

The Normative Significance of Pragmatic Genealogies

Genealogical explanations are widely thought to be normatively inert: they may advance our understanding of philosophically puzzling concepts, but they do not directly vindicate or debunk them—they are only preparatory, but not constitutive of critique.¹ Accordingly, attempts to use genealogy to affect the space of reasons are frequently dismissed as committing the ‘genetic fallacy’.² Against this standard view, I have suggested that pragmatic genealogies can be carefully constructed to showcase the respects in which certain conceptual practices serve our needs, and that in virtue of this, they can be normatively significant and affect the space of reasons. But in what sense exactly? To carve out the contours of this claim, we can chisel it with four increasingly refined objections: (i) normatively ambitious genealogies commit the genetic fallacy; (ii) if they do not commit the genetic fallacy, they founder on failures of continuity in the conditions from which they draw their normative import; (iii) if they do not founder on such continuity failures, this must be because they are based on anthropologically universal needs, which severely restricts their explanatory scope; and (iv) even this does not provide a solid basis, for need ascriptions are contestable (as illustrated by the economists’ jibe that a ‘need’ refers to something you want, but are not prepared to pay for).

As we work through these four objections to substantiate the thesis that pragmatic genealogies can affect the space of reasons, we will also have occasion to tie up some loose ends. In particular, the notions of *pointfulness*, *needs*, and the *conception of the agent* with which pragmatic genealogies operate will be clarified. It will also emerge that pragmatic genealogies can model even entirely socio-historically local problems, and help us distinguish between different ways in which our ideas seem to be necessary for us.

¹ See Dutilh Novaes (2015, 100–1) and Koopman (2009).

² This objection was raised against Williams’s genealogy by Koopman (2013, 20). For further discussions that see the genetic fallacy as clouding the prospects of normatively ambitious genealogical explanations, see Fraser (1981), Glock (2008a; 2008b, 101), Goudge (1961), Hanson (1967), Kaplan (2002, 13), and Kim (1990).

9.1 Genetic Fallacies and the Ways Around Them

The first objection to the claim that pragmatic genealogies can affect the space of reasons, which is not yet specific to pragmatic genealogies and calls for an answer in more general terms, maintains that attempts to derive reasons from claims about the genesis of something commit the genetic fallacy. This alleged fallacy is well known; what is less so is that when Morris Cohen and Ernest Nagel introduced the term in 1934, they identified not one, but *two* distinct genetic fallacies. And as Amia Srinivasan (2019, §1n3) notes, it is the first and lesser-known of the two that poses the greater *prima facie* threat to vindicatory genealogies.

This first form of the genetic fallacy ‘takes a logical for a temporal order’ (Cohen and Nagel 1934, 388): it fallaciously infers from the fact that something is *logically prior* that it must be *temporally prior* as well. To condemn this form of reasoning as a fallacy, Cohen and Nagel think, is to condemn

all attempts current in the eighteenth century, and still widely popular, to reconstruct the history of mankind prior to any reliable records, on the basis of nothing but speculations as to what must have been. The theories as to the origin of language or religion, or the original social contract by which government was instituted, which were based on empirically unsupported assumptions as to what ‘the first’ or ‘primitive’ man *must* have done are all historically untenable. It is clearly a logical error or fallacy to assume that actual history can be so constructed or discovered. Not much different, however, are those speculative *a priori* histories which under the name of social evolution attempt to deduce the stages which all human institutions must go through and therefore actually have gone through. In all of these attempts to trace the history of the family, industry, the state, and the like, the earlier stages are assumed to have been simpler, and the later stages more complex. Such attempts appeal to us because we can understand the present complex institutions better if we see them built up out of simpler elements. But it is an inexcusable error to identify the temporal order in which events have actually occurred with the logical order in which elements may be put together to constitute existing institutions. Actual recorded history shows growth in simplicity as well as in complexity.

(Cohen and Nagel 1934, 388–9)

Even leaving aside the respects in which Cohen and Nagel are representative of the verificationists of the 1930s, who have their own particular reasons to be unsympathetic to unverifiable speculations about the past (1934, 207–11), their objection looks to be fatal to state-of-nature-based genealogies *if these are interpreted as conjectural histories*. But if they are interpreted as *dynamic models* whose order is in the first instance meant to reflect the order of optimal intelligibility rather than

the temporal order of actual development, the objection loses its force. Indeed, it is the point of pragmatic genealogies understood as dynamic models to exploit the fact that ‘we can understand the present complex institutions better if we see them built up out of simpler elements’ *without* committing ourselves to groundless speculations about actual history. As became clear in our discussion of Craig and Williams in Chapters 6 and 7—though it is already true of Hume as interpreted in Chapter 4—these vindictory pragmatic genealogies start out from states of affairs that, so far from being alleged to have obtained at some early stage of history, are not alleged to have obtained at all—indeed, they are alleged *not* to have obtained, because they involve unrealistic or unstable idealizations. Instead of being a threat to pragmatic genealogies, therefore, Cohen and Nagel’s first form of the genetic fallacy precisely brings out the advantage that, on the dynamic-model interpretation, pragmatic genealogies possess over conjectural histories. By *constructing* a progression from the simple to the complex in a model instead of looking to history to offer such a progression in ready-made form, pragmatic genealogies elegantly sidestep this genetic fallacy, reaping the benefits of Enlightenment-style origin stories without the costs.

As for the second form of the genetic fallacy that Cohen and Nagel introduce, which is the currently prevalent understanding of it, it boils down to the error of treating items in the *context of formation* of conceptual practices as if they belonged to the *context of justification* when in fact they do not.³ We can acknowledge that there is such an error without committing ourselves to the much stronger claim that nothing can be inferred about the justification of something from facts about its origins. Items in the context of formation *can* form part of the context of justification, but they can properly do so only if there is a *connection* between some aspect of the context of formation and the justification of the item in question. What is fallacious is not the inference from origins to justification *per se*, but the inference from *irrelevant* information about origins to justification. And of course, *whether* some piece of information is relevant to the justification of a given conclusion is often precisely what is at issue.⁴ What normatively ambitious genealogical explanations depend on, then, is that there be a connection rendering some aspect of the context of formation

³ This Reichenbachian characterization is adapted from Salmon (1973, 11). Alternative characterizations of the fallacy maintain that it consists in judging the truth of an assertion on the basis of its source rather than by the evidence available for it (Kaplan 2002, 13), or in conflating temporal origin with logical nature (Koopman 2013, 20).

⁴ The rise of the genetic fallacy charge in the 1930s and 40s may have been a response to the genetic reasoning involved in anti-Semitic discreditations of ‘Jewish science’ (Giere 1999, 14). But the distinctions animating the charge—between genesis and validity, explanation and justification, causes and reasons—were already in high demand during the ‘psychologism’ debates that raged from the 1880s to the 1920s, when philosophers needed to demarcate their discipline from the emerging field of psychology (Kusch 1995).

relevant to the context of justification.⁵ Such a connection can be forged from two directions. Either the space of reasons is itself such that it locally encompasses certain formation processes, because something is justified or claims authority for itself *in terms of* its formation; or the formation processes are such that knowledge of them can contribute to the vindication or subversion of their product even when that product was not already justified in terms of its formation. Either we have *genetically justified practices*, or we have *genealogies yielding justifications*.

Consider genetically justified practices first. Claims about the formation processes of conceptual practices may affect the space of reasons because these claims concern practices whose *authority is itself a function of their formation*.⁶ That is to say, formation processes are part of the truth conditions of the propositions from which the practice derives its authority. We may call practices that understand themselves or claim authority for themselves in terms that knowledge of their formation can undermine *genetically justified practices*. Examples of such genetically justified practices abound in politics and law, where it is common for practices to derive their authority from the procedure by which they were formed. There are also many rituals and traditions that justify their continuation by reference to their authoritative origins—things are done a certain way because some respected originator did them that way. Religious practices in particular tend to revolve around widescreen representations of their own origins from which they derive their self-understanding and authority.

In such cases, genealogical explanations can impinge on the space of reasons because the rational articulation of the practices in question itself refers to their formation. It is in virtue of displaying such a justificatory connection to their own formation that certain practices will be susceptible to vindication and subversion by genealogical explanations. The structure of such vindications and subversions will then be as follows:

Vindictory Genealogy of a Genetically Justified Practice:

Conceptual practice *P* claims authority for itself in terms of a representation R_{FP} of its own formation process *FP*.

Inquiry into how *FP* might have given rise to *P* suggests that R_{FP} is true.

Therefore, the authority of *P* is to that extent vindicated.

⁵ Pashman (1970) argues that relevance depends on there being a causal link between the context of formation and the context of justification. But in many cases, no such philosophically neutral ways of determining relevance will be available: the Archimedean standpoint is lacking (Crouch 1993; Srinivasan 2015).

⁶ Williams (2014g, 410) and Gutting (2005, 50).

Subversive Genealogy of a Genetically Justified Practice:

Conceptual practice P claims authority for itself in terms of a representation R_{FP} of its own formation process FP .

Inquiry into how FP might have given rise to P suggests that R_{FP} is false.

Therefore, the authority of P is to that extent subverted.

Genealogy can thus sidestep the genetic fallacy by exploiting the fact that the target phenomenon understands itself and claims authority for itself in terms that render it vulnerable to genealogical inquiry: genealogical inquiry can sap the authority of beliefs or ideas *insofar* as these demand authority for themselves in terms that are incompatible with the kinds of origins that genealogical inquiry shows them to have. Thomas Nagel (1997, 2009a) renders the authority of liberalism vulnerable to genealogical subversion, for example, when he represents liberalism as the rationally inevitable product of a historical process of attunement to universal reasons.⁷ Wherever there is such a veneer of inevitability, genealogy can peel it away by generating a sense of alternative possibilities: people *can* live and reason differently, because they *have* lived and reasoned differently.⁸

However, there are other ways in which genealogy can impinge on the space of reasons which we miss if we focus only on how genealogical revelations of contingency can undermine claims to inevitability or necessity. These are not a matter of how practices claim authority for themselves, but of how and why they originated. This is where we turn from genetically justified practices to *genealogies yielding justifications*.

In this second way of connecting origin and justification, it is not the justificatory structures but the formation processes themselves that are such that knowledge of them can contribute to the vindication or subversion of practices, or simply exhibit them as rationally contingent.⁹ Let us say that a practice P is *rationally contingent* to the extent that the considerations contributing to the best explanation of why a group G engages in P fail to provide *reasons* to prefer P over possible rivals to P , where *possible rivals* to P are unrealized alternatives to P competing for the place in our lives occupied by P , and notably include the abandonment of P . We can then distinguish three ways in which insights into the formation process of a practice can bear on our understanding of it:

⁷ See Williams (2014g, 410).

⁸ Even when a practice appears inevitable or necessary *without* its authority depending on its being taken to be so, genealogical inquiry can prompt a critical reevaluation of authority. Generating a sense of alternatives will then not itself constitute a subversion of authority. But, as Elizabeth Anderson puts it, it can convert dogmas into tools that we can choose to use or not (2001, 22). It can turn dogmatic acceptance into critical assessment.

⁹ As Srinivasan (2015, 2019, manuscript) argues, *which* formation processes count as vindicatory, subversive, or neutral is a question that cannot ultimately be answered without drawing on some first-order commitments concerning what one in fact takes to be true or valuable.

Vindictory Genealogy:

Group *G* engages in conceptual practice *P*.

The best explanation for why *G* engages in *P* is that *P* is the result of formation process *FP*.

FP is vindictory, i.e. it offers reasons to prefer *P* over possible rivals, including the abandonment of *P*.

Therefore, the continuation of *P* is to that extent justified.¹⁰

Non-Vindictory Genealogy:

Group *G* engages in conceptual practice *P*.

The best explanation for why *G* engages in *P* is that *P* is the result of formation process *FP*.

FP is not vindictory, i.e. it fails to yield reasons to prefer *P* over possible rivals, including the abandonment of *P*.

Therefore, *P* is to that extent rationally contingent.

Subversive Genealogy:

Group *G* engages in conceptual practice *P*.

The best explanation for why *G* engages in *P* is that *P* is the result of formation process *FP*.

FP is incriminating, i.e. it offers reasons against the continuation of *P*.

Therefore, the abandonment of *P* is to that extent justified.

There are two reasons for reconstructing the genealogies at issue here as forms of *abductive* reasoning, i.e. reasoning to the best explanation. The first is that it enables us to offer genealogies even where we have no knowledge of how a given practice actually came about (knowledge that a sound *deductive* argument would require). The second reason is that the abductive reconstruction licenses a form of self-referential reasoning (Klement 2002, 392): the existence of the practices can be used as evidence for the existence of the formation processes imbuing them with authority, which is important because the existence of these formation processes is often just what is at issue. At the end of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, for example, Levine comes to see the existence of his own moral values as evidence for the truth of divine revelation, a formation process whose existence in turn vindicates those values (Tolstoy 2014, VIII, chs. 12–13). Another example is Descartes's argument for the existence of God in the *Third Meditation*: among the contents of his consciousness, Descartes finds, is the concept of unified

¹⁰ Here I am generalizing to conceptual practices a pattern of genetic reasoning spelled out by Klement (2002, 390).

perfection, i.e. the concept of God; this concept of unified perfection could not have come from something less than perfect; since he himself is imperfect, the best explanation for his having the concept of God is that it was implanted in him by God himself, as the mark of the maker stamped upon his work (Descartes 1996, 3.51).¹¹

While genealogies of genetically justified practices can take only two possible forms, genealogies yielding justifications can take three possible forms. This is because the former turn on representations of formation processes *as being thus-and-so*, and these representations obey the principle of bivalence: they are either true or false. If a genealogy fails to yield evidence that a certain representation of formation processes is true, this will be *prima facie* evidence of its falsity. Hence, genealogies of genetically justified practices will be either vindictory or subversive. But if we start at the other end—with the formation processes of concepts, values, and practices—we get three rather than two possible argumentative structures. This is because concepts, values, and practices are neither true nor false. They can be evaluated: there can be reasons for or against living by those practices rather than by possible alternatives. Yet this allows for the possibility that aspects of our ways of going on will simply be rationally contingent (and even where our having *some* form of a conceptual practice is not rationally contingent, the specific form it takes in our own cultural situation may be). Hence, a genealogical explanation of how we came to live by a given conceptual practice may yield reasons in favour of it, reasons against it, or neither—but as Wittgenstein (2009, §289) pointed out, the fact that we use something without justification does not mean that we use it wrongfully.

At the level of these highly general considerations that are not yet specific to pragmatic genealogies, we thus find that there are two ways of connecting origin and justification that sidestep the genetic fallacy objection. Either claims about the origins of practices affect the space of reasons because these claims concern practices whose authority is itself a function of their formation, or the formation processes themselves are in some way *reason-giving*, providing reasons for or against cultivating a conceptual practice.

This brings us to an important complication we have so far ignored, namely that whether one considers a genealogy vindictory, non-vindictory, or subversive crucially depends on what one is prepared to *recognize as a reason* for or against a conceptual practice, and that in turn depends on one's conception of one's *ultimate aim* in assessing the ideas one lives by. Do we take ourselves to strive for the set of ideas that is absolutely and definitively best, which is to say: best from a point of view that is as free of contingent historical perspective as possible? If so, then in order for something to *count* as a reason for or against

¹¹ See Williams (2005b, 134–7).

cultivating an idea, it would have to be recognizable as a reason *to anyone*. This is to hold our ideas accountable to a timeless and universal standard—something that is by no means the preserve of believers in eternal foundations for human thought in Platonic Forms, Divine Commands, natural law, or universal reason. One can hold our ideas accountable to a timeless and universal standard while granting, at the same time, that *no ideas in fact admit* of vindication by such a standard. This is the position of Richard Rorty (1989, chs. 3–4), for example. On the last analysis, according to Rorty, all ideas must appear rationally contingent. In practice, we may be forced to retain some commitment to the ideas we happen to have; but at a reflective level, our attitude towards them should be one of ironic distance.

To assess the ideas we live by in the light of their pragmatic genealogy, however, is precisely not to hold them accountable to a timeless and universal standard; it is precisely not to ask whether *anyone* has reason to use the ideas we live by, but rather *who* does, given *which* needs and concerns. As Wittgenstein remarked: ‘if anyone believes that certain concepts are absolutely the correct ones, and that having different ones would mean not realizing something that we realize—then let him imagine certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to, and the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become intelligible to him’ (2009, II, §366). To see our ideas as answers to practical problems that are contingent upon who we are and what kind of world we live in is to recognize contingency not only at the level of our ideas, but also at the level of the *standards* to which they answer. This is why Williams can reject Rortyan irony as expressing a failure to go *far enough* in recognizing contingency:

Once one goes *far enough* in recognizing contingency, the problem to which irony is supposed to provide the answer does not arise at all. . . . Precisely because we are not unencumbered intelligences selecting in principle among all possible outlooks, we can accept that this outlook is ours just because of the history that has made it ours; or, more precisely, has both made us, and made the outlook as something that is ours. We are no less contingently formed than the outlook is, and the formation is significantly the same. We and our outlook are not simply in the same place at the same time. If we really understand this, deeply understand it, we can be free of what is indeed another scientific illusion, that it is our job as rational agents to search for, or at least move as best we can towards, a system of political and ethical ideas which would be the best from an absolute point of view, a point of view that was free of contingent historical perspective. (2006d, 193–4)

Responding to this passage, John Cottingham complains that ‘there is no real harmony here, just a concatenation of contingencies’; ‘this is something we can perhaps learn to put up with’, he concludes, ‘but *confidence* seems sadly out of place’ (2009, 37). *Pace* Cottingham, however, there *is* harmony between us and

our ideas when our ideas answer to *our problems*—that is the sense in which genealogy can reveal the formation undergone by us and our outlook to be *significantly* the same, and strengthen our confidence in those ideas as a result.

Of course, this kind of reflection can also weaken our confidence in our ideas by showing that they answer to problems we no longer face, or, more alarmingly, that others face in oppressing us. So Williams is not plumping for a complacent conservatism, as Srinivasan (2019, 139) might perhaps be taken to suggest.¹² Nor, as Srinivasan definitely suggests, is he disputing that the insight into the contingency of our ideas is an important one that should affect our view of them and of their relation to the ideas of others.¹³ On the contrary, the crucial question becomes precisely: what are these ideas contingent *upon*? Genealogical reflection along these lines can help us locate our own ideas in relation to rival ones: are these rival ideas simply archaic, having survived into a world in which they are bereft of their point, or are they still rooted in live concerns that we merely happen not to share? And with regard to our own outlook, genealogical reflection can render us less hostage to a picture of that outlook as a tensionless and universally beneficial whole.¹⁴ By tracing ideas to the concerns from which they derive their point, we become more disposed to recognize how many ideas only cater to certain constituencies, how one set of ideas can be deployed against another, and how the concerns they each promote can come into conflict.

On this view—which is, if not *implied* by the method of pragmatic genealogy, certainly a natural fit for it—we want the concepts and values that best make sense of the world *to us* and that best help *us* to live; but what makes sense to us and helps us to live is in turn a function of who we are, which concepts and values shape our concerns, and what kinds of circumstances we find ourselves in—all of which are largely matters of contingent historical forces. This is not a constraint to be overcome, but rather what enables our sense-making and practical reasoning in the first place. The self that subjects its concepts and values to genealogical scrutiny cannot be separated from everything that it contingently is—it is not, in the first instance, *biased* by historical processes, but *constructed* by them.¹⁵ Once we recognize this, we can see that our task as pragmatic genealogists is not to find the ideas that are best from a point of view that is maximally pure of contingent influence, and we shall accordingly be freed of the expectation that

¹² Williams explicitly insists—as Srinivasan (2019, 139n19) duly acknowledges—that this does not leave us with ‘an inactive or functionalist conservatism that has to take existing ethical ideas as they stand’, but rather enables a ‘critique of existing institutions, conceptions, prejudices, and powers’ (2005h, 36–7). See Queloz and Cueni (forthcoming) for a more extensive discussion, which draws on the above, of how Williams’s ‘Left Wittgensteinianism’ promises non-foundationalism without conservatism.

¹³ See, for instance, Williams (2006d, 195).

¹⁴ See Williams (2005h, 36–7; 2006d, 195), Prescott-Couch (manuscript), and Queloz and Cueni (forthcoming).

¹⁵ See Williams (1993, 158–9).

our ideas ought to emerge from genealogical scrutiny vindicated against all possible rivals, in terms of reasons recognizable to anyone. The concern animating pragmatic genealogy is not that our ideas should be ultimately and timelessly desirable, but that they should have a point *for us*.

9.2 Understanding Pointfulness and Avoiding Continuity Failures

As the case studies of Chapters 4–8 have brought out, what renders formation processes reason-giving in *pragmatic* genealogies is the notion of a *point*, which straddles the space of causes and the space of reasons: pragmatic genealogies can yield reasons by showing that certain ways of going on are rational because pointful responses. But as section 9.1 also made clear, the needs and concerns that render ideas pointful themselves have a history, and the second hurdle for pragmatic genealogy's claim to being normatively significant is that this historicity threatens to rob genealogies of the continuity on which their normative significance depends. Before confronting this second objection head on, however, we first need to clarify the notion of 'pointfulness' at work in pragmatic genealogies. What exactly is it for an idea to have a point?

9.2.1 The Need-Satisfaction Account of Pointfulness

Ideas—more precisely, tokens of a conceptual practice—have countless effects. So what makes a particular type of effect the *point* of an idea? Evidently, pragmatic genealogists' talk of points and pointfulness is really a humanistic-sounding way of ascribing *functions* to conceptual practices, and in the literature on the notion of function, there are broadly speaking two kinds of theories on offer: *causal role* theories and *selected effect* theories.¹⁶ The first kind of theory focuses on the way in which talk of functions helps us understand the causal role of something within a complex system: by asking which effects of some particular trait or item contribute to the realization of some system-level capacity—which effects of the boiler contribute to the heating system's capacity to heat the house, for example—we can specify the relevant effects of something in relation to a system-level capacity. The second kind of theory, by contrast, focuses on the way in which talk of functions helps us understand how the past effects of something contributed to its present ubiquity: by asking which effects have a history of being selected for—which among the various past effects of hearts (heat production, noise emission,

¹⁶ The first kind of theory is exemplified by Cummins (1975); the second by Wright (1973), Millikan (1989), and Neander (2017).

or blood pumping) are causally responsible for the retention and consequent prevalence of hearts, for example—we can specify the relevant effects by reference to selection histories. While the first kind of theory has been criticized for being too inclusive in what it is prepared to describe as a function, the second has been criticized for being too restrictive in limiting functions to effects with a selection history.¹⁷

What selected effect theories have going for them is that they make ascriptions of functions more objective. The importance of this is brought out in psychiatry, for instance, when attempts are made to define mental illness in terms of functions and dysfunctions in the brain.¹⁸ Who gets to decide what counts as a functional brain? Are ascriptions of functions just thinly veiled value judgements? By equating functions with selected effects, we can do away with much of this dependence on value judgements. There is an objective fact of the matter as to what the selection history of a trait looks like, so that one can discover functions largely independently of one's value judgements.

Insofar as one's concern in telling a pragmatic genealogy is the purely explanatory one of accounting for the present ubiquity of an idea, the relevant understanding of pointfulness arguably aligns with selected effect theory. But insofar as the driving concern of our pragmatic genealogists is to find out whether an idea is *worth having going forward*, understanding the points of conceptual practices as selected effects will not do. Conceptual practices may now serve an important need *even if* that need played no role whatsoever in the retention of that concept in the past. A conceptual practice could be freshly instituted by a mad king on a whim—so that on a selected effect theory, it would lack a point—while still promising to stand in important instrumental relations to our needs going forward.

For the purpose of understanding the pragmatic genealogies at issue in this book, therefore, the notion of pointfulness is better understood not in terms of selected effects, but in terms of *needed* effects: the points of conceptual practices are the effects that contribute to the satisfaction of the needs of concept-users. More precisely, to say that the point of concept *A* is to serve some need *C* is to say:

- (1) Tokens of the practice of living by concept *A* tend to cause effect *B*.
- (2) *B* tends to cause the satisfaction of need *C*.

(1) and (2) show how ascriptions of pointfulness or functionality can be translated into causal claims relating the typical effects of conceptual practices to the satisfaction of human needs. We can call this the *need-satisfaction account* of

¹⁷ For an overview of the different theories of functions in biology and the criticism they have attracted, see Garson (2016).

¹⁸ See Garson (2019, ch. 11).

pointfulness or functions. On this account, the notion of pointfulness at work in pragmatic genealogies is a fairly modest causal notion which is not committed to there being any particular selection mechanism or even any kind of differential survival—(1) and (2) would be applicable even to a world containing little else besides *A*, *B*, and *C*.¹⁹ The notion of pointfulness they articulate is simply the idea that the practice of living by a given concept, value, or virtue has certain effects, and that some of these effects make a *salient useful difference* to the lives of participants in the practice, where ‘usefulness’ is specified in terms of conduciveness to need-satisfaction, and ‘saliency’ is specified according to the purposes animating the telling of the genealogical story in the first place: by describing something in terms of its point, one highlights a select few among the unsurveyably many effects of a practice, and the merits of the selection depend on the purposes pursued in so describing them.²⁰

How perspectival or mind-dependent does this make the functions or points of ideas? Certainly more so than on selected effect theories, where functions are objectively determined by causal histories, and the selection patterns discernible in those histories are, in that sense, formed independently of human interests. But while severing the connection to human interests secures greater objectivity, it also renders it less evident that *this* should be the notion of function best suited to assessing an idea’s present relation to our interests. In the context of evolutionary biology, there is certainly a point to thinking of functions as selected effects, but that point derives from the professional interest of evolutionary biologists in selection histories. When our interests are not primarily historical, however, it is less clear that this is the concept of function we need (a fact obscured by the frequent overlaps between the effects that different interests give one reason to highlight—the evolutionary biologist and the heart surgeon may approach the heart with very different concerns and nonetheless converge in the effects they find worth highlighting). We must apply the spirit of pragmatic genealogy to its operative concepts.

Unlike selected effect theories, causal role theories retain a tight connection to human interests: by specifying the function of something in terms of how it contributes to the realization of some system-level capacity, we identify its function in relation to *what we see as a system exercising a capacity we are interested in*. Here the human disposition to regard something as a system worth understanding is primary and grounds function attributions.²¹ However, this also means that things will have as many functions as there are systems we are interested in: relative to the system of honey production, the function of bees is to produce

¹⁹ A point highlighted by Kincaid (2020, 23) to immunize functionality ascriptions against the notorious ‘missing mechanism objection’. For a critical discussion of this objection, see Van Riel (2020).

²⁰ See Queloz (2019) and Barnes (1995, 43).

²¹ See Haslanger (forthcoming, §6).

honey; but relative to the system of absinthe production, the function of bees is to pollinate wormwood. Hence the charge that causal role theories are overly inclusive.

On the need-satisfaction account, by contrast, we do not have to start from the idea that there is some system whose capacities we want to explain in terms of the capacities of its constituents; nor are we required to specify in what sense a community of concept-users form a 'system' exercising some 'system-level capacity' before we can attribute functions to our concepts; what guides the attribution of functions is rather the conviction that we have certain needs relative to which certain causal effects of conceptual practices are usefully singled out because they contribute to the satisfaction of those needs. Function attributions become less arbitrary when they are anchored in needs rather than in what we are prepared to regard as a system. We identify functions by working from the needs up rather than from the system down.

Of course, the ascription of needs still involves interpretation and value judgements (as, in a different way, does the individuation of systems and capacities). But need ascriptions are still more objective than many other value judgements: whether we have a need comes as a discovery, and it is not subject to our will the way that having a desire, a preference, a purpose, or a goal is.²² We can have needs without knowing that we have them, and part of what pragmatic genealogies do is to help us recognize the needs we did not know we had by deriving them from needs we knew we had.

If we apply the spirit of pragmatic genealogy to the notion of pointfulness it operates with, it becomes clear that how inclusive its understanding of functionality can properly get once again depends on what we use it for. In theories of biological functions, a notion of function will arguably be too liberal if it includes so much that it ends up being out of touch with the way biologists think and speak.²³ But in the present book, the task is to make sense of the notion of functionality or pointfulness as it figures in the pragmatic genealogies we considered. And the need-satisfaction account does achieve that: each of the pragmatic genealogies we considered primarily turns on revealing the way in which some conceptual practice satisfies some important need, be it the need to avoid conflicts over external goods (Hume), the need to avoid deception within the community (Nietzsche), the need to flag good informants (Craig), the need to gain

²² This helps distinguish the need-satisfaction account from accounts on which functions are, more broadly, effects that promote the realization of people's goals: see Wimsatt (1972), Boorse (1976), and Nagel (1977); more recently, the idea that functions are contributions to goal-realization has been defended by McShea (2012), Trestman (2012), and Piccinini (2015, ch. 6). A related account that has been influential in discussions of social functions is Searle's (2010, 58–60), on which functions are imposed on objects by agential purposes and values.

²³ See Garson (2016, chs. 1–3).

and share information effectively (Williams), or the need to neutralize prejudice (Fricker).

In the first instance, of course, these are ascriptions of pointfulness to prototypes of conceptual practices in relation to the needs of agents in a state-of-nature model. The genealogies primarily identify instrumental relations *within a model*, and it is important to distinguish this primary use from secondary uses that build on it, such as drawing attention to comparable instrumental relations in our actual practices, or making out comparable instrumental relations in the history of our actual practices. Uncluttered by the messiness of reality, the model sharpens our eye for certain patterns of pointfulness (much as a priming look at a sample morel can help one spot the notoriously well-camouflaged morels of varying shapes and colours in the tangles of the forest floor). The model also provides *prima facie* evidence for ascriptions of pointfulness in much the same way that design analyses in evolutionary biology provide evidence for ascriptions of biological function: a model is used to show that a given trait would solve a problem, and this is advanced as evidence for thinking that what we find in reality solves a comparable problem.²⁴

Insofar as such instrumental relations can plausibly be identified in reality—either now or in the past—they can then act as a basis for *evaluations* of the extent to which we have reason to continue to engage in the practice, and they can act as a basis for more or less ambitious *explanations*. For example, instrumental relations can act as a basis for explanations of *resilience* (Pettit 1996, 299–300), i.e. of why a practice is in some respects unlikely to disappear, because its loss would make itself felt in ways that would drive the practice back into the mainstream. This is to undertake, in addition to the commitments to claims (1) and (2), a further commitment to the following claim:

- (3) A is resilient because it tends to cause the satisfaction of need C.

This implies a commitment to *counterfactual* claims to the effect that certain forces *would* be actualized *if* we were to move away from A. Even more ambitiously, instrumental relations can act as a basis for explanations of *persistence*, i.e. of why a practice actually endured over time:

- (4) A persists because it tends to cause the satisfaction of need C.

This implies a commitment to *factual* claims to the effect that such forces *were* actualized and are part and parcel of the causal-historical story explaining why we now find A. But as Harold Kincaid (2020, 21–2) makes clear, even such

²⁴ See Kincaid (1996, 118–19) for a discussion of design analyses in biology. I elaborate on the differences between pragmatic genealogies and design analyses in Queloz (2020).

explanations of persistence can be cashed out in terms of unmysterious causal claims of the form: the existence of practice *A* at time *t* can be explained by the fact that the typical effects of *A* at time *t* – 1 cause the existence of *A* at time *t*. Neither explanations of resilience nor explanations of persistence involve the claim that a practice *came into existence in order to serve human needs* (a claim that would invite the old objection that as yet unrealized effects cannot cause something to exist). They only explain why, having come into existence, a practice is unlikely to disappear (resilience) or why, having come into existence, it was retained (persistence). Only the use of pragmatic genealogical models in explanations of persistence carries any claims about the actual course of history. Using such models merely to ascribe pointfulness or resilience to our present practices does not yet commit one to history being a certain way.²⁵

What commitments and burdens of proof are undertaken by pragmatic genealogies thus depends on the use to which they are put by the genealogists and their audience. This methodological nuance is registered most clearly by Craig: ‘The depth of factual obligation incurred by a state-of-nature theory depends on its aims’, he writes; it ‘will be greatest when its intentions are explanatory, to account for the existence of the target phenomenon’ (2007, 193). By contrast, the depth of factual obligation will be smallest when the story is offered merely as a heuristic device that helps us determine to what extent certain instrumental relations now obtain between needs and conceptual practices.

How does Craig’s own genealogy situate itself on that spectrum? Considered in isolation from the declared aims of its author, the genealogy minimally involves an ascription of pointfulness to the concept of proto-knowledge in the model: the practice of living by the concept of proto-knowledge causes the flagging of good informants; the flagging of good informants helps satisfy the need to pool information; and therefore, the practice of living by the concept of proto-knowledge helps satisfy the need to pool information. But these observations might then be used as a basis for the identification of similar instrumental relations in our *actual* conceptual practice. And having identified these relations in our actual practice, they might further be used to explain why, were the practice of living by the concept of knowledge to come under pressure, there would be some pressure to drive it back into use. Or they might be used to explain why the concept of knowledge persisted up to the present day in so many cultures. Craig himself declares that he ‘was trying to explain how certain real results have arisen, and only real pressures can produce real results’ (2007, 190). Accordingly, he notes:

I do and must suppose that there were societies whose members, collectively and individually, had the needs I ascribe to them and were able, whether as the

²⁵ See Queloz (2020) for further discussion.

outcome of some conscious process or of other equally real tendencies, to find their way to the solution I describe. . . . My line was, and had to be, that the needs were real and the persons concerned would have come, in one way or another, to satisfy them. . . . I had to maintain that the circumstances that favour the formation of the concept of knowledge still exist, or did until very recently, since otherwise I would have had no convincing answer to the obvious question why it should have remained in use. (Craig 2007, 191)

This means that Craig's ambitions in advancing his genealogy led him to incur rather deeper factual obligations than he would have incurred had he simply used the genealogy to reveal the relation of the concept we now have to some of our present needs. And one might complain that his book, admirably concise though it is, marshals rather little empirical evidence with which to honour these obligations. But one upshot of the present discussion is that the merits of his genealogical model are distinct from the merits of the use to which he puts it. We can find fault with a tool's application while thinking no less of the tool.

9.2.2 Avoiding Continuity Failures

Having clarified what it means to identify the pointfulness of a conceptual practice in some situation of emergence, we are now in a position to confront the second objection to the claim that pragmatic genealogies can affect the space of reasons: showing that something has a point in some situation of emergence does not suffice to show that it now has one, since the conditions from which a practice originally derives its point may not obtain in the situation we are now in—the genealogy's normative ambitions might founder on what Nicholas Smyth calls *continuity failure* (2017, 1137).²⁶

This second objection thus points to the fact that if they are to possess normative import, pragmatic genealogies presuppose continuity in the conditions relative to which a practice has a point. We can formulate this constraint as follows:

Continuity:

Necessarily, for any P , G , and RC_i : if $\{RC_1, RC_2, \dots, RC_n\}$ is the set of root conditions relative to which practice P is originally pointful under some description, then the inference from the original point of practice P to its actual point in group G is justified only if $\{RC_1, RC_2, \dots, RC_n\}$ also obtains in G .

²⁶ Smyth's (2017) critique concerns inferences from the original to the current function of morality, and he focuses on genealogists such as Kitcher (2011) and Joyce (2006), though there is a suggestion that the same difficulties extend to Hume and Williams—see Smyth (2017, 1130n4, 1131).

When this constraint is not met, genealogically derived ascriptions of pointfulness to actual practices suffer from continuity failure. If we are to draw any evaluative conclusions about our practice from its practical origins depicted in the genealogical model, therefore, we must be given some reason to think that there is in fact continuity between the conditions that give point to the practice in the model and those we actually face.

There are two strategies with which pragmatic genealogies can try to avoid continuity failures. The first is to operate at high levels of description that abstract away from particulars and bring into view features extending over a wide range of situations. Call this the *high level of description* strategy. The second is to show that the need for the target practice has a firm basis in and derives from basic needs humans can be assumed to have anyway. Call this the *anchoring in basic needs* strategy. While analytically distinct, the two strategies are combined in the pragmatic genealogies we considered: they focus on the general and anchor it in the basic.

The danger for this way of proceeding is that the explanations will end up being too abstract and general to be informative. It is therefore no coincidence that the pragmatic genealogies we have encountered take a *piecemeal* approach: instead of trying to identify the point of entire domains of human thought and action, they proceed *one conceptual practice at a time*, singling out a particular thread within the tangle of our conceptual practices and following it to its moorings in the needs of concept-users. Though this may not be a necessary condition on the method's effectiveness, it contributes to it in two ways. First, since informativeness decreases with increasing abstraction, but securing continuity requires working at a fairly abstract level, keeping the object of investigation narrow and concrete by philosophy's standards—showing that any society will need a *particular* conceptual practice in order to solve a *specific*, well-delineated coordination problem, for instance—allows one to maximize informativeness while retaining continuity. Second, working piecemeal keeps one more sensitive to the extent to which our practices are an assemblage of individually pointful elements, each tailored to its specific point, that do not all fit together into a harmonious, functional whole. If one does not work piecemeal and inquires into the point of *morality* rather than of a particular moral idea, one is more likely to miss the tensions and conflicts between ideas that cannot be pursued all the way together.

It is true that even if one works piecemeal, substantial commitments will be undertaken about what kinds of creatures humans are and what kinds of environments they live in. Like all explanations, genealogical explanations have to start somewhere and take certain things for granted. But the pragmatic genealogists do not simply settle on a practice and then paint an innate need for just that practice into our picture of human nature. They execute their genealogical projects in a way that allows them to take as little for granted as possible. They try wherever possible to take for granted only *structural needs* such as the need to gather and

share information about the immediate environment or the need to avoid conflict: as we saw in Chapter 4, structural needs are second-order needs that grow out of the relations between individuals' first-order needs (such as their need for various types of foods, goods, and tools). Structural needs are to a large extent counterfactually robust, because they are overwhelmingly insensitive to the content of first-order needs: almost irrespective of what their first-order needs are under given circumstances, humans will have a strong interest in gathering and sharing information about their immediate environment and in avoiding conflict. Indeed, there is a limit to how different a form of life can be while remaining intelligible as a variation on ours. Differences must ultimately be made sense of in terms of similarities—variations on human life are only recognizable as such against the backdrop of a shared set of features that make them variations on human life. And if there are any needs that we can be confident human beings have anyway, structural needs that grow already out of the least contested of human needs, such as the need to locate and access sources of water, are good candidates.

These structural needs can then form a basis from which to derive further needs, by showing how one practical exigency entails the next, until one reaches the need to which the target practice forms a direct response. The need for the target practice is thus not simply stipulated, but shown to be entailed by less controversial needs. This way of proceeding sets pragmatic genealogies apart from much-maligned just-so stories about human nature such as that of Randy and Nancy Thornhill (1983, 1992), which raised eyebrows by presenting 'men's tendency to rape' as an innate part of human nature.²⁷ Pragmatic genealogies are more modest in their assumptions when they demonstrably but fallibly *derive* the needs they are interested in from structural needs that raise no eyebrows when presented as inscribed in human nature.

The question raised by *Continuity* is whether we actually have the needs at issue in the genealogical model, and there is a point to the *anchoring in basic needs* strategy when target needs we are *less* confident we have can be derived from root needs we are *more* confident we have. It may not at all be obvious that we need the virtues of truth, the concept of knowledge, or the virtues of justice in the Humean and Nietzschean senses. What pragmatic genealogies do is reveal how some practice helps us to live by taking something we are less confident we need (e.g. the concept of knowledge, or the virtues of truth) and deriving it, as a practical corollary, from something we are more confident we need (e.g. information about our immediate environment). Eschewing attempts to derive the concepts we should live by from absolute rational foundations in universal reason, they instead

²⁷ See Hufendiek (forthcoming) for a nuanced discussion of this and other controversial inscriptions of traits into human nature and of how these have been exploited as bases for the critique of naturalism in the nature–nurture debate.

try to *foster* allegiance to certain conceptual practices by showing that they promote material that *already* commands allegiance. The uncontroversial needs that figure at the root of the pragmatic genealogies are paradigmatic examples of such material. Few will be disposed to deny that we have these needs; what they *might* be disposed to deny is that these needs bring with them certain problems that certain conceptual practices in turn equip us to solve; and this is where the genealogical derivations come in, as narratives designed to bring out just how these conceptual practices in fact serve ends that the narrative's addressees are already fully committed to pursuing (which is not to say that the most basic needs are always those that command the most allegiance or that we are most confident in—the diehard liberal may be willing to sacrifice a great deal before compromising on the need for political liberty).

The crucial point, then, is that pragmatic genealogies do not *assume* continuity in the practical demands we face, because precisely what they are is attempts to identify *bases* of continuity in those demands. They are not arguments depending on continuity, but arguments *for* it. The argumentative structure of a pragmatic genealogy can be reconstructed as follows:

- (P1) In a prototypical group G , a set of root needs RN_1 – RN_n under root conditions RC_1 – RC_n generates a practical problem.
- (P2) This generates a practical pressure on G to solve the problem: the target need TN .
- (P3) Prototypical conceptual practice CP would meet the target need TN by serving point P .
- (P4) CP could develop quite naturally, i.e. out of the capacities we are prepared to grant G anyway, via the set of steps S_1 – S_n .
- (C1) Therefore, circumstances permitting, CP would be highly likely to develop in G .
- (C2) Therefore, it is rational for G to engage in CP in order for P to be served in G (in the sense that people with these needs under these circumstances would welcome and, if they could do so, aim for engagement in CP with a view to securing P).
- (P5) In the actual group G^* , there are close analogues to RN_1 – RN_n and RC_1 – RC_n , namely RN^*_1 – RN^*_n and RC^*_1 – RC^*_n .
- (C3) Therefore, it is also rational for G^* to engage in CP^* , the closest analogue to CP in G^* , in order for P to be served.
- (C4) Therefore, the best explanation for why we go in for CP^* is that it serves P .
- (C5) Therefore, there is a *prima facie* reason for G^* to continue to engage in CP^* , and CP^* is to that extent vindicated.

This reconstruction lays out how pragmatic genealogy can affect the space of reason by showing us that *given* that we share certain needs, we have reasons to engage in certain conceptual practices.²⁸ What the reconstruction also brings out is that the soft underbelly of such genealogies is (P5), which assumes that the root needs and root circumstances *in fact obtain* in our present situation. It is this premise that the two strategies we considered aim to strengthen: the variables $RN^*_1-RN^*_n$ and $RC^*_1-RC^*_n$ are assigned to facts about human beings and their environment that stand a good chance of obtaining anyway, independently of the particulars of a given situation, because they are basic structural facts about the human situation picked out under highly general and abstract descriptions.

A pragmatic genealogy thus aims to affect the space of reasons through an inference from a generic predicament to our local manifestation of it. Such an inference might still be wrong, of course. Yet on the interpretation offered here, the problem will then not be that it has subtly trespassed against the canons of reasoning, but simply that it is unsound.

9.3 The State of Nature as a Model of Local Problems

Emphasizing the respects in which pragmatic genealogies can avoid continuity failures by building their case on near-universal needs captures a central concern of the genealogical projects we considered: to bring out the respects in which some of our conceptual practices respond to timeless human problems. But it also invites the objection that this severely restricts the explanatory scope of the pragmatic genealogical method. It suggests that the method is appropriate only when dealing with anthropologically necessary conceptual practices—and surely the greater part of human thought is not necessary in that way.

While many of the pragmatic genealogists we considered are indeed keen to show that certain conceptual practices are, at core, enduring because held in place by near-universal human needs, we must be careful not to mistake incidental for essential features of the method. In particular, we should not take pragmatic genealogy to be limited in principle to investigating what P. F. Strawson called the ‘central core of human thinking which has no history—or none recorded in histories of thought’ (1959, 10). The response to the threat of continuity failure explored in section 9.2 was, in effect, that the genealogical model applies to *us* because it applies to *any* human beings anywhere. But this is only *one* way of

²⁸ A complication arises here—at least on an internalist account of reasons—if we acknowledge that someone might lack any interest in pursuing their needs, where this lack of interest is not the product of a false belief, and there is no sound deliberative route, from the motives that they do have, by which they might be brought to care; but as Williams notes, ‘we have to bear in mind how strong these assumptions are, and how seldom we are likely to think that we know them to be true’ (1981b, 105).

securing continuity between the model and reality. The other way is for the model to apply to us because the conditions it models are specifically *ours*.

Balancing out section 9.2's one-sided emphasis on the near-universal, this section therefore emphasizes that pragmatic genealogy is neither constitutively committed to there being an *enduring core* at the centre of the practices it investigates nor restricted to considering only *universal* needs. A significant upshot of the interpretation defended here is rather that pragmatic genealogy can be tailored to our specific situation by modelling even highly local problems arising from local needs. Contrary to its history-transcending connotations, the state of nature can help us make sense of our own particular location in history and of its relation to other socio-historical situations.

It is true that Craig in particular tends to present his method as revealing 'the core of the concept as it is to be found now' (2007, 191), a core he presents as 'an outcome of certain very general facts about the human situation' (1990, 10). He thereby commits himself to the thesis that the prototype of the concept of knowledge described in his genealogy makes up the core of our actual conceptual practice. But it would unnecessarily weaken the method to view that commitment as essential to it. As Kusch and McKenna rightly insist, 'we should not think of *protoknowledge* as the core or essence of *knowledge* just because we have a predictively successful model that represents *knowledge* as developing out of *protoknowledge*' (2020, 1061). Part of the power of pragmatic genealogy is that it can make sense of our conceptual practices as elaborations of simpler prototypes even when these prototypes are not themselves realized in our actual practices. It can help us make sense of practices as elaborations of prototypes that are no longer—and perhaps never were—extant.

Pragmatic genealogy is thus not in principle committed to there being an unchanging, timeless core at the centre of the practice it investigates, even if some genealogists encourage that preconception. It will therefore not fall quite so easily into what the historian Peter Gay dubbed 'the trap of spurious persistence' (1971, 192)—the mistake of treating ideas as more unchanging and insensitive to historical context than they really are.²⁹

Harder to dislodge is the assumption that the state-of-nature model necessarily depicts universal human needs. Again, this is an idea that the pragmatic genealogists themselves encourage. Craig traces the concept of knowledge to some 'very

²⁹ A danger that the methodological debates initiated by Quentin Skinner, J. G. A. Pocock, John Dunn, and other figures associated with the Cambridge School have been effective in alerting us to. Skinner's diatribe against the idea that the thinkers of the past could be understood as explicating a set of 'fundamental concepts' and 'universal ideas' in answer to a set of 'perennial problems' (Skinner 1969, 5) has left its mark, engendering an acute and carefully cultivated 'sensitivity to anachronism' (Oakley 1999, 9). As a result, historians have become so uneasy about tracing 'the morphology of a given concept over time' (Skinner 1969, 5) as to put the approach explored here effectively off limits. I hope to show that on the interpretation I defend, pragmatic genealogy is more accommodating of historical change than it at first appears.

general facts about the human situation', so general, indeed, 'that one cannot imagine their changing whilst anything we can still recognize as social life persists' (1990, 10); Williams describes the state of nature as a 'representation of universal requirements' (2014g, 410), while Fricker describes it as a 'maximally ahistorical setting' serving to characterize our most basic needs and what they entail (2007, 108–9). If one takes this to be a necessary feature of the method, it must seem odd that historically, the state-of-nature method should have been most prominent in political philosophy. It is, after all, one of the more history-sensitive branches of philosophy, which concerns practices that are fairly specific to particular cultural situations in comparison to the highly generic conceptual practices that are the concern of the philosophy of language and mind. This is true even of the state, which in the wake of Hobbes is often seen as the paradigmatic object of state-of-nature theorizing in political philosophy:³⁰ for most of prehistory, human societies were stateless societies.³¹

Against this conception of the state of nature, it is worth emphasizing that one of the more interesting consequences of interpreting the state of nature *as a model* is that it is cut loose from the requirement of having to depict near-universal needs. Even if the genealogical method invites us to start from the most generic needs that still prove illuminating, these may still be comparatively local, and there is nothing in the method to rule out that the most generic need that a practice bears an instrumental relation to will be a recent arrival on the historical scene. Not only is pragmatic genealogy not restricted to near-universal needs—it is not even bound to *start* from near-universal needs. It is true that if one's aim in telling a genealogy is to advocate whole-hearted engagement in a target practice by presenting it as indispensable for us, then grounding a need for the practice in needs so general that one cannot imagine their changing while human life persists is an effective strategy. But more parochial material can command strong allegiance as well, and it can be just as effective to ground a need for the target practice in needs that 'we', in a more local sense, consider non-negotiable. The pragmatic genealogist can use the state of nature to model local problems that are specifically those of certain people in certain times and places. All it takes is for the state-of-nature model to be given a *localizing* rather than a universalizing interpretation—an interpretation on which the genealogy is understood to be a pragmatic reconstruction of *our particular situation* rather than of some generic human condition.

This can even be done with models that were originally intended to be given a universalizing interpretation. A particularly prominent example—which bears at

³⁰ In fact, it is arguably the concern with natural rights that constitutes the animating concern for the use of the state-of-nature device in political philosophy from Grotius through Hobbes, Locke, and Selden to Pufendorf. See Tuck (1979, 1993) and Lane (1999).

³¹ See Service (1975) and Johnson and Earle (1987).

least a strong family resemblance to state-of-nature models—is John Rawls’s ‘Original Position’.³² In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls interprets the Original Position as the depiction of a timeless problem; to regard the human situation from the perspective of the Original Position ‘is to see it *sub specie aeternitatis*: it is to regard the human situation not only from all social but also from all temporal points of view’ (1971, 587). But in his later *Political Liberalism*, he interprets the same model as modelling a local problem, one specific to modern societies with their unprecedented moral diversity and attendant difficulties in reaching substantive agreement: the problem of providing a shared framework justifiable to people with remarkably different ethical outlooks and a correspondingly thin basis for negotiating and justifying the structures of society (1993, xviii). Outwardly, the model remains the same. But the interpretation of *what it does* and *for whom* it is supposed to have a point has changed.³³

Another example of a pragmatic reconstruction of a local problem’s comparatively generic form that nonetheless still calls for a localizing interpretation is Christoph Möllers’s examination of the point of the separation of powers in *The Three Branches* (2013). The book can be read as constructing a jurisdictionally neutral model of the separation of powers by asking of *what generic prototype* the various historically and culturally inflected concretizations of the separation of powers in different national jurisdictions are elaborations. Because what we see in reality are very different concretizations of the separation of powers in different jurisdictions, working back to a neutral prototype allows Möllers to reverse-engineer the most general point of having three branches of government in the first place—it allows him to determine what the separation of powers *does for us* before it becomes entangled in local traditions. On Möllers’s account, the point of separating power into three branches—the legislative, the executive, and the judicial—is to negotiate the otherwise irredeemable tension between individual and collective self-determination. The legislative and executive branch, which together serve the need for collective self-determination, are balanced against the judicial branch, which serves the need for individual self-determination. The separation of powers thus allows the tension between individual and collective self-determination to be ‘perpetuated as a political controversy within its framework’ (Möllers 2013, 8). But though this working back to the most general point of the separation of powers in its jurisdictionally neutral form can look like an attempt to shake off any kind of historical conditioning, it is clear that even this most general point remains relative to needs that, though widely shared across modern societies, remain indexed to a particular stretch of history. The idea of collective self-determination, in particular, is a distinctively modern idea.³⁴

³² See Rawls (1985) and Williams (2014d, 326–7). Rawls remarked in 1959: ‘the conception of justice I set out is perhaps closer to Hume’s view than any other’ (Forrester 2019, 12).

³³ See Queloz and Cueni (forthcoming, §3).

³⁴ See Habermas (1996, ch. 3, §1).

Nevertheless, tracing the separation of powers to such local needs allows Möllers to vindicate it against the widespread suspicion that it might be a relic of an outdated legal order that has outlived its usefulness (2013, 8, 227). It also gives him a critical grip on realizations of the separation of powers, allowing him to assess the extent to which realizations of the separation of powers in particular jurisdictions serve or fail to serve that point (2013, ch. 3); and it gives him some guidance in determining whether there might be a point in trying to replicate such a separation at the international level (2013, ch. 4). Working back to the jurisdictionally neutral prototype filters the practical contribution that the separation of powers makes at the generic level from the ways in which particular concretizations of it add to—or detract from—that contribution.

A third example of the pragmatic reconstruction of a local problem's comparatively generic form is Damian Cueni's (2020) account of what he calls the *Liberal Democratic Dilemma*. Taking his cue from Craig, Williams, and Fricker, Cueni works back to the most generic form of that dilemma (2020, ch. 1) before considering its manifestation and elaboration in more specific socio-historical contexts (2020, ch. 5). But as calling it a *liberal democratic* dilemma acknowledges, the problem remains rooted in local needs characteristic of liberal democratic societies. The dilemma is that we who live in liberal democratic states face two conflicting demands: on the one hand, we increasingly need *strengthened international institutions* to tackle the pressing problems of our time (climate change, financial systemic risk, health security, the global migration crisis); on the other hand, we still need the power exerted by these international institutions to be *legitimated according to liberal democratic standards of legitimacy* if that power is to be reconciled with our modern concern for individual and collective self-determination. Traditionally, in the domestic context, reconciling our need for rule with our need for legitimacy has been made possible by conceptual and institutional resources allowing us to mark out certain exercises of power *as* legitimate, and in liberal democratic states, these resources have taken the form of democratic participation, accountability, transparency, and judicial review. But since these resources are tailored to the legitimation of institutional power *within* the nation state, they are notoriously ill-suited to legitimating the very different forms that institutional power takes *beyond* the nation state. As a result, we are caught up between the conflicting demands of two real needs: the need to strengthen international institutions on the one hand, and the need to legitimate their power according to our domestic expectations of legitimacy on the other. The effective tackling of pressing global problems seems to come at the expense of collective and individual self-determination; the preservation of collective and individual self-determination at the cost of a failure to address pressing global problems. Historically, this predicament is extremely local. But this makes it no less pressing and ineluctable for us.

This suggests a more general methodological point. The mere fact that a pragmatic genealogy starts out from historically contingent problems renders the solutions no less necessary. All that the insight into the contingency of the problem entails is the theoretical possibility of ridding oneself of the problem by eliminating the features of our situation that engender it. But as the example of global challenges and international institutions illustrates, this will often be no more than a theoretical possibility. Certain conceptual practices may turn out to be indispensable for us even if they are the products of historically contingent circumstances. In these cases, pragmatic genealogy will have uncovered what might be described as indispensability without inevitability.

The upshot of this model-based, progressively localizing interpretation of pragmatic genealogy is that we are not faced with an exclusive choice between historical genealogy and model-based genealogy; between a method concerned with the socio-historically local and a method concerned with the maximally ahistorical. The state of nature and its functional equivalents can represent demands that are to various degrees socio-historically situated. To put it cursorily: the state of nature can model local problems, and situate them in relation to generic ones. Pragmatic genealogy is thus not committed to viewing our local situation only under its most universal aspect as the latest iteration of the condition of generic humanoids.

9.4 Contested Needs and the Conception of the Agent

Having established that neither the *explananda* nor the *explanantia* of pragmatic genealogies have to be anthropologically necessary—such genealogies are neither restricted to explaining the universal core of human thought nor to doing so in terms of universal needs—we are left with the last of the four objections we set out from: needs do not provide a solid basis for genealogical explanations, because need ascriptions are contestable. What seems like a need to some seems to others like a mere caprice.

So far from ignoring the fact that need ascriptions are contestable, however, pragmatic genealogies give us the means to confront such contestations. Pragmatic genealogies are tools by which to ascertain whether we rightly treat something as need. Not only can they show that we need things we may not have suspected we needed; they can also help us ground controversial need ascriptions in less controversial need ascriptions—at the limit, revealing a need to be ineliminable because rooted in needs we have anyway. They help us relate things we are *not sure* we need and ought to value ‘to other things that we *know* that we need and value’ (Williams 2002, 90, emphasis mine). As Craig writes, genealogies are ‘at their strongest when the human needs from which they start are the most practical, hence the most undeniable ones’ (1990, 89). But of course, even the

most undeniable needs have been denied. The idea of a need is correlative with the idea of a serious harm that one will incur if the need is not satisfied, and that idea of a serious harm is in turn correlative with culturally conditioned conceptions of human life and flourishing. These ideas are contestable, but as David Wiggins and Sira Dermen have argued, ‘that is the condition of all important ideas’ (1987, 63), and they are none the worse for that.³⁵

If pragmatic genealogies tend to ground contested need ascriptions in further need ascriptions, it is because needs are in important respects more objective than desires, preferences, aims, or purposes. Most basically, what one needs does not depend on the workings of the mind in the way that it does in those other cases. Needs are objective in that they are not subject to the will: we cannot, in the relevant sense, simply *decide* to need something. To need X because it is F, moreover, X must really *be* F, while one can desire X because it is F even when X is not F. Furthermore, what our needs are is not necessarily transparent to us in the way that our individual wants and purposes are transparent to us—in modern parlance, needs are not *luminous* (Williamson 2000, 13): we may have them without knowing that we have them, and we can think we have them without really having them. Moreover, needs could be said to be objectively demanding, making demands on us in a way that mere desires and purposes do not—not just practical demands on those whose needs they are, but ethical demands on others. As Williams puts it in an early essay, it is ‘a matter of logic that particular sorts of needs constitute a reason for receiving particular sorts of good’ (1973c, 241–2), whereas it is much less clear that the same could be said of interests, merits, preferences, or purposes. This combination of features contributes to turning the question of what our needs *really* are into a moot question that carries substantial ethical and political implications.³⁶ We have, for example, rightly become wary of ascriptions of *real* as opposed to *perceived* needs, on the grounds that such ascriptions might be used to coercively override people’s perceived needs. Down this road, the fear is, lies totalitarianism. But note that the problem lies not in the notion of real needs itself, i.e. in the idea that there are such things. The problem lies in a further idea, namely the principle that licenses certain inferences *from* the ascription of real needs *to* certain practical and political conclusions—in particular, that real needs justify coercion.³⁷

The need ascriptions of pragmatic genealogies anyway do not hinge on the contrast between real and perceived needs, but rather on that between needs we *already* perceive and needs we can be *brought to* perceive. These genealogies concern needs we may be unaware of or insufficiently sensitive to, but which we

³⁵ The notion of a need is explored in great detail in Wiggins (1998, 2002a, 2005).

³⁶ See Brock (1998), Reader (2005, 2007), and Brock and Miller (2019) for further discussion of the normative significance of needs for ethical and political theory.

³⁷ See Williams (2011, ch. 3).

can come to perceive through a perspicuous representation of how these needs are entailed by needs we already perceive ourselves as having. They offer derivations of needs we did not know we had from needs we knew we had. The process whereby we come to see needs we did not see before is not problematically self-validating in the way that, say, brainwashing would be. No controversial idea of needs is at stake in pragmatic genealogy if all it is committed to is that there are needs that, through genealogical reflection, we can be brought to recognize in light of needs we acknowledge already. And even when what acts as the point of departure in a genealogical narrative is not beyond doubt, the method can be applied to this point of departure in turn. We can first reflect on one part of our conceptual practices while relying on the rest, and then take *that* part for granted in sounding out some other part. In good Neurathian fashion, we mend the ship while out on the open sea.

What is true, however, is that although needs are objective in many respects, they are so only relative to the *conception of the agent* one implicitly draws on in telling a genealogy. In ascribing needs to the agents in one's initial description of the state of nature, and less obviously also in moving from this to later stages of the story, one draws on a particular conception of the kind of creature we are dealing with. The conception of the agent with which pragmatic genealogies operate is itself an important parameter in those genealogies, and one that can be made to take different values in the course of the genealogy. A pragmatic genealogy thus only ever shows to what extent people need to live by certain ideas *given* a certain conception of the agent.

This necessary limitation of the method is not necessarily a problem for it. We can distinguish more generic from more socio-historically local conceptions of the agent, and insofar as we want to tailor a pragmatic genealogy to our particular socio-historical situation, there is nothing problematic about starting with needs human beings have on a generic conception of the agent, and then gradually factoring in the richer, more demanding needs they have on a conception of them that is more peculiarly ours. We must only be aware that this is what we are doing.

Williams's genealogy of liberty, one of the supreme political values in liberal democracies, offers a good example of how a pragmatic genealogy can help us confront the contestation of needs in a way that turns precisely on how parochial its underlying conception of the agent is. In 'From Freedom to Liberty: The Construction of a Political Value', Williams aims to explain not the generic and pre-political value of freedom, but the local and political value of liberty 'as a value *for us* in *our* world' (2005c, 75, emphasis mine). Why, Williams asks, is this idea of liberty so important to us? Why does it play such a central role in *our* political lives?

One response is that liberty and the liberal order are so important to us because human beings have a *need for freedom*. On this view, liberalism is easily justified, because the need for it is built right into the conception of the agent.

But the glaring weakness in this line of argument is that while human beings may have a need for freedom in some sense, they hardly have it *in a sense strong enough* for it to vindicate the liberal order against its historical rivals. It is only if the need for freedom is understood in a particularly demanding sense—as what Williams labels the need for ‘autonomy’ (2005i, 8)—that it will deliver what this attempt to justify liberalism expects of it.

The flaw in this justification of the value of liberty is thus that the conception of the agent on which human beings have such a demanding form of the need for freedom is itself a *liberal* conception: a recent arrival on the historical scene which fits the liberal order because it emerged alongside it, out of much the same historical forces. And to justify the liberal order in terms of a coeval conception of the agent that only liberals accept is mere self-congratulation. It takes us no further at all in authenticating liberalism as, in any independent sense, the right political arrangement.³⁸ The argument is not so much wrong as too *internal*: it spells out the value of liberty ‘from here’. But once we acknowledge that ‘here’ is just one place among others—a fact that we historically self-conscious moderns are bound to bump into—we also need an *external* answer to our question to achieve *reasonable* as opposed to blind confidence in the value of liberty. Achieving reasonable confidence requires achieving a vindicatory reflective understanding of liberty as a value: an understanding, among other things, of why we have it, what needs it answers to, and whether it is right for us given our circumstances. This is why, for Williams, the conception of liberty ‘we need for ourselves’ must be ‘historically self-conscious’ if it is to be ‘suitable to a modern society’ (2005c, 75). It must *include a reflective understanding* of the basic concerns to which a more generic notion of freedom answers, and of *why* the socio-historical elaboration of the notion of freedom *we* happen to have is adequate to *our* socio-historical elaboration of those basic concerns. Precisely because we can consider our conceptual practices from the outside and compare them with real and possible alternatives—precisely because we are aware of their contingency—we need to say more about why we have the ones we happen to have, and to what extent they are right *for us*, if we are to sustain reasonable confidence in them. In other words, the understanding of freedom that *we* need includes the kind of understanding yielded by pragmatic genealogy.

Williams makes a step towards such an understanding by sketching a vindicatory genealogy of liberty which starts out from the need for what he calls ‘primitive freedom’—the pre-political notion of an individual’s freedom from constraint by other individuals in trying to satisfy his or her desires. This is a need that is not contested in the way that the demanding need for autonomy is. As Williams

³⁸ See Williams (2005d, 74; 2005e, 20–3; 2005h, 39; 2005i, 7–9; 2005j, 133).

remarks, we can hardly make sense of a conception of human agents on which they have no need for even the most primitive form of freedom:

Why should human beings in general be concerned with some value of that form? I do not know that I can answer that question, beyond suggesting a set of questions to put in its place: What view would one have to take of one's desires and projects and other values if there were never even a question of its being something to be resented and resisted if others aimed to frustrate them? What view would one have to take of those others, in particular of a political authority, for that question never to arise? (2005c, 93)

To begin from a conception of agents on which they care about being unobstructed by others in doing what they want is not to project one's liberal concerns into the starting point; it is to begin from a conception that is, at the very least, far more widely shared than that, and likely even without alternative.

From this starting point, Williams argues that in pursuing their primitive freedom, individuals will impinge on each other's freedom spheres, and one individual's desire satisfaction will be another individual's coercion. A basic problem emerges: where does one freedom sphere end and the other begin? Disagreement over this generates violence, instability, and chaos. This gives rise to the need for a public conflict-resolver, an allocator of freedom spheres. But if this allocator of freedom spheres is not to replace private with public coercion (in which case it remains a mere example of successful banditry that reproduces the problem of coercion at a higher level), there needs to be a distinction between *legitimate* and *illegitimate* uses of public power. Consequently, there is a need for legitimating concepts that permit this distinction. This need is scalable and context-sensitive, and it will become more pressing the closer the situation comes to that in which some public power uniquely commands the means of coercion—that is, the closer it comes to the ideal type of state power. But wherever this need is manifest, the required legitimating concepts will have to be fleshed out in terms of a *legitimation story*, which, drawing, for instance, on religious or transcendent sources of authority, will explain to each citizen why public power can be used to coerce certain people in certain ways. The function of these legitimating concepts and the legitimation story they articulate is thus to secure a political form of freedom under public power by putting normative constraints on that power and justifying certain exercises of it to each citizen.

The basic political problem highlighted by Williams's genealogy is that we need *some* legitimating concepts enabling a distinction between good and bad government. But these needs cannot by themselves determine *which* concepts these will be—whether the legitimation stories will draw on the idea of liberty, for example, or on theological or transcendent sources of legitimacy. Under conditions of modernity, moreover, truthful inquiry and historical self-consciousness have

eroded many of the myths, narratives, and Whiggish histories that formed the stuff of past legitimation stories, leaving us with less material for our legitimation stories; and once these sources of legitimation have fallen away, there is a stronger presumption in favour of citizens' freedom to do what they decidedly want. This helps explain the special importance of liberty under conditions of modernity. We are more concerned with liberty than past societies because 'we start, in a sense, with less' (2005c, 95)—in particular, less by which to justify restricting liberty. Our stronger presumption in favour of the liberty of the individual reflects the fact that fewer sources of legitimation are available to us, thus barring us from justifying exercises of power that could formerly have seemed legitimate.

This genealogy of liberty helps explain our special concern with liberty, but also shows that we are *rightly* more concerned with liberty by presenting our heightened concern with liberty as an expression of truthfulness. As Williams writes, it

connects our construction of liberty, and the value we give it under that construction, with the condition of modernity, but it offers more than the consideration (which is in itself a perfectly sound consideration) that this is our condition. It connects our ideas of liberty with a universal truth, that everywhere legitimacy requires more than mere coercion, and it adds to this the conviction that under the conditions of modernity, whatever else may be worse, we at any rate have a better grasp on the truth. (2005c, 95–6)

Williams's genealogy is vindictory, but it does not ground the need for liberalism in a demanding need for liberty that is itself just as contested as liberalism itself. Rather, it presents our special concern with liberty as a local manifestation of a near-universal predicament, a manifestation reflecting practical pressures that are distinctive of our situation; and it simultaneously presents the fact that we brought ourselves into this situation *as an achievement*. Pragmatic genealogies that, like this one, are tailored to a specific situation can yield a vindictory understanding of how that situation and the conceptions that are peculiar to it relate to both past and possible alternatives.

To conclude, then, pragmatic genealogies can help us navigate contestations of needs by giving us a model or plan of how our ways of thinking relate to both local and less local needs, thereby allowing us to move beyond the simple contrast between 'what is necessary and what is the product merely of our own contingent arrangements' (Skinner 1969, 53). They enable us to distinguish between *different ways* in which things can be necessary: the ways in which things are necessary *for us* for different values of 'us'. This is what Williams sees as the chief contribution that genealogy can make; that it

can help with the business, which is quite certainly a philosophical business, of distinguishing between different ways in which various of our ideas and

procedures can seem to be such that we cannot get beyond them, that there is no conceivable alternative. . . . Wittgenstein influentially and correctly insisted that there was an end to justifications, that at various points we run into the fact that 'this is the way we go on'. But . . . it makes a great difference who 'we' are supposed to be, and it may mean different groups in different philosophical connections. It may mean maximally . . . any creature that you and I could conceive of understanding. Or it may mean any human beings, and here universal conditions of human life, including very general psychological capacities, may be relevant. Or it may mean just those with whom you and I share much more, such as outlooks typical of modernity. (2006d, 195–6)

As citizens of modern liberal democracies, we may have needs, such as a need for political freedom and self-determination, that human beings in different socio-historical situations did not have in this form or to that degree. In trying to provide a comprehensive view of our conceptual practices as rooted in a complex historical accumulation of both generic and socio-historically local needs, many of which depend on or derive from each other, pragmatic genealogy attempts to do justice to these differences. Its aim is not to arrive at something incontestable, but to provide us with a deeper and more nuanced understanding of what we are contesting.