

The Practical Origins of Ideas

Abstracts and Keywords

Book Abstract

Why did such highly abstract ideas as truth, knowledge, or justice become so important to us? What was the point of coming to think in these terms? In *The Practical Origins of Ideas*, Matthieu Queloz presents a philosophical method designed to answer such questions: the method of pragmatic genealogy. Pragmatic genealogies are partly fictional, partly historical narratives exploring what might have driven us to develop certain ideas in order to discover what these do for us. The book uncovers an under-appreciated tradition of pragmatic genealogy which cuts across the analytic–continental divide, running from the state-of-nature stories of David Hume and the early genealogies of Friedrich Nietzsche to recent work in analytic philosophy by Edward Craig, Bernard Williams, and Miranda Fricker. However, these genealogies combine fictionalizing and historicizing in ways that even philosophers sympathetic to the use of state-of-nature fictions or real history have found puzzling. To make sense of why both fictionalizing and historicizing are called for, the book offers a systematic account of pragmatic genealogies as dynamic models serving to reverse-engineer the points of ideas in relation not only to near-universal human needs, but also to socio-historically situated needs. This allows the method to offer us explanation without reduction and to help us understand what led our ideas to shed the traces of their practical origins. Far from being normatively inert, moreover, pragmatic genealogy can affect the space of reasons, guiding attempts to improve our conceptual repertoire by helping us determine whether and when our ideas are worth having.

Keywords

metaphilosophy, concepts, functions, genealogy, pragmatism, state of nature, history, David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche, Edward Craig, Bernard Williams, Miranda Fricker

1 WHY WE CAME TO THINK AS WE DO

This introductory chapter presents the questions and concerns animating the book and outlines its two main theses: that there is an under-appreciated

tradition of pragmatic genealogy which cuts across the analytic–continental divide, and that these genealogies are dynamic models serving to reverse-engineer the points of ideas in relation to generic and local needs. After sharpening key notions such as ‘genealogy’, ‘living by an idea’, and ‘conceptual practice’, the pragmatic genealogical tradition that forms the topic of the book is brought into view and contrasted with other genealogical traditions. It is shown how this particular method proves puzzling in various ways and resists assimilation to better-known methods. This motivates the search for an attractive systematic account of the method that can make sense of its more puzzling features. The last section of the chapter then offers a rationale for developing this systematic account by doing history of philosophy.

Keywords

genealogy, state of nature, historiography, models, reconstruction, money, history of philosophy, analytic–continental divide, systematic–historical divide

2 THE BENEFITS OF REVERSE-ENGINEERING

This chapter motivates attempts to reverse-engineer the points of ideas by bringing out the various benefits that conceptual reverse-engineering promises to deliver. After working through seven general benefits of reverse-engineering, it focuses on three benefits that genealogical reverse-engineering is particularly well suited to delivering. First, genealogy can offer us explanation without reduction, combining naturalism and pragmatism into a non-reductive framework that can help us understand what led our ideas to shed the traces of their practical origins. Second, it can affect the space of reasons, subverting or vindicating our ideas by weakening or strengthening our confidence in them. And third, it can facilitate responsible conceptual engineering by alerting us to the multiplicity of functions we need to take into account as we revise our conceptual practices. Finally, the chapter situates pragmatic genealogy in a broader methodological landscape and examines how it can inform and be informed by other methods.

Keywords

reverse-engineering, conceptual analysis, metaphysics, naturalism, pragmatism, reduction, confidence, vindication, subversion, conceptual engineering

3 WHEN GENEALOGY IS CALLED FOR

This chapter examines when and why reverse-engineering is best pursued through pragmatic genealogy. In contrast to Miranda Fricker's interpretation of pragmatic genealogies as elaborate ways of achieving what could equally be achieved with paradigm-based explanations that dispense with historicizing and fictionalizing, an account of pragmatic genealogy is developed which shows that it would be a mistake to replace pragmatic genealogies with paradigm-based explanations across the board. When dealing with self-effacingly functional practices, paradigm-based explanation misses important aspects that pragmatic genealogy is better suited to capturing. And when dealing with historically inflected practices that lack a paradigm case or an obvious connection to generic human needs, paradigm-based explanation fails to get a grip; by achieving a grip even here and giving us a comprehensive view of the historical amalgam of generic and local needs to which our practices answer, pragmatic genealogy earns its keep alongside paradigm-based explanation.

Keywords

paradigm-based explanation, pragmatic genealogy, Miranda Fricker, self-effacing functionality, Friedrich Nietzsche, historical inflection, generic and local needs, comprehensive view

4 IDEAS AS REMEDIES TO INCONVENIENCES

This chapter locates the roots of the pragmatic genealogical tradition in David Hume's explanations of artificial virtues as remedies to inconveniences. The motivation for Hume's turn to genealogy is examined, and it is shown how viewing his accounts of the virtues of justice and fidelity to promises through the lens of pragmatic genealogy sets them apart from the Enlightenment genre of conjectural history. Four functions performed by Hume's fiction of a counterpossible state of nature are identified, and it is shown how Hume introduces two key ideas: that under certain circumstances, the motivations to engage in a practice need to be non-instrumental motivations if the practice is to be stable; and that shared needs can give rise to practices that serve a point for participants even when those fail to grasp what that point is. This prevents genealogies from becoming overly intellectualist or circular.

Keywords

David Hume, artificial virtues, Circle Argument, justice, property, promising, state of nature, self-interest, sympathy, conjectural history, vindicatory genealogy, intellectualism, circularity

5 A GENETIC HISTORY OF THOUGHT

This chapter moves into the nineteenth century and brings Friedrich Nietzsche into the fold of the pragmatic genealogical tradition. It is argued that in his Basel years, Nietzsche sketches primarily fictional and vindictory genealogies of justice and truthfulness which bring him closer to the 'English' genealogists than he later cared to admit. Nietzsche's significance for pragmatic genealogy is shown to be threefold: he diagnoses philosophers' tendencies to dehistoricize and denaturalize their objects, and envisages, as a remedy for these failings, a systematic application of genealogy across our conceptual practices; he views concepts as growing out of needs, but, under the influence of Darwinism and historicism, he indexes needs to socio-historical perspectives and invites genealogists to think more historically; and he highlights that what has a point under some circumstances might become pointless or dysfunctional once it takes more demanding forms or comes to be applied beyond those circumstances.

Keywords

Friedrich Nietzsche, dehistoricization, denaturalization, justice, truthfulness, will to truth, English genealogists, Darwinism, historicism, history, fiction, dysfunctionality, hypertrophy

6 LOOSENING THE NEED-CONCEPT TIE

This chapter on E. J. Craig's genealogy of the concept of knowledge aims to bring out four attractive features of the method. First, by examining its alleged incompatibility with knowledge-first epistemology, it is shown how genealogy allows one to treat as arising separately what in reality has to arise together, so that one can isolate a concept's practical contribution even when it could not have arisen in isolation. Second, genealogy allows one to consider a concept's development out of prior forms that more clearly display its relation to human needs even when these prior forms could not have been realized in history, for reasons that the genealogy itself brings out. Third, genealogy reveals practical pressures driving the de-instrumentalization of concepts, the process whereby concepts shed the traces of their origins in the needs of individual concept-users. And finally, the method allows one to assess and reconcile competing accounts of concepts.

Keywords

E. J. Craig, concept of knowledge, practical explication, function-first epistemology, knowledge-first epistemology, testimony, epistemic division of labour, de-instrumentalization of concepts, concept sharing, conceptual synthesis

7 THE USES OF INTRINSIC VALUE

This chapter explores Bernard Williams's genealogy in *Truth and Truthfulness* and argues that by emphasizing the historicity of needs and the ways in which practices can acquire or lose their points, Williams brings pragmatic genealogy from its Neo-Humean phase into its Neo-Nietzschean phase. The chapter begins by reconstructing Williams's notoriously elusive genealogy and reveals its affinities with Cambridge pragmatism. It then addresses three influential challenges raised by Colin McGinn. Williams's notion of intrinsic value is elucidated and his position distinguished from indirect utilitarianism. It emerges that Williams's distinctive contribution to the pragmatic genealogical tradition is to identify the practical pressures driving thought away from a stance of instrumental valuation to a stance of intrinsic valuation, thus showing how intrinsic values have their uses, and to illustrate how the method equips one to do justice to self-effacingly functional practices. The chapter concludes by considering the depth of Williams's debt to Nietzsche.

Keywords

Bernard Williams, concept of truth, value of truth, truthfulness, sincerity, accuracy, authenticity, Cambridge pragmatism, intrinsic value, indirect utilitarianism, self-effacing functionality, pessimism of strength, Friedrich Nietzsche

8 A POLITICAL AND AMELIORATIVE STATE OF NATURE

This chapter turns to Miranda Fricker's genealogy of the virtue of testimonial justice and argues that her politicized state of nature illustrates how reverse-engineering can feed into conceptual engineering. The chapter first examines how she de-idealizes her state-of-nature model just enough to bring social heterogeneity and politics into it, thereby raising the question of how far genealogical models should be de-idealized. Second, it is shown how Fricker's use of pragmatic genealogy differs from that of the other genealogists in being primarily ameliorative rather than explanatory. While earlier genealogists reverse-engineered the points of practices we already have, Fricker's genealogy functions as a corrective, indicating respects in which our practices have in fact developed in ways that fall short of satisfying the needs highlighted by her model. It is then argued that making ameliorative use of the method requires pairing genealogy with a theory of error.

Keywords

Miranda Fricker, epistemic injustice, testimonial justice, de-idealization,

politics, power, prejudice, testimony, theory of error, conceptual engineering, amelioration, conceptual innovation

9 THE NORMATIVE SIGNIFICANCE OF PRAGMATIC GENEALOGIES

This chapter examines how pragmatic genealogy can affect the space of reasons by addressing four objections to this idea: normatively ambitious genealogies commit the genetic fallacy; if not, they founder on failures of continuity in the conditions securing their normative import; if not, this must be because they deal with universal needs, which severely restricts their explanatory scope; and what counts as a need is anyway eagerly contested. In answering these objections, the chapter shows two ways around the genetic fallacy and addresses the problem of Rortyan irony; it offers a need-satisfaction account of functions or pointfulness and discusses the strategies by which genealogies can secure continuity; it shows that the method is not restricted to explaining anthropological universals and that the state of nature can also be used to model local problems; finally, it explores how genealogies help us navigate contestations of certain needs and conceptions of human agents.

Keywords

genetic fallacy, normative significance, needs, irony, functions, points, need-satisfaction account, anthropological universals, state of nature, local problems, political liberty, liberalism, contestation

10 IDEAS WORTH HAVING

This concluding chapter argues that pragmatic genealogies show us to what extent the ideas we live by merit our confidence by revealing whether and when they are ideas worth having. Returning to the opening contrast between Socratic and Pragmatic Questions, the chapter argues that the kind of pragmatic inquiry exemplified by pragmatic genealogies is something that Socratic inquiry can be grounded in and guided by. The answer to a ‘What is X?’ question cannot be the last word, because the authority of any answer to that question needs to be assessed in light of the merit of accepting it as authoritative. Finally, the chapter highlights how the method of pragmatic genealogy provides philosophy with a vessel for incorporating social, psychological, and historical understanding into philosophy, thereby offering philosophers a concrete model for how to pursue philosophy as a humanistic discipline, in integration with neighbouring human sciences.

Keywords

confidence, Socratic inquiry, pragmatic inquiry, authority, metaphilosophy, humanistic discipline, history, psychology, sociology