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Why We Came to Think as We Do

We did not make the ideas we live by. They are, for the most part, ideas we inherited, unthinkingly growing into patterns of thought cultivated by others, with little sense of why just these ways of seeing, valuing, and reasoning should have gained hold in the first place. Some ideas, like that of *water*, may be so plainly useful for creatures like us as to appear inevitable. But many of our most venerable ideas—such as *truth*, *knowledge*, or *justice*—are highly abstract, and their practical value for us is elusive. Why did these 'highest concepts', these 'last wisps of smoke at the evaporating end of reality' (*TI*, Reason, §4), as Nietzsche called them, ever become so important to us? What was the point of coming to think in terms of these grand abstractions, and what would we lose if we lacked them?

Such *Pragmatic Questions* about the practical origins of ideas have seldom been raised. They have tended to be side-lined by more traditional *Socratic Questions* of the form 'What is X?' Aiming straight at the essence of truth, knowledge, or justice, the Socratic approach reckons that if only we achieve clarity about what these things really are, an understanding of why we came to be concerned with them will follow. Socratic Questions can prove obstinately vexing, however, and a consensus on what truth, knowledge, or justice are has yet to emerge. Accordingly, some have concluded with the American pragmatist C. S. Peirce that 'we must not begin by talking of pure ideas—vagabond thoughts that tramp the public highways without any human habitation—but must begin with men and their conversation' (1931, 8.112). Peirce, like the philosophers I discuss in this book, diagnosed a tendency in philosophy to set ideas too high above human affairs, to contemplate them entirely *in vacuo*. Ideas are in their element in distinctive contexts of purposive human action, action that takes place against a background of contingent facts about us and the world we live in. Trying to understand the ideas we live by in isolation from the circumstances in which they are felicitously deployed is like studying a shoal of beached fish as if they were in their natural habitat.

Instead, we can turn the order of explanation around and let the *what* grow out of the *why*: we approach the question of the nature of truth, knowledge, or justice by first asking why we came to think in these terms. Such an inquiry into the origins of ideas can take many guises. Plato asked after the origins of ideas, but he sought them in an abstract realm of Forms. Conceptual historians of various stripes asked after the origins of ideas, but they sought them by tracing the changing

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meanings of words across different socio-historical contexts.[1] My concern, by contrast, is with the *practical origins* of ideas: with the ways in which the ideas we live by can be shown to be rooted in practical needs and concerns generated by certain facts about us and our situation.

If an idea persists, the reason may be that it fills a need, or at least that it earns its keep through subservience to *some* kind of concern or interest. What motivates this line of inquiry is the realization that we are, as Jane Heal puts it, 'finite in our cognitive resources while the world is immensely rich in kinds of feature and hence in the possibilities it offers for conceptualization' (2013, 342). Why do we find at our disposal just the concepts we do rather than any of the countless imaginable alternatives? As Heal goes on to remark, this question cannot be answered simply by observing that using certain concepts enables us to form *true judgements* in terms of those concepts. More needs to be said—in particular, about what makes thinking and judging in just these terms *worthwhile*. This is especially true of the abstract notions at the heart of philosophy, which seem to be the stuff of idle grandiloquence rather than effective action. What needs, if any, were filled by introducing these ideas into our repertoire? What necessity was the mother of these inventions?

The method I propose to explore in this book is designed to help us look at ideas from a practical point of view—to look at what ideas *do* rather than at whether the judgements they figure in are *true*—in order to see how exactly our ideas are bound up with our needs and concerns. This method, which I propose to call *pragmatic genealogy*, consists in telling partly fictional, partly historical narratives exploring what might have driven us to develop certain ideas in order to discover what these ideas do for us. What *point* do they serve? What is the *salient useful difference* these ideas make to the lives of those who live by them?[2] Much as

[1] An important early example of a historicizing approach to philosophical concepts is Gustav Teichmüller's *Studien zur Geschichte der Begriffe* (1864). More recent examples include the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (1971–2007) and the works in the *Oxford Philosophical Concepts* series. For histories of concepts in social and political thought, see *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (1972–97) as well as the genealogies of concepts presented by Skinner (2002, 2009) and other representatives of the Cambridge School; for scientific thought, the seminal work of Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem lies upstream of numerous forms of conceptual history, including historical epistemology and the history and philosophy of science (HPS). Underneath the umbrella term 'conceptual history' thus reside substantially different approaches that I cannot explore further here. Another relevant tradition whose relation to my topic merits more attention than I can give it is the sociology of knowledge, especially as exemplified by Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* (1936).

[2] In what follows, usefulness will primarily be cashed out in terms of the tendency to satisfy individual and social needs, but pragmatic genealogies could be told in relation to all kinds of practical concerns and interests. My focus on needs is not meant to exclude the possibility of using pragmatic genealogy to criticize conceptual practices by revealing their pernicious subservience to problematic interests; nor does the use of a state-of-nature fiction commit one to telling a vindicatory story—think of Rousseau's (1977) genealogy of inequality as interpreted by Neuhouser (2014). But since the primary purpose of the pragmatic genealogists discussed in this book is to vindicate and defend practices, and since, for that purpose, it makes sense for them to focus on genuine needs (see Chapter 9), I shall follow them and concentrate on needs. As we shall see, moreover, even a genealogy rooted in needs can have revisionary implications.

an archaeologist who digs up a mysterious relic will try to reverse-engineer its point by imaginatively reconstructing the life of those who used it and hypothesizing what useful difference it might have made to that life, we can take an abstract idea whose point eludes us, such as *truth*, *knowledge*, or *justice*, and try to explain why we came to think in these terms by reconstructing the practical problems that these ideas offer practical solutions to. A pragmatic genealogy answers the question of why we came to think as we do by reverse-engineering the points of ideas, tracing them to their practical origins, and revealing what they do for us when they function well.

In asking why we came to think as we do, we are then not concerned with what triggered the occurrence of an idea, why an individual applied the idea as they did, or why they came to acquire the idea in a community in which it was already common currency.[3] Answers to any of these questions would themselves draw on the idea at issue and thereby presuppose what we are trying to explain, namely the *communal acceptance* of the idea, the *practice* of thinking in these terms in the first place.[4] Thus, the explananda whose practical origins we are investigating are the *communal practices of living by* certain ideas, such as the practice of living by the concept of knowledge, or the value of truth, or the virtue of justice. To *live by* a concept, value, or virtue is not just to understand it—that can be done in a *disengaged* way, as an ethnographer understands an idea at work in a different culture by imaginatively inhabiting that culture's viewpoint without making it her own. One can understand the idea behind some religious festivity without living by it oneself. To live by an idea is to be an *engaged* user of it, where that entails being responsive, in the conduct of one's own affairs, to the reasons generated by the idea's applicability in given situations.[5]

Let the term 'conceptual practice' therefore stand for a community's practice of letting its thoughts, attitudes, and actions be shaped and guided by a given idea. Unlike mere practices, such as walking on one's feet rather than one's hands, *conceptual* practices are essentially shaped by sensitivity to conceptual norms or reasons—take away the idea in terms of which those norms and reasons are articulated, and the practice collapses. The term's emphasis on the conceptual is apt even if it is taken to cover values and virtues, for valuing things involves value concepts, and while possessing a virtue may be a matter of reliably manifesting a

[3] This would lead into a rather different set of debates over the origins of concepts, namely those focusing on whether concepts are learned or innate. See Carey (2009).

[4] There is a distant echo here of the Wittgensteinian distinction between justifying a thought or an action by reference to the criteria or rules encoded in a concept, which is often straightforward, and the more vexing task of justifying the practice of operating according to such a concept. For a discussion of Wittgenstein's views on this, see Queloz (2016).

[5] The engaged/disengaged terminology and the notion of 'living by' an idea hail from Moore (2006), who develops them in his discussion of thick concepts on the basis of Williams's thoughts on the 'ethnographic stance' (1986, 203–4; 1995d, 207; 2011, 157). The engaged/disengaged distinction admits of degrees, and allows for pretence, role-playing, and ironic uses: see Moore (2006, 138).

disposition out of motives that make no reference to that virtue (the genuinely humble person is precisely not motivated by a desire to appear humble), its systematic recognition and cultivation *as* a virtue by a community requires the concept *of* that virtue, which is why even virtues come as complexes of dispositions and concepts that are helpfully bundled under the heading of 'conceptual practices'.[6]

Once we understand inquiry into the origins of ideas as inquiry into the practical origins of conceptual practices, we can ask of any such practice why it arose and what it does for those who engage in it. This is the spirit that led Voltaire to the conclusion that if God did not exist, we would have to invent him.[7] It is a *pragmatic* spirit, because it focuses primarily on human *practices* of living by certain ideas rather than on what these ideas refer to, and because it seeks to make sense of those practices in terms of their *practical point*. The Socratic Question then cedes priority to the Pragmatic Question: 'Why would creatures like us be driven to develop the idea of X?' In Voltairean terms: if it did not exist, why would we have to invent it?

1.1 Bringing the Pragmatic Genealogical Tradition into View

One of my two main objectives in this book is to uncover a methodological tradition that pursues this Pragmatic Question by telling pragmatic genealogies of conceptual practices. Perhaps surprisingly, this tradition cuts across the analytic–continental divide and runs right through the heartland of Anglophone philosophy. The reason this may come as a surprise is that there is a perceived rift in philosophy between 'those who think that everything must be genealogised' and 'those who think that there is nothing to be learned from genealogy' (Srinivasan 2015, 326). The rift is often said to line up with the analytic–continental divide, the implication being that genealogy is something 'continental', and that Anglophone philosophy—certainly in the analytic tradition—defines itself through its opposition to genealogy.[8]

[6] What exactly concepts, values, and virtues should be taken to be in this context will become clearer in later chapters. On the need for interdependent concepts, dispositions, and practices to co-evolve, see Pettit (2018, 25–8).

[7] See Voltaire (1877–85, Vol. 10, 402).

[8] See Blackburn (2005), Boghossian (2006), Dutilh Novaes (2015), Glock (2008a, b), and Srinivasan (2011, 2). The divide itself has long been recognized as a strange cross-classification of the methodological and the topographical, as well grounded as that between cars with a four-wheel drive and cars from Japan (Williams 2006b, 201); moreover, the origins of analytic philosophy anyway lie on the continent (Dummett 1993; Glock 2008b). Yet there is some truth to the idea that an ahistorical spirit was characteristic of analytic philosophy in its early days. Wittgenstein emphatically captured it when he wrote in 1916: 'What has history to do with me? Mine is the first and only world!' (1979, 82). For a discussion of Wittgenstein's attitude towards history, see Glock (2006b, 2008a, b, 2017a) and Sluga

Subverting this divide, I want to suggest that Anglophone philosophy has its own genealogical tradition to look back on. This tradition of pragmatic genealogy remains invisible as long as we conceive of genealogy either along Foucauldian lines as something approaching or even exemplifying regular historiography, as Alexander Nehamas does when he suggests that Nietzschean 'genealogy simply *is* history, correctly practiced' (1985, 246n1),[9] or along Hobbesian lines as a purely justificatory contrast foil that serves to exhibit the present as preferable to some hypothetical state of nature. A more helpful entry-point for our purposes is offered by the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*'s definition of 'genealogy':

> Genealogy is part historical reconstruction of the way certain concepts have come to have the shape they do, and part 'rational reconstruction' or story about the function they serve, which may or may not correspond to historical evolution. (Blackburn 2016)[10]

This broader characterization of genealogy as containing two aspects that can be combined in various proportions allows us to situate genealogical explanations on a spectrum rather than on either side of a dichotomy. At one end of the spectrum, we can place the fictional and primarily justificatory state-of-nature stories in political philosophy from Hobbes (2006) through Locke (2003) to Nozick (1974): these are genealogical insofar as they are developmental narratives, but it is for the most part doubtful that these narratives have any serious explanatory ambitions.[11] They are more plausibly read as justificatory arguments in genealogical guise. At the other end of the spectrum, we have the thoroughly historical and primarily explanatory genealogies of a Foucauldian stripe which are particularly popular outside philosophy: these do not start out from a state of nature, but trace out the multiple roots of something across real history; and while such genealogies tend to

(1998). Glock also compares Wittgenstein's 'remarks on the natural history of human beings' (2009, §415) with Williams's genealogical method (2006b, 296–303).

[9] Something approaching this conception of genealogy as regular history is endorsed by Geuss (1999, 22–3), Owen (2007, 143), Sarasin (2008), and Migotti (2016). Of course, if one's notion of history is broad enough, it is trivially true that genealogy is history; but this then precisely masks the difference—which is surely there, and which the aim of understanding what is specific to genealogy requires us to bring out—between history as practised by academic historians and history as practised by philosophical genealogists.

[10] For a fuller characterization of genealogy that serves my purposes equally well, see Owen (2010). For other characterizations of genealogy that situate it closer to history and further from functional explanation, see Bevir (2008) and Saar (2002, 2007, 2008).

[11] See Kavka (1986), Hampton (1987), and Angehrn (2007). Following Kant's interpretation of Hobbes, the point of hypothetical state-of-nature stories has often been thought to lie in demonstrating the *exeundum* principle—the rational imperative of exiting the *status naturalis* to live under the law (Byrd and Hruschka 2010; Kersting 2017, 30; Mori 2017, 104). It is true that Nozick (1974) explicitly harbours explanatory ambitions as well as justificatory ones. But see Williams (2002, ch. 2) for a critical discussion of Nozick's explanatory ambitions.

strip off the veneer of inevitability by revealing the contingency of present arrangements, this is usually offered as factual input to normative reflection, presenting genealogy as merely preparatory rather than constitutive of critique.[12]

But halfway between these two poles, we find genealogical explanations that combine fiction with history and justification with explanation. These hybrid genealogies fall squarely into the core territory of Anglophone philosophy, and notably include David Hume's genealogy of the virtue of justice (*T*), Edward John Craig's genealogy of the concept of knowledge (1990, 1993), Bernard Williams's genealogies of the virtues of truth (2002) and of the political idea of liberty (2005c), and Miranda Fricker's genealogy of the virtue of testimonial justice (2007). Following this trajectory, we could add Michael Hannon's (2013, 2015, 2019) and Steven Reynolds's (2017) Craigean genealogies of the concepts of knowledge and understanding, Maria-Sibylla Lotter's genealogy of the concept of the person (2012), Thomas Simpson's genealogy of the concept of trust (2012), Martin Kusch and Robin McKenna's genealogy of relativism and absolutism (2018), Philip Pettit's genealogy of moral desirability and responsibility (2018), and no doubt many others.[13] What these genealogists have in common is that they start from some fictional state of nature (or some equivalent of it); they seek to explain our ways of going on by presenting them as elaborations of prototypes that, in such state-of-nature situations, creatures like us would be driven to develop in virtue of certain needs; and they draw some normative guidance from these insights, because these put them in a position to assess whether we now share and endorse these needs, and whether the ideas are worth continued cultivation.

Once this line of continuity is rendered salient, it is easy to see much the same kind of genealogical method at work in the early writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, with whom the philosophical use of genealogy remains indelibly associated. I shall argue that in his Basel period (1869–79), Nietzsche sketches pragmatic genealogies that similarly start out in something like a fictional state of nature, and aim to make sense of ideas of justice or truthfulness in terms of their practical value for creatures like us. This leads on to the question whether Nietzsche's later genealogical method refines rather than replaces this earlier use of the

[12] See, e.g., Dutilh Novaes (2015, 100–1). While stopping short of yielding normative conclusions, even such Foucauldian genealogies do not leave everything as it was. Koopman (2013, 95) argues that it is not so much the fact of contingency as the way in which something contingently arose which is of interest, because it makes explicit and opens up to critique the enabling background assumptions of practices (2013, 21). Others have emphasized the ways in which genealogies uncover the role of social power in the construction of the self (Saar 2007), render practices uncanny (Menge 2017), or 'possibilize' them by enabling us to isolate, from the contingent processes that led us where we are, the possibility of no longer thinking as we do (Lorenzini forthcoming).

[13] The genealogies of ethics proposed by Joyce (2006), Prinz (2007), Kitcher (2011), Tomasello (2016), and Brandhorst (2021) are also broadly pragmatist and naturalistic in spirit, but they are in the business of forming historical conjectures as to how (elements of) ethics might in fact have arisen—they are primarily about our hominin past, whereas the pragmatic genealogies I am concerned with treat this as being at most a secondary application of models whose primary purpose is to elucidate our present.

method. But what, in any case, these early genealogies show us is that there is a pragmatic genealogical tradition which cuts across the analytic–continental divide.

Speaking of a 'tradition' raises the question whether there really was, as the etymology of the word suggests, a *passing on* of ideas from X to Y in the sense of a fairly direct relation of influence—though the term is also used more loosely, for example when it is said that, unbeknownst to Y, Y produced something *in the tradition of* X. Many an amateur poet composes verse in the tradition of Petrarch without knowing it (an example that also illustrates the notorious difficulty of ascertaining influence relations).[14] In the case of the tradition that forms the topic of this book, it would seem to me to be worth speaking of a pragmatic genealogical tradition even if there were no direct lines of influence between its members, because it would serve to highlight that besides what people widely regard as *the* tradition of using a genealogical method in philosophy (the tradition notably involving Foucault and the later Nietzsche as seen through a Foucauldian lens), there is *another* genealogical tradition, if only in the sense that there is a series of philosophers who all use a different genealogical method in strikingly similar ways.

As it happens, however, there are fairly direct relations of influence between the genealogists I discuss. Miranda Fricker explicitly develops Williamsian and Craigean ideas in her *Epistemic Injustice*, and her dissertation at Oxford in the 1990s was jointly supervised by Sabina Lovibond and Bernard Williams. She recalls Williams handing her his copy of Craig's *Knowledge and the State of Nature* and roundly recommending it.[15] Williams would also begin lectures on unrelated topics by recommending Craig's book, which he acknowledges as an inspiration for his *Truth and Truthfulness* (the book's subtitle, *An Essay in Genealogy*, echoes Craig's subtitle, *An Essay in Conceptual Synthesis*).[16] Williams and Craig were colleagues at Cambridge from 1967 to 1988 and mutually influenced each other. Craig explicitly draws on the 1973 paper in which Williams argues that the natural home for the concept of knowledge is not the situation of the *examiner* who assesses whether someone knows something already known to the examiner, but rather that of the *inquirer* who seeks to identify someone who knows something the inquirer does not yet know. Williams also sketched a precursor to Craig's genealogy of the concept of knowledge in his 1978 book on Descartes.[17]

[14] For an account that sets the bar for influence relations particularly high, see Skinner (1966). For a critique of Skinner's account as being sceptical to the point of being disabling, see Oakley (1999, 138–87).

[15] Fricker, personal communication.

[16] See Williams (2002, 21, 32–3). For the claim that Williams would start his lectures by recommending Craig's book, see Millgram (2009, 162n21).

[17] See Craig (1990, 18), which references Williams (1973a, 146). For a precursor to Craig's genealogy of the concept of knowledge, see Williams (2005b, ch. 2). Williams later wrote that he got the idea for a pragmatic genealogy of the concept of knowledge 'from the Australian philosopher Dan Taylor, who

Going further back, Williams was a Nietzsche scholar and Craig a Hume scholar, so that there can be no doubt that they were serious readers of Nietzsche and Hume, respectively. As for Nietzsche's relation to Hume, it is harder to make out, refracted as it may have been through Hume's influence on Darwin and Darwin's influence on Nietzsche's close friend Paul Rée.[18] But as we shall see in Chapter 5, Nietzsche presents himself as improving on the method of the 'English genealogists' that he read about in his extensively annotated copy of W. E. H. Lecky's *History of European Morals* (1869), a book that notably outlines the views of Hume. Nietzsche also read some Hume first-hand (though never, as far as we know, the *Treatise*), and first encountered Hume's ideas in the summer of 1865, when he was a student in Bonn and attended Carl Schaarschmidt's lectures (among the recommended readings was Albert Schwegler's *Geschichte der Philosophie im Umriß* (1848), which includes a chapter on Hume). He also carefully studied Maximilian Drossbach's Humean account of causality as well as the histories of philosophy by Kuno Fischer, Friedrich Ueberweg, and F. A. Lange, in which Hume featured prominently, if only as a stepping-stone to Kant.[19] Hume's own intellectual background will occupy us in Chapter 4. The present point is that even in the demanding sense of 'tradition' that requires not just *similarity* but *influence*, the tradition of pragmatic genealogy can be said to have a notable source in Hume's thought, which is to say right in the ancestral heartland of Anglophone philosophy. Realizing this may help reconcile contemporary analytic philosophy to a method it has long considered alien to itself.

1.2 A Systematic Account of the Method

My second main objective in this book is to develop a systematic account of this pragmatic genealogical method that identifies a rationale for its use in philosophy and makes sense of its many rather baffling features. How does this puzzling hybrid, which is neither a straightforward historical explanation nor a pure

may have been influenced in this direction by John Anderson' (Williams 2010, 215n4). Another precursor to Craig's genealogy is Oswald Hanfling's 'structural account' of knowledge (1985).

[18] On Hume's influence on Nietzsche, see Brobjer (2008a, b), Mabille (2009, 73), Emden (2014, 108–9), and Kail (2016). On Hume and Darwin, see Wild (2008, 2011) and Slavov (2019). On Darwin's influence on Nietzsche and its refraction through Rée, see Richardson (2004, 16–17), Small (2005), Janaway (2007, 78), Brobjer (2008a, b), Young (2010, 414), Emden (2014), and Hufendiek (2019). Already in 1872—before he met Rée—Nietzsche described Darwinism as something 'I hold to be true' (*eKGWB*, 1872, 19[132]).

[19] See Drossbach (1884), Fischer (1869, 37–45), Ueberweg (1866, 121–6), and Lange (1866, 145, 237–43, 258–64).

justification, actually work, and why should we bother with its elaborate narratives if we are interested in the point of our current conceptual practices?

These questions only become more acute once one takes a closer look at an example of the method. Take Williams's *Truth and Truthfulness*, whose subtitle introduces it as 'an essay in genealogy'. The genealogy starts out from a 'State of Nature' that is not localized in either space or time. In it, we find 'a small society of human beings, sharing a common language, with no elaborate technology and no form of writing' (2002, 41). These human beings, we are told, need information about their immediate environment if they are to satisfy even their most basic needs. They do not just rely on their five senses to acquire it, but begin to cooperate, in particular by pooling information. They then begin to cultivate the dispositions that make *good* contributors to the pool, and that is where dispositions of accuracy and sincerity, the two components of truthfulness on Williams's view, make their first appearance. Initially, the value of these dispositions is understood in purely instrumental terms, so that they are treated merely as means to the effective sharing of information. But as the genealogy progresses, they come to be regarded as worth exhibiting for their own sake—as *virtues*. These two virtues are still quite unlike what we today mean by accuracy and sincerity, however. For one thing, they only apply to the immediate environment, so that there is no expectation that one should be accurate in speaking about the distant past. They are also not very demanding: sincerity only requires that one come out with one's occurrent beliefs and desires, not with what one *really* believes or desires. To bridge this gap, Williams leaves the fictional state of nature behind and moves into real history—more specifically, into the ancient Greece of Thucydides. There, we are told, accuracy is extended to cover the distant historical past. We then fast-forward to the Romantic period, where sincerity is elaborated into the more demanding virtue of authenticity, though in two different forms: one associated with Rousseau and the other with Diderot. Finally, we move on to consider how truthfulness developed in the context of modern liberal politics, where we are told that truthfulness becomes an important instrument of liberalism 'by serving as the sharp end of a critique of injustice' (2002, 209) and by encouraging truthful history. This genealogical story is not offered merely as an explanation, but is meant to be affirmative or 'vindicatory' (2002, 36): it aims to strengthen our confidence in truthfulness.

This is a caricature of Williams's genealogy, but it gives one a sense of the puzzles with which it has presented even careful readers of *Truth and Truthfulness*: Thomas Nagel (2009b, 134) expresses puzzlement over the project of vindicating through genealogy; Colin Koopman (2013, 20, 64–5, 74, 87) charges Williams with committing the 'genetic fallacy' in conflating genesis and justification; Colin McGinn (2003) finds the genealogical story redundant given that instrumental considerations are supposed to vindicate; Richard Rorty (2002) confesses himself unable to see the connection between the fictional and the historical parts of

the book.[20] And indeed, the way Williams combines insistence on the need for philosophy to involve itself in history with insouciance towards historical detail is puzzling. How can such a breezy romp through history pass as a genealogy of truthfulness? Is Williams perhaps 'trying to press more out of genealogy than is really there' (Koopman 2013, 71) by claiming that his genealogical explanation carries a vindicatory force? And how, in particular, are we to make sense of all this talk of a 'State of Nature'?

Any attempt to assimilate the state-of-nature part of the genealogy to the conjectural but at least professedly historical narratives of evolutionary psychology is soon discouraged. Williams, like Craig before him, is keen to distance his project from evolutionary psychology's conjectural histories and from the criticism they have encountered.[21] The state of nature they start out from, these genealogists insist, is not the Pleistocene. It is not even a conjectural depiction of the distant past or of our environment of evolutionary adaptation. The state of nature is a fiction—there is nothing more to be *found out* about it. In fact, it need not even be so much as possible.[22] As Hume insisted, it is 'a mere philosophical fiction, which never had, and never cou'd have any reality' (*T*, 3.2.2.14).

While this helps demarcate pragmatic genealogy from evolutionary psychology, it seems to do so at the cost of stripping this state-of-nature fiction of all pretensions to doing serious philosophical work. Is not, in Bentham's phrase, the season of fiction now over?[23] How are fictions supposed to tell us anything about reality? In particular, how are situations that are not just counterfactual but even counterpossible supposed to yield insights into the conceptual practices we actually have? And even if they succeed, how are these avowedly fictional stories supposed to mesh with real history? Either one tells a story that tries to be truthful to how things actually developed at some level of description, if only metaphorically, or one abandons this ambition. But Williams's genealogy moves seamlessly from hypothesizing into the blue to deciphering the grey, hieroglyphic writing of the past, as Nietzsche's famous contrast has it (*GM*, P, §7). How can fiction dovetail into history, *mythos* into *logos*, the way Williams moves from the state of nature to Thucydides and thence to Rousseau? Finally, even if these hurdles could be overcome and a coherent and continuous hybrid narrative could be constructed along these lines, setting out from the state of nature seems to undermine the point of telling a genealogy in the first place: it seems to renege on the promise of historicization carried by the term 'genealogy' and to dehistoricize one's object by

[20] More generally, what exactly the book's 'circuitous' (Elgin 2005, 343) argument is supposed to be has been contested. Reactions have ranged from hailing it as 'the most interesting set of reflections on the values of truth and truth-telling in living memory' (Hacking 2004, 137) to questioning whether the book is more than 'a collection of loosely related essays on truth' (Fleischacker 2004, 382). The first monograph on Williams calls it 'a collection of interesting intellectual tributaries feeding a somewhat elusive main channel' (Jenkins 2006, 163).

[21] See Craig (1990, 10; 2007) and Williams (2002, 27–30). For examples of such criticism of evolutionary psychology, see Dupré (1998, 2001) and Driscoll (2015).

[22] See Williams (2002, 30).

[23] See Bentham (1988, 53).

placing it in that 'maximally ahistorical setting' (Fricker 2007, 108–9) that is the state of nature—which, on top of everything, is anyway notorious for providing 'a blank canvas onto which a philosopher may paint the image of his personal theoretical predilections' (Fricker 1998, 164).

All of these worries have considerable force, and it is no surprise that where the approach I have been calling 'pragmatic genealogy' has been noticed at all, it has been considered either entirely *redundant* or severely *restricted* in its scope and power.[24] Those who take pragmatic genealogy to be redundant think that if we want to get at the function of our present practices, a synchronic approach is the shortest route, and genealogical state-of-nature fictions can add nothing but colour to these ascriptions of functionality; and if we are interested not in our present practices, but in some earlier historical form they took, we should do real documentary history instead of contenting ourselves with simplistic and fanciful just-so stories—there is plenty of careful contemporary history that is in the business of uncovering functions.[25] Of course, there are also those who have discerned more merit in the method. But even these more sympathetic interpreters see pragmatic genealogy as restricted in several respects: the state of nature's claim to being explanatory might be salvaged by interpreting it as an abstract depiction of extremely general facts about the human condition, but this restricts the method's scope of application to the explanation of anthropological universals; it also restricts the method's freedom in depicting the state of nature, for when it strays too far from reality, the state of nature loses its explanatory value; and once we have granted pragmatic genealogy entry into the realm of genuine causal explanation by restricting it in this fashion, it runs into the firmly entrenched idea that if genealogical explanations of any kind have a normative upshot at all, they are restricted to subverting claims to being normal, natural, or necessary by revealing the contingency of our arrangements—an idea that would seem to bar pragmatic genealogy from having any effect in the space of reasons, since contingency is precisely what it will *not* reveal if it is restricted to dealing with anthropological universals. We are thus left with the view that pragmatic genealogy must be either redundant or else restricted to unimaginatively saying rather little about the few practices that fall into its proper remit.

Against this, I develop an account of pragmatic genealogy that shows it to be neither redundant nor restricted in any of these ways. Scrutinizing past applications of the method instead reveals pragmatic genealogy to be a powerful and well-motivated elaboration of the synchronic approach. In particular, I argue that when dealing with what I call *self-effacingly functional* practices—practices that are functional *only insofar as* and *because* we do not engage in them for their

[24] Proponents of the redundancy view include McGinn (2003), Dutilh Novaes (2015), Hacking (2005, 168), Hannon (2019, 52–3), and Koopman (2009; 2013, 71); proponents of the restriction view include, with qualifications I shall come to in later chapters, Craig (2007, 192–3), Fricker (2007, 114), and Wild (manuscript).

[25] See, e.g., Ogilvie (2019).

functionality—the synchronic approach is prone to miss explanatory connections between the instrumental and the non-instrumental aspects of such practices that pragmatic genealogy is better able to bring out. Second, when dealing with strongly *historically inflected* practices that lack a paradigm case displaying the practice's connection to human needs, the synchronic approach fails to get a grip altogether; by achieving a grip even here, pragmatic genealogy proves a valuable addition to our methodological repertoire. Third, far from being an inferior substitute for real history, pragmatic genealogy presents philosophers with perspicuous representations of practices' relations to needs that are tailored to the demands of relevance, salience, and persuasiveness that are specific to philosophy. Fourth, the method is not restricted to depicting anthropological universals or highly generic facts about the human condition, but can also model local problems deriving from local needs—at its best, pragmatic genealogy offers us a comprehensive view of what a conceptual practice does for us, placing and relating the respects in which the practice answers to both generic and local needs. Fifth, pragmatic genealogy can profitably stray from reality and involve distortions which explain why things are as they are by vividly bringing out how they would fail us if they were different. And sixth, far from being normatively inert, pragmatic genealogy can affect the space of reasons by showing us what reasons we have for or against cultivating a given conceptual practice—although in contrast to the genealogical methods described by Michel Foucault (1971, 1975) and Alasdair MacIntyre (1988), pragmatic genealogy tends to be affirmative or vindicatory before it is destabilizing or subversive: like any broadly functionalist explanation, a pragmatic genealogy begins by showing how something is somehow worthwhile for someone, even if it then continues as a narrative of loss of functionality, or if the *pro tanto* vindication *relative to* some practical concern amounts to an indictment in the eyes of those who have no wish to see that concern satisfied.

To substantiate these claims and to understand what fictional state-of-nature genealogies can be true *to*, we need to question the traditional role allocation according to which the state of nature merely justifies while real history merely explains. We need to make room for the idea that pragmatic genealogies can be genuinely explanatory *despite* operating with a fiction, and that they can be normatively significant *despite* being explanatory.

To this end, we can take our cue from two interpretive strategies that have grown out of attempts to make sense of Craig's genealogy in particular. One is what might be called the *actualist* interpretation advocated by Miranda Fricker (2016b, forthcoming). On this view, temporal priority within a genealogical narrative corresponds in reality to explanatory priority within our *actual* conceptual practices, and the primitive form of a practice considered at the beginning of the genealogy stands for a *paradigm case* of our actual practice which is presented by the genealogy as explanatorily basic. The second strategy is what might be

called the *dynamic model* interpretation advanced by Martin Kusch (2009b, 2011, 2013). On this view, genealogies are not just elaborate ways of describing our actual practices. They involve genuine historicization and fictionalization, because they are best interpreted as *models* which at first involve strong idealization, but are then gradually de-idealized to approximate their target system. They provide models with a time axis—*dynamic* models—explaining why we came to think as we do.

My own approach makes use of both interpretations to develop a general account of this genealogical method that turns on recognizing the extent to which it embodies a certain kind of pragmatism—hence the term 'pragmatic genealogy'. On my account, pragmatic genealogies are an example of philosophy as model-building,[26] and I draw on Kusch's insight that pragmatic genealogies are dynamic models that work through idealization and de-idealization. But Kusch thinks of all the dynamic models that these genealogies present us with as constituting a form of history, albeit history of a particularly abstract kind. For him, they are 'Aristotelian' idealizations that abstract away from the particular without distorting it rather than 'Galilean' idealizations that distort reality in order to illuminate it. On his interpretation, therefore, the order of genealogical development must correspond to the order of historical development. By contrast, I think there is something importantly right about Fricker's insight that the order of priority in these genealogies corresponds in the first instance to explanatory rather than to historical priority. But we need not take this to mean that the genealogies simply describe our present practices. They can be dynamic models involving genuine fictionalization and historicization, only of a kind that is less beholden to history—indeed, I shall argue that part of their power derives from their ability to describe as developing sequentially what in reality had to develop together, so as to help us untangle the array of needs to which some of our most fundamental ideas answer; and part of their power derives from their ability to describe counterfactual or even counterpossible developments in order to help us understand why we think as we do—for instance, to explore genealogical stages that were probably never realized because they are hopelessly unstable (such as truthfulness being valued purely instrumentally), but whose instability tells us something about why we find the slightly more complex stages we really do find in history (such as truthfulness being valued intrinsically).[27]

[26] A conception of philosophy as model-building is defended by Paul (2012), for example, who notably advocates the use of fictional situations in metaphysics, and by Williamson (2017; 2018a, ch. 10; 2018b), who advocates the use of formal models in particular, but argues in his 2016 Annual Lecture of the Royal Institute of Philosophy that many areas of philosophy should be thought of as aiming to offer ever better models of highly complex target systems rather than to formulate necessitated universal generalizations and test them against counterexamples.

[27] The view that distorting idealization can enhance rather than impede understanding has been gaining support since the 1980s. See the essays in Grimm, Baumberger, and Ammon (2016) as well as Appiah (2017), Elgin (2007), Strevens (2008, ch. 8), and Weisberg (2007, 2013).

On this interpretation, pragmatic genealogies stand to more regularly historiographical genealogies much as sense-making in terms of practical pressures stands to sense-making in terms of causal-historical processes. Imagine having to explain to someone utterly unfamiliar with our culture why a car has the shape it does. One could do it by enumerating the different stages of the car's actual formation on the assembly line, thereby describing the *causal construction* of the car; or one could explain the design of a finished car as reflecting a series of needs, thereby offering a *pragmatic reconstruction* of the car.[28] Most basically, the design of a car reflects a need for mobility; but it is further determined by the need to see certain practically relevant parts of one's surroundings, the need to stay warm and dry, the need to sit comfortably—and so on, down to the need to follow currently prevailing aesthetic trends. Picture a computer animation starting out from a primitive geometrical shape and gradually reaching something recognizably car-like by successively factoring in the various needs of car-users and warping the shape to meet them. The stages of this formation process would not at all correspond to the steps involved in actually assembling a car. But they would reveal how various aspects of car design reflect and answer to a specific combination of needs. A similar bifurcation is marked by the contrast between primarily historiographical genealogies and pragmatic genealogies: primarily historiographical genealogies can be compared to descriptions of the assembly line, concerned in the first instance to offer an accurate depiction of the stages and forces through which something was actually constructed; the genealogies discussed in this book, by contrast, are better compared to models of needs: they are in the first instance concerned to offer an accurate depiction of the variety of needs that something serves, and hence draw on a succession of practical pressures rather than on a succession of causal-historical forces (the distinction survives the observation that practical pressures are also causal-historical forces, because there is no expectation that the succession of practical pressures must correspond to the succession of causal-historical forces). *Which* practical pressures should figure in the dynamic models is partly a matter of one's interests and purposes in offering the models and partly a matter of one's understanding of psychology, sociology, and history. But while history informs the dynamic models, it is not the primary purpose of these models to mirror actual historical development. Their primary purpose is to extricate from the nit-and-grit of history the main practical pressures and dynamics that have sculpted our conceptual practices and that help us understand their retention, elaboration, and differentiation.

Accordingly, it is an important feature of pragmatic genealogies that they allow genealogists to start out neither from the present nor from a particular point in the past, but from counterfactual situations that bring out the relation of simple

[28] See Kappel (2010) for an elaborate example of an explanation along these lines.

prototypes to certain needs. An example of such a genealogy that starts from a probably counterfactual situation is the genealogy of money as told by Philip Pettit on the basis of Carl Menger's (1892) classic work.[29] What does the institution of money do for us, and if it did not exist, why might we invent it? To find out, Pettit invites us to imagine a society in a fictional state of nature—akin to the one he uses for his genealogy of moral desirability and responsibility, which he fittingly calls 'Erewhon', a Butlerian anagram of 'nowhere'—in which money does not exist: a pure barter society, in which commodities are exchanged directly for other commodities. In reality, there has probably never been such a pure barter society (Graeber 2011). But we can usefully start out from there in order to explore the practical pressures that might lead such a society to develop money. In such a society, agents have a pressing second-order need, namely the need to get, by way of exchange, the commodities that they directly need at a given time. If I am an individual in this barter society, however, I face a problem: at any given time, the probability of there being another individual who happens to be able and willing to exchange precisely what I then directly need, and who happens to need precisely what I am able and willing to give in return, is frightfully low, and the probability of our running into each other and performing the exchange in time even lower. The solution lies in the realization that some commodities are easier to exchange than others—they have greater *marketability* (or *Absatzfähigkeit*, as Menger puts it)—because the demand for them is greater, more widespread, and more stable than for other commodities. This means that it is rational for me to exchange my commodities for something I do not directly need if its marketability is greater, for this will increase the probability of my being able to get what I do need by way of exchange. In addition to functioning as commodities in their own right, therefore, highly marketable commodities come to function as *media of exchange*, especially those that also happen to be portable, durable, and divisible, such as precious metals, cowry shells, or, in post-World War II Berlin, cigarettes. And every time a commodity is used as an intermediary in this way, this further increases its marketability by contributing to its wider recognition *as* a medium of exchange. Once one of these commodities reaches the point where it is commonly known to be accepted by everyone, it has become a *general* medium of exchange—in other words, something very like what we call 'money'. The actual historical emergence of money may have owed more to the state's need for a general currency unit for tax payments.[30] But what this genealogy suggests is that even in a pure barter society, something very like money would be nearly bound to arise, because money turns out to discharge a crucial function: it alleviates the fundamental problem of finding suitable exchange partners.

[29] See Pettit (2018, 50–2). For a more sustained philosophical discussion of Menger's account, see Tieffenbach (2011).
[30] See Wray (1998, 50) and Karimzadi (2015).

Of course, as this simple prototype of our institution of money illustrates, the dynamic models of cultural development we can construct out of very basic human needs will, for many purposes, still be *too* simple. To bridge the gap between these all-too-simple prototypes and the practices we actually have, the models will need to be further de-idealized in the direction of our actual situation. This can be done by factoring in more *socio-historically local* needs that drive the practice's development further and bring it closer to the practice we recognize as ours. We might tailor the genealogy of money to our own situation, for example, by factoring in the various pressures driving the emergence of certificates or tokens representing commodities and the eventual emancipation of those tokens from the commodities they represent.[31] But although a pragmatic genealogy that gradually factors in the influence of ever more socio-historically local needs is likely to end up modelling history at a highly abstract level, the fact that something happens later in the genealogy does not *necessarily* mean that it happened later in history. *Later* primarily means *less idealized*. The temporal order of the genealogical model is, in the first instance, the order in which the genealogist chooses to take complicating factors into account in order to offer us a maximally surveyable or perspicuous representation—an *übersichtliche Darstellung*, to use the Wittgensteinian term—of the complex tangle of needs at the roots of our conceptual practices.[32]

My second contention, then, is that pragmatic genealogies are best interpreted not as narratives of causal or historical construction, but as narratives of pragmatic reconstruction: they are dynamic models serving to reverse-engineer the functions or points of our conceptual practices in relation to both generic and local needs, thereby enabling us both to explain why we came to think as we do and to evaluate what these conceptual practices do for us. Explanation and evaluation are aims that eventually pull in different directions. But they can be pursued some of the way together, since, as the genealogies we will consider illustrate, many of the practical dynamics at the roots of our ideas are as relevant to their explanation as to their evaluation.

[31] See Pettit (2018, 51).

[32] See Owen (2001) for an argument to the effect that in the context of moral and political philosophy, genealogy is one form that Wittgensteinian *übersichtliche Darstellung* may take. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes: 'A surveyable representation produces precisely that kind of understanding which consists in "seeing connections". Hence the importance of finding and inventing *intermediate links*' (2009, §122). For an elucidation of Wittgenstein's notion of *übersichtliche Darstellung*, which he developed out of Goethe's 'morphological method' of using models to organize and understand the development of organisms, see Schulte (2017), who also highlights that the 1931 manuscript version of §122 continued: 'But an hypothetical connecting link should in this case do nothing but direct the attention to the similarity, the relatedness, of the *facts*. As one might illustrate an internal relation of a circle to an ellipse by gradually converting an ellipse into a circle; *but not in order to assert that a certain ellipse actually, historically, had originated from a circle* (evolutionary hypothesis) but only in order to sharpen our eye for a formal connection'.

This interpretation will also bring out the relevance of pragmatic genealogy to philosophers' increasing preoccupation with conceptual engineering.[33] Whereas conceptual engineering involves starting out from what we want a concept to achieve and specifying a concept that will achieve it, conceptual *reverse*-engineering works not *from* the function to the conceptual practice that would perform it, but rather from the conceptual practice *to* the function it performs.[34] Reverse-engineering is thus a backward-looking enterprise that can reveal what our conceptual practices do for us when we do not yet know it. But as we shall see in Chapters 2 and 8, in particular, reverse-engineering nevertheless can and should guide the forward-looking enterprise of engineering better concepts.

1.3 Doing Systematic Philosophy by Doing History of Philosophy

All metaphilosophy runs the risk of having a high-altitude feel to it, of remaining a bloodless abstraction at two removes from reality. Our systematic sketch of the method of pragmatic genealogy and its rationale needs to be fleshed out. One template for this is Descartes's *Discours de la méthode*, where the exposition of a method is followed by treatises on dioptrics and meteors which, as the title page had it, *font essais de cette méthode*—are essays of this method. But in the case of pragmatic genealogy, there already *are* essays of the method—Williams's *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* follows the Cartesian model to the letter, opening with methodological reflections in the early chapters and devoting the bulk of the book to showing the method in action. For all that, the method as much as its implementation have remained more than a little obscure. The problem is thus not that essays of the method are lacking, but that the method they instantiate is ill-understood, which in turn leaves it unclear what should or should not count as an instantiation of it. Although I have myself made use of pragmatic genealogy on occasion,[35] I have decided against adding to the list of

[33] As evidenced by Cappelen's programmatic monograph on conceptual engineering (2018) and the essays in Burgess, Cappelen, and Plunkett (2020). My interpretation of pragmatic genealogy renders it particularly relevant to approaches seeking to improve conceptual practices on the basis of their function or point, such as Haslanger (2000, 2012a), Brigandt (2010), Brigandt and Rosario (2020), Nado (2019), Simion and Kelp (forthcoming), and Thomasson (2020). Scharp (2013) and Richard (2019, ch. 6, section 6) also conceive of conceptual engineering in terms that invite a focus on functions. See also Plunkett (2016) for a rich discussion of how history, by alerting us to under-appreciated aspects of the content of our concepts and furnishing us with alternative concepts, can inform normative reflection on which concepts to use.

[34] My use of the term 'reverse-engineering' differs from that of Dogramaci (2012) and Hannon (2019, 22–7) in that they use it narrowly to refer to the method of looking at the present usage of words with a view to hypothesizing their function, while I use it more broadly to cover any attempt to explain why we think (and speak) as we do in terms of the practical point of coming to do so.

[35] See Cueni and Queloz (2021).

examples with this book, and resolved instead to provide a unifying interpretation of the examples we have. Fresh perspectives in systematic philosophy also generate fresh perspectives on the history of philosophy: they provide new lenses through which to view the materials of the past, new threads on which to string old ideas, and new frames in which to set them. Pragmatic genealogy is no exception. Scrutinizing the history of philosophy through the methodological lens of pragmatic genealogy reveals under-appreciated aspects and continuities in the works of Hume, Nietzsche, Craig, Williams, Fricker, and, by implication, others whose work will be illuminated by a revised understanding of these authors.[36] Insofar as the genealogies of these authors have been discussed at all, they have typically been discussed separately. By bringing them together in this book, I attempt to situate these authors as proponents of a shared philosophical method with a serious pedigree tracing back to Nietzsche and Hume, and to show how their respective genealogies support each other. The hope is that the end result will be far more satisfying than a defence of any of these authors taken in isolation. By subsuming these various projects under a common terminology and aligning them in a tradition, we get a sense of their commonalities and differences, of the variety of concerns that animate pragmatic genealogy as a method, and of its range, possibilities, and strengths. Fleshing out methodological reflections with antecedent examples of the method in this way keeps methodological theorizing honest: instead of tailoring the illustration to the methodological theory, the methodological theory has to prove itself by fitting its antecedent applications.

This book thus pursues two connected aims: to uncover the methodological tradition of pragmatic genealogy and to make the case for that method by offering an attractive systematic interpretation of it that demonstrates its value to the philosophical enterprise. These two aims are connected, because the book seeks to make the case for the method *by* uncovering a tradition of using it, thereby bridging the systematic–historical divide as well as the analytic–continental divide. Relating systematic philosophical reflection to the history of the subject in this mutually beneficial manner is one way in which the history of philosophy can, in Williams's phrase, be done *philosophically*; that is, in a way that yields philosophy before it yields history.[37] This is particularly true in this case, since on the interpretation I propose, pragmatic genealogies *themselves* yield philosophy before they yield history, and moreover yield the kind of philosophy that helps us make sense of how the ideas of the past relate to those of the present. If Hume or Nietzsche were simply tracing the history of ideas like justice or truthfulness up to their own time, this would leave it unclear how their understanding of these ideas

[36] I am thinking in particular of Rousseau (1977), Smith (2002), Hart (1961), and Wittgenstein (2009), though I cannot elaborate on this here; but see Neuhouser (2014), Rasmussen (2017), and Pettit (2019).

[37] See Williams (2006a) and Queloz (2017).

related to our own understanding of them today, and to what extent these were understandings of the same ideas at all. But if, as I shall argue, they are offering dynamic models designed to help us grasp how local elaborations of these ideas are rooted in more widely shared needs, they are providing us with the means to see our ideas and theirs as different elaborations of the same ideas, whose similarities and differences become intelligible as reflecting similarities and differences in our respective needs. In telling their genealogies, the pragmatic genealogists thus themselves build the bridges that connect their ideas to ours.

The next two chapters (Chapters 2 and 3) articulate in more detail what the method of pragmatic genealogy consists in, why one might want to use it, and which types of cases it is particularly well suited for. With the methodological lens of pragmatic genealogy ground and polished by the end of the third chapter—which is both structurally and substantially the pivotal chapter of the book—we can then peer through that lens at the history of philosophy and bring the genealogical explanations of Hume, Nietzsche, Craig, Williams, and Fricker into focus. These historical chapters are not just exegetical, however. Each reconstruction serves to illustrate broader methodological points: Hume demonstrates the functions of the state-of-nature fiction as well as the method's power to bypass circular or overly intellectualist explanations; Nietzsche reveals the value of hardening and sharpening one's functional hypothesizing 'under the hammer-blow of historical knowledge' (*HA*, I, §37), as he characteristically put it, while also alerting us to the need to be more sensitive than perhaps Hume was to the possibility that something originally useful might deteriorate into dysfunctionality; Craig shows us the pressures driving concepts to shed the traces of their origins in subjective needs; Williams brings out the pressures driving their further de-instrumentalization into concepts of intrinsic values; and Fricker indicates how the state-of-nature fiction can be politicized and used for ameliorative purposes. We then return to a more purely systematic perspective and address a battery of objections in the last two chapters (Chapters 9 and 10), clarifying what the normative significance of pragmatic genealogies consists in, how the notion of having a point should be understood, what the role of needs is, and how genealogy offers us a concrete model for the pursuit of philosophy as a humanistic discipline. The hope is that this combination of systematic and historical perspectives yields a nuanced understanding not only of these pragmatic genealogists, but also of the method and its still largely untapped potential.