hume's emphasis on land as the central instantiation of property appears, from this pragmatic perspective, as a secondary feature of his account. In Hume's Scotland, land was scarce and in high demand, so conflict prevention had to revolve around

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[16] See Hume (2000, 3.2.5.8) and Rousseau (1977). For an illuminating discussion relating Hume's discussion of property to Rousseau's, see Sagar (2018).

landownership. But there are places and times when land is abundant or not in high demand, and conflict tends to break out not over land at all, but over other external goods, such as cattle. The pragmatic genealogy's hypothesis that the concept serves to prevent conflict over external goods should not lead us to expect that the concept of property will refer to the same kinds of things everywhere, or obey the same rules of use; on the contrary, it should lead us to expect variation in this respect: it predicts that socio-historically local elaborations of the concept of property track *whatever is most likely to give rise to conflict over external goods* in a given time and place, and that is obviously something that is highly sensitive to contingent circumstances.

Having situated Hume's concept of property within a pragmatic genealogy, we are then in a position to see what about Hume's concept reflects parochial circumstances, and what about it answers to conceptual needs we potentially still share. On the one hand, Hume's own elaboration of the rules guiding the application of the concept of property made reference to colonisation and slave labour, and the resulting concept is too distinctively an eighteenth-century British solution to the problem of conflict over external goods to be anything other than a non-starter in our own time. On the other hand, the pragmatic genealogy reveals it to be a specific solution to a more general problem—a problem so general, indeed, that it can hardly fail to be with us still. We can hardly avoid sharing the concern to avoid conflict over external goods—not because that concern is itself inscribed into human nature, but because the problem that generates that concern grows out of more basic concerns that are nearly bound to be present.

We must distinguish here between *problem-generating* and *problem-reflecting* concerns. The concern to avoid conflict over external goods is a problem-reflecting concern that grows out of the plausible threat of conflict over external goods. The

problem-generating concerns, i.e. the concerns that this threat itself grows out of, are more basic than that: they are the selfish concern to have the goods one wants, and the generous but limited concern that *some* others—e.g. one's closest friends and kin—likewise have what they want. Whenever these concerns are conjoined with circumstances in which the goods in question are scarce and easily change hands, the problem of avoiding conflict over external goods is generated, bringing in its wake the concern to avoid such conflict. It is in relation to this problem-reflecting concern that the conceptual need then arises for a concept, or a set of concepts, that will help to satisfy that concern by alleviating the problem of conflict over external goods.

In showing how both we and Hume face local elaborations of a shared predicament, pragmatic genealogy makes Hume's analysis of the concept of property speak to us by revealing in what respects even his concept of property serves our conceptual needs, and in what respects it fails to do so. Some problems are recurrent or even permanent problems, recreated or held in place by highly general facts about human beings and their environment, and there is illumination to be had from seeing how these fundamentally shared problems presented themselves differently to thinkers whose situation differed from ours in important respects. Moreover, grasping that Hume's concept of property *fails* to serve our conceptual needs holds lessons for what concept *would* best serve our needs: it indicates how the concept must co-vary with certain circumstances to retain its pointfulness.

On this account, philosophers of the past speak to us notably insofar as they speak to our concerns, and pragmatic genealogy *makes* thinkers of the past speak to us by highlighting the more general practical problems that these philosophers, wittingly or not, offered conceptual solutions to. This sharpens our eye for certain

instrumental connections between concepts and concerns, allowing us to recognise philosophers whose ideas answer to concerns that we still share to some extent, and to adapt their answers to our own circumstances, without necessarily engaging in flagrant anachronism.

Hume's account of property is a specially interesting example of this because he is arguably the first philosopher who *himself* offers a full-fledged pragmatic genealogy of the concept he describes, and thereby himself contextualises his account in a way that allows us to see how his account speaks to us. In this sense, Hume himself uncovered the practical dynamics in connection with which his ideas turn out to still have something to tell us.

Where the philosophers of the past were themselves pragmatic genealogists, they themselves laid bare their ideas' roots in practical problems that we might recognise as still being with us. This might be thought to give pragmatic genealogists a special claim to inclusion in the canon. Not only do they themselves self-consciously work to display the instrumental relations of their ideas to present concerns; they also situate their ideas, parochial as they may be, within broader practical dynamics, and thereby empower us to extend and adapt those ideas to new circumstances, and to recognise the practical relevance of other philosophers' ideas to our present concerns.

But this is, as I say, a special case: I am not arguing that the only philosophers who can be made to speak to us are pragmatic genealogists, but that linking philosophers' ideas to present concerns through pragmatic genealogies is one notable way in which these ideas can be made to speak to us: reconstructing the most general problem to which some philosopher's idea answers before determining what is common ground between us and the philosopher and what is

different will bring out the respects in which the philosopher's idea still speaks to our concerns; moreover, by understanding how what is different non-randomly reflects differences in our respective circumstances, we may gain some indication of how the idea needs to be rethought to achieve what we need it to achieve in our own circumstances.

3. Revising Past Perceptions of Problems

When philosophers of the past themselves explicitly think within a pragmatic problem-and-solution model, this makes them more readily integrable in a pragmatic genealogy linking their concerns and circumstances to ours. But it also brings with it a potential complication—a special way in which their relevance to our concerns can be concealed from us. For when philosophers themselves present their ideas as solutions to problem, they make certain assumptions about what generates the problem and what solution it calls for, and these assumptions may be off. Explicitly representing an idea's relation to practical dynamics may facilitate its integration within a broader genealogical account of the idea and the practical dynamics driving its development. But where there is representation, there is the possibility of misrepresentation. And sometimes, what renders past philosophers' ideas seemingly mute for us is that they misconstrue the problems to which their ideas answer.

This indicates another way in which philosophers that do not obviously speak to us now can be made to speak to us through pragmatic genealogies: by situating a past philosopher's account of a problem and its solution within a pragmatic genealogy, we can identify where the philosopher's assumptions deviate from those that seem plausible to us now, and, by adjusting those assumptions, we can make the

ideas of the philosopher speak to us after all, much as if we were clearing a radio channel from noise.

Let me illustrate what I have in mind using a highly schematic depiction of a familiar example: Hobbes's account of the practical origins of (the idea of) sovereign power.[17] Hobbes himself presented sovereign power as the solution to the practical problem of how to achieve security and the conditions of cooperation. Given what human beings are like and what kinds of environments they inhabit, they are susceptible to disagreement and violent conflict with each other. To remedy this problem, Hobbes believed, it is necessary to institute some form of sovereign power that will stabilise and regulate social life, thereby achieving some degree of security and putting in place the conditions of cooperation. But Hobbes also happened to think that, given what human beings and their situations actually tend to be like, they cannot hope to achieve the required degree of security necessary to cooperation except through the institution of a concentrated and extremely authoritarian form of sovereign power—that is why Hobbes is commonly seen as a champion of absolute monarchy.[18] His assumptions about what could possibly solve the problem were such that only a terrifying power—comparable to the biblical monster Leviathan—could hope to function as a viable solution.

As Bernard Williams has remarked, however, Hobbes's solution to the problem was so drastic that many later philosophers have found it difficult to distinguish from the problem.[19] Even if it could be made to work, moreover, such an immense

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[17] A fuller account than I have room for here would systematically differentiate between the idea of sovereign power and the kind of power that instantiates it. On the Hobbesian account, both are needed, and for closely related reasons. But I gloss over the distinction here to focus on the broader methodological point that the Hobbesian example is meant to illustrate.

[18] See Sommerville (2016).

[19] See Williams (1996, 370).

concentration of power seems alarmingly open to abuse in the long run. Hobbes, writing in the seventeenth century, may still have been tempted to regard state power as an un-ideological check on war-mongering religious factions. But for us, looking at Hobbes's notion of sovereign power from this side of the twentieth century, it is hard not to fear that such an authoritarian state will eventually employ its power to grind its own ideological axe.[20] All this makes it difficult to see how Hobbes's notion of sovereign power can still be of much use to modern liberal democracies today.

Once we situate Hobbes's account in a pragmatic genealogy of sovereign power, however, it emerges that there is much in his account that can nonetheless be made to speak to the concerns of modern liberal democracies.[21] The trick is to regard his account as a particular elaboration of a solution to a particular elaboration of a problem that we still face as much as Hobbes did. And he, like Hume, made it easy, because he is another example of a philosopher who himself indicated the pragmatic framework of problem and solution within which we can now grasp his ideas as being rooted in a problem we still share with him.

This shared problem, which can never presumed to have been solved once and for all, is how to achieve security and the conditions of cooperation. For recent liberal democratic political thinkers such as Bernard Williams or David Runciman as much as for Hobbes, this continues to be the most basic problem of politics.[22] They also concur with Hobbes that the general form of the solution to this problem is the institution of some kind of public authority with the power required to achieve

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[20] See Tuck (1989, 74).

[21] I take Williams's political philosophy to be neo-Hobbesian in this sense; see Williams (2005). For a fuller development both of how Hobbes's account can be developed along these pragmatic lines and of how it can thereby be made to speak to the concerns of modern democracies, see Cueni (manuscript).

[22] See Williams (2005, 3) and Runciman (2016).

security and the conditions of cooperation.

What led Hobbes from there to absolute monarchy were certain pessimistic empirical assumptions about *how much* power would be required, and *how concentrated* that power should be. He thought that the problem he had identified would admit only of one solution under any historical circumstances: absolute power concentrated in a single sovereign representative.[23] But with the benefit of hindsight, we can now see that his assumptions were too pessimistic: the political history of the last couple of centuries shows that it is possible, circumstances concurring, to achieve security and the conditions of cooperation with a lesser degree of power that is also far more dispersed across different offices and institutions.

The way in which Hobbes's ideas tie in with our present concerns is thus concealed by certain assumptions he made in characterising the problem. But placing that characterisation within a genealogical reconstruction of the problem shows that these assumptions in fact play a subsidiary role in his account. We can relax Hobbes's assumptions while remaining within the practical dynamics he described. It then emerges that absolute monarchy is just one practicable solution to the Hobbesian problem alongside others, and hardly the one to be preferred once we factor in the liberal and democratic concerns that we now bring to the problem. And insofar as we share with him both the general problem and the general shape of the solution, even the respects in which he differs from us in his perception of those practical dynamics can be instructive for us, because they still, if only

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[23] Thus, at any rate, Williams's (2005, 3) reading of Hobbes (see also Williams's discussion of Hobbes in the "Freedom" episode of the BBC Radio 4 programme *In Our Time*). Whether this is a compelling reading of Hobbes matters less for my purposes here than the broader methodological point this reading exemplifies.

counterfactually, map out those practical dynamics: we can consistently accept both that absolute monarchy is not the best way for us to solve the problem that Hobbes identified, and that *if* the kinds of assumptions Hobbes brings to the problem *were* to hold, it might yet prove to be.

In sum, this schematic discussion of Hobbes exemplifies another way in which philosophers of the past can be made to speak us through pragmatic genealogy: while making Hume's treatment of property speak to us required seeing how he answered to a socio-historically local manifestation of a much wider problem, the case of Hobbes calls for an adjustment of the empirical assumptions that go into characterising the problem. The difference is subtle, but it comes down to this: in Hume's case, I suggested that we could accept his depiction of the relevant practical dynamics, and merely needed to update them for our own time; in Hobbes's case, I suggested that we needed, in addition, to revise his depiction of the relevant practical dynamics: his actuality is occluded by his misdiagnosis of how severe the problem is, and how drastic a solution it calls for. By relying on a pragmatic genealogy of sovereign power constructed by our own lights, however, we can correct that misdiagnosis and reveal those practical dynamics to be profoundly and enduringly pertinent to the politics of the present day.

Thus, pragmatic genealogies can link past ideas to present concerns by reverse-engineering shared practical problems. What the examples of Hume and Hobbes bring out is that pragmatic genealogies can do this even when the connection between past ideas and present concerns is obfuscated by parochialisms or misrepresentations. As the example of Hume showed, pragmatic genealogies allow us to see past the parochially alien—and alienating—features of older ideas by adverting to the more widely shared problems to which they answer. But as the

example of Hobbes showed, situating past ideas within a pragmatic genealogy even allows us to correct misrepresentations of the relevant practical dynamics. Rethinking Hobbes's pragmatic genealogy of sovereign power from our twenty-first century vantage point reveals his ideas to tie in far more directly with our present concerns than his emphasis on absolute monarchy would suggest. Hobbes misconstrued the problem he spoke to as having a unique solution. But he was wrong in a way that renders him *more* relevant for us, not less.

4. Three Pitfalls

Pragmatic genealogies' use of a pragmatic problem-and-solution model offers us an attractive way to specify what it means for the ideas of past philosophers to speak to us. In this final section, I sharpen the contours of that approach further by indicating how it avoids three pitfalls.

The first pitfall is that of rendering the speaking-to-us relation overly individualistic and subjective. After all, if the capacity to speak to us is to yield a criterion guiding the formation of a *canon* as opposed to a compilation of personal favourites, that relation cannot just be a matter of meaning a lot to someone personally. The idea has to be that a philosopher's ideas tie in with concerns that are broadly shared within a group, and not just with someone's particular predilections. This still allows for variation in what is regarded as canonical across different groups. But as Tim Crane observes, this variation is real—the writings of Wilfrid Sellars are treated as canonical in some places, but not in others; and the same might hold for the works of Rudolf Carnap, or J. L. Austin (Crane 2015, 74).

Pragmatic genealogies can avoid this pitfall, notably, by relying on problem-generating concerns so general that they can hardly fail to be at work in human

societies even today (though pragmatic genealogies might equally rely on local concerns, as I emphasise in Queloz (2021b, 231–36)). The facts about human beings and their environment that create a conceptual need for something like the idea of property or the idea of sovereign power are not individual idiosyncrasies, but some of the most generic facts about the kinds of creatures we are. That is why philosophers of the past that speak to those needs are thereby also likely to speak to our needs. Of course, one can still contest that the facts at issue in fact are as general as some pragmatic genealogy makes them out to be. But where a pragmatic genealogy succeeds in showing that some past idea ties in with present concerns, it will be by showing that the idea answers to individual needs that are widely shared, or else to social needs that are visible once one switches from the perspective of the individual to the perspective of the collective.[24]

The second pitfall is that by letting our sense of what speaks to us inform our selection of whom to engage with, we risk turning the history of philosophy into an echo chamber, collapsing the difference between the past and the present. This is an elaboration of a worry that Bernard Williams presses in response to Grice's injunction: it is right to think that the history of philosophy should be made to speak to us, Williams thinks, but only so long as it is not assumed that "what the dead have to say to us is the same sort of thing as the living have to say to us," since "the point of reading philosophers of the past is to find in them something different from the present" (2006b, 344). It is precisely to the extent that philosophers of the past *cannot* be heard as participating in contemporary debates that they are in a position to

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[24] For more on this, see Queloz (2020b; 2021b, chs. 4–5).

uncover the unquestioned assumptions that contemporary debates rest on.[25] If philosophers of the past are to have anything philosophical to tell us, on this view, the history of philosophy has to maintain its identity as philosophy while at the same time remaining sensitive to past philosopher's historical distance and difference from us—it has to yield philosophy, but not *our* philosophy.[26] If it fails in the first respect, it might be historically informative, but it will fail to be *philosophically* informative; and if it fails in the second respect, it will fail to be informative *tout court*, since it will merely reflect present opinion. That worry is only exacerbated by the proposal to convert the capacity to speak to us into a criterion of canon formation, because this makes it even easier to turn the past into an echo chamber of the present.

Pragmatic genealogies promise to avoid this second pitfall by interpreting the speaking-to-us relation in practical terms, as a matter of tying in with our practical concerns, and by explicitly factoring in and learning from the differences that separate us from the past. Few ideas that have been handed down to us from cultures with radically different outlooks, organisations, and technologies already have the right shape to answer to our present conceptual needs. For example, as French revolutionaries like Louis Antoine de Saint-Just found out to their detriment, the ideals of civic virtue that made the Roman republic tick cannot simply be transplanted into eighteenth-century France, because ancient Rome and revolutionary Paris have completely different social and economic structures.[27]

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[25] This is how A.W. Moore renders Williams's position in P. Williams (2006, ix–x). See also Williams (2006a, 258).

[26] See Williams (2006a, 259–61).

[27] I elaborate on this difficulty in Queloz (2021a, §IV), drawing on Williams's discussion of "Saint-Just's illusion" (1995). For accounts of how Saint-Just and Robespierre self-consciously modelled their ideals on those of the Roman republic, see Linton (2010) and Andrew (2011, chs. 6 and 7).

But if we link the ideas of the past to our present concerns through pragmatic genealogies, we have room both for the thought that these ideas still bear some relation to our concerns because they fundamentally answer to problems we still face, and for the thought that those ideas are adapted to their specific socio-historical circumstances, so that to recreate their functionality under different circumstances must involve rethinking these ideas to adapt them to those new circumstances. As I have argued elsewhere, pragmatic genealogies may start out from a highly generic representation of human life, but the best of them do not end there: they shade into real history, telling the story of how an idea in fact came to be extended, elaborated, transformed, and repurposed by more sociohistorically local developments.[28] They may begin as developmental narratives describing why a strongly idealized community lacking an idea would be driven to develop it, but they then continue as narratives of de-idealization, drawing on real history to describe why the idea would have come to take something like the form it actually has, now and around here.

Far from being blind to historical differences, then, pragmatic genealogies explicitly factor in those differences as crucial parameters determining what it means for ideas to serve people's needs in a given setting. In the spirit of Williams's injunction to turn to the past in order to find in it something different from the present, pragmatic genealogies explore the practical dynamics governing the instrumental relations between concepts and concerns by investigating how different ideas can answer to similar concerns under different circumstances. In coming to see, for instance, how Hume's very different idea of property serves to solve a nearly ineluctable problem under very different circumstances, we

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[28] See Queloz (2021b, 8–17, 59–70, 126–31, 231–36).

understand something about the broader practical dynamics into which any elaboration of the idea of property is embedded—much as turning the knobs on an unfamiliar machine enables us to understand how it works by exploring what co-varies with what, and what this means for what we now want to achieve.

The third and related pitfall that pragmatic genealogies avoid, finally, is that of overstating the importance of historical difference at the cost of underestimating the philosophical value of discerning commonalities across history. Williams's response to Grice might be taken to suggest that the value of the history of philosophy lies exclusively in the differences it reveals. Indeed, Williams explicitly goes on to claim in that passage that "[t]o justify its existence," the history of philosophy "must maintain a historical distance from the present, and it must do this in terms that sustain its identity as philosophy. It is just to this extent that it can indeed be useful, because it is just to this extent that it can help us to deploy ideas of the past in order to understand our own" (2006a, 259). But even Williams's own work in fact draws much of its philosophical import from the value of revealing unsuspected commonalities across history: [29] *Shame and Necessity* reveals the ideas of responsibility and voluntary action to be practically indispensable to any human society, because the conceptual need for them is found to follow "from some universal banalities" (1993, 55) about human beings; and of his last book, *Truth and Truthfulness*, Williams writes that it invites us to think of truthfulness in terms of "a common core … developed or expressed … in different ways …. It is this kind of structure, of central core and historical variation, that I try to explain in *Truth and Truthfulness*" (2014, 407).

On a pragmatic problem-and-solution model of how history can speak to us,

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[29] See also Barnes (2011) for related criticism of Williams's position.

however, these commonalities need not consist in being contributions to the same philosophical debates, pinned in place by perennial philosophical questions. They are commonalities to be found at the non-discursive level of how people's ways of thinking relate to their ways of living. A one-eyed emphasis on the value of recognizing how differently philosophers of the past thought is in danger of masking these commonalities. There should also be a place and role in the history of philosophy for the recognition of what is shared across history, and using pragmatic genealogies to bring out how past ideas tie in with our own concerns allows us to achieve such a stereoscopic vision.

At the same time, it must be emphasized that despite Williams's talk of a "common core," the idea is not replace "perennial questions" with "perennial problems." The problems in question may be local ones, emerging downstream of the contingent advent of certain geographical, technological, or sociohistorical changes.[30] Moreover, what a local philosophical tradition regards as salient practical problems may not in fact be the most important ones, or the only ones deserving of attention. People may face more problems than are represented in their philosophy. Pragmatic genealogies can be used not only to remind us of problems addressed earlier in one philosophical tradition, as I have done here, but also to uncover problems that have been overlooked in that tradition, or even overlooked altogether.

To conclude, then, making history speak to us through pragmatic genealogies allows us to specify in sufficiently objective terms what it means for past philosophers to "speak to us," and it achieves this in a way that maintains past philosophers' historical distance from the present while at the same time

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[30] I discuss examples of this in Queloz (2021b, 231–35), in the section entitled "The State of Nature as a Representation of Local Problems."

maintaining a role in philosophy for the recognition of what is shared across history. The ideas of long-dead philosophers can reveal themselves to be alive for us by carrying lessons for how we can meet our own conceptual needs. In this sense, they answer to our concerns, and this can inform our selection of whom to include in the canon and why. But the answers these philosophers offer need not take the form of explicit answers to the philosophical questions that trouble us now. Their answers can lie in the way in which the ideas they expound respond to certain practical problems, and the problems they respond to need not be explicitly recognised by them: they are practical problems that ideas can solve without anyone being aware that a problem is being solved. This is part of what makes pragmatic genealogies informative: even ideas we may not have suspected of bearing any instrumental relation to practical needs at all—because they are lofty ideas that seem remote from practical concerns, perhaps—can be shown, by pragmatic genealogies reverse-engineering the practical point of having those ideas, to do important work for us.

I have argued that this pragmatic way of thinking about concepts as answering to human concerns by solving practical problems indicates one—and merely one—way of forming a philosophical canon. The pragmatic genealogist seeks to make past ideas speak to us by regarding them as non-randomly varying practical solutions to enduring problems, thereby duly acknowledging both what is different and what is common ground between us and the figures of yore. Where those figures themselves thought in pragmatic terms, they lend themselves more readily to such a treatment, but also complicate it by raising the possibility that their perception of the relevant practical dynamics diverges from ours. But my guiding thought has been the more basic platitude that, as various as the reasons are for studying thinkers of the past, one important way in which they can earn their claim to our attention is by helping

us understand what ideas we now need, given the problems we now face.

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