10
Ideas Worth Having

Although any human community needs some ideas to live by, it is much less clear that there is any one set of ideas this should be. Under conditions of modernity, where societies are pluralistic and historically self-conscious, we are inescapably aware that there are real alternatives to the ideas we happen to have. This forces a question on us: how confident should we be in the ideas we live by?

We can now see that pragmatic genealogies provide one kind of answer to this question: they show to what extent the ideas we live by are *ideas worth having*. The pragmatic genealogies we have considered in this book do this by relating ideas we are less confident we need to what we are more confident we need. It is because many ideas have or lack a point for us in certain contexts without being *understood* to have or lack a point for us that pragmatic genealogies can have a vindicatory or subversive effect. All that is required for ideas to have a point for us is that their application in a given context stand in an instrumental relation to our needs. The reflective activity of representing that relation to ourselves is then a further step—the step we take in raising Pragmatic Questions and answering them with pragmatic genealogies.

10.1 Grounding Socratic in Pragmatic Inquiry

Pragmatic Questions are not just an underexplored alternative to Socratic 'What is X?' questions. They are something that Socratic Questions can be grounded in and guided by. It is all very well to pursue Socratic Questions in order to bring into focus the guidance that the ideas we already live by can provide—we can ask what a *good life* is, or what a *democratic society* is; by analysing these notions, we achieve greater clarity about the reasons, norms, and proprieties they encode and the demands they make on us. But the clearer we become about what our ideas demand of us, the more pressing the question becomes of what *authority* these ideas have over us. Why should we heed the demands that our ideas make on us? Why, in particular, should we heed the demands of just *these* ideas *thus* conceived as opposed to those of alternative ideas or conceptions we might also live by? What does it *do* for us to acknowledge the authority of ideas that demand these things of us?

These are questions that Socratic inquiry by itself cannot answer, because it must always beg the question, once the analysed concept lies before us like a

patient etherized upon a table, of why it is this concept rather than another that we should live by. The answer to a 'What is X?' question cannot be the last word, because the authority of any answer to that question needs to be assessed in light of the merit of accepting it as authoritative. This is where Pragmatic Questions come in to fill a need. They allow us to disengage ourselves from a given idea and take a sideways view of it in order to assess its right to have a hold on us according to whether this helps us to live. This kind of inquiry allows us to assess what ideas *demand* of us in light of what they *do* for us, and this just is to assess answers to Socratic Questions in light of answers to Pragmatic Questions. Socratic inquiry can help us understand our ideas better, but it cannot tell us whether we are drifting away from ideas we have reason to cultivate, or blindly adhering to ideas we have reason to abandon. That judgement requires the kind of self-understanding yielded by pragmatic genealogies.

10.2 Pursuing Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline

While good pragmatic genealogies lead to better self-understanding, there is also an important sense in which it is the other way around: good self-understanding leads to better pragmatic genealogies. How one sets up one's genealogy, what facts, needs, and problems one sets out from, are choices grounded in psychological, social, and historical understanding. One starts somewhere according to one's best knowledge of what kinds of creatures we most basically are, and adds further needs according to one's best knowledge of what we more particularly came to be. The primary aim of a pragmatic genealogy is to bring out what a concept does for us when it functions well, and to understand this, one needs to bring into view the broad array of contexts, practices, and institutions in which it is put to work—the rough ground with which it makes contact when, after having been held up for philosophical inspection, it is lowered back into human affairs.

It is therefore only at a superficial level that the present interpretation could be said to sever the connection between genealogy and history; at a deeper level, the connection is very much there, as it is history, along with the other human sciences, that provides the understanding that guides and informs the selection of what should go into the dynamic model of a pragmatic genealogy. Pragmatic genealogy does not compete with more regularly historiographical or Foucauldian forms of genealogy. On the contrary, it feeds off them, and should be informed by them. Otherwise, we run the risk of overgeneralizing from our own experience and, more generally, of operating with an unrealistic view of human affairs. As Lewis Namier remarked, history gives us an intuitive understanding of how things do *not* happen.[1]

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[1] See Stern (1956, 30).

Yet the integration with neighbouring disciplines does not just function as a check on genealogists' prejudices. What pragmatic genealogists most basically seek to do is to render transparent the relation of our concepts to our needs; but the needs that function as input to genealogies' dynamic models have to come from somewhere, as does the largely tacit conception of human capacities and the circumstances in which they are exercised that we draw on in moving from one stage of the dynamic model to the next. If the practical value of concepts can only be assessed against the background of a nuanced understanding of the world in which they are put to work, then philosophy must engage with and incorporate the findings of other disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences. The guiding concerns will still recognizably be those of philosophy; but in pursuing its own concerns, philosophy need not entirely abandon those of the humanities and social sciences. Philosophy 'cannot be too pure if it really wants to do what it sets out to do' (2002, 39), Williams insisted, and 'if there is to be a philosophical way of doing better respect to the complexity of these value concepts and their relations to a wider background, it will not be one which totally leaves behind the interests of the social sciences, but rather one which cooperates with them' (2006g, 158).[2]

What other disciplines can tell us about concept-users and their wider circumstances does not just act as input to pragmatic genealogy, moreover. It also offers an external validation of its output. The genealogies we considered give us reasons to expect certain conceptual practices to be extremely widespread across many human cultures and epochs. Consequently, observation and comparison of human cultures and epochs might prove them wrong or incomplete in this respect. Should it turn out that ideas of property, knowledge, or truthfulness are only very recent arrivals on the scene of world history, or that they are far more parochial than these genealogies suggest, this will show the assumptions that went into constructing the models to be, at least by themselves, inadequate. A genealogy's appeal will be directly proportional to its ability to explain and predict the shape of our conceptual practices as characterized by the various disciplines that are in the business of describing how human beings actually think, speak, and act.

Hence, the facts about the needs, capacities, and circumstances of concept-users that go into and come out of pragmatic genealogies are drawn from and validated by the varieties of empirical observation that form the province of the human sciences. What the dynamic models of pragmatic genealogy offer are *receptacles* for the incorporation of social, psychological, and historical understanding into philosophy.

One might thus say that pragmatic genealogy provides a concrete proposal for how to pursue philosophy as a humanistic discipline. The method is designed to

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[2] See Moran (2016) for further discussion of Williams's conception of the 'impurity' of philosophy.

help us negotiate the border between philosophy and the human sciences. Its dynamic models exemplify a way in which philosophy can be practised as a humanistic discipline, i.e. in close integration with neighbouring human sciences, without surrendering its disciplinary identity. In their abstraction, their emphases, and the types of insight they yield, these dynamic models are recognizably the tools of philosophers rather than of inquirers specialized in the nit-and-grit of human affairs. Considered as regular psychology, sociology, or historiography, the pragmatic genealogies of Hume, Nietzsche, Craig, Williams, and Fricker are odd creatures indeed. But their contours make perfect sense when considered as answers to philosophical concerns about the naturalistic credentials or the point and value of certain concepts. Here, idealizing and potentially distorting narrative devices like the state of nature serve a point, because the concerns of philosophy are not best served by a 'Laplacean' genealogy capturing every little detail in the meandering history of our practices. Here less is more, for it distils into a perspicuous narrative the essential dynamics we need to grasp in order for our suspicions to be awakened or assuaged. At the same time, this condensed narrative is still a long way from a priori philosophical reflection as exemplified by transcendental arguments. It would not satisfy a purist definition of philosophy as reflection that remains independent from how the world contingently is, because the genealogical narrative aims to embody a form of philosophical reflection that is suitably sensitive to the contingent dependencies of our concepts.

True to the spirit of its subject matter, the present book has sought to uncover the point of giving pragmatic genealogies, the practical and theoretical needs answered thereby, and the method's elaboration in response to the specific concerns of Hume, Nietzsche, Craig, Williams, and Fricker. It has emerged that there is a pragmatic genealogical tradition with which contemporary analytic philosophy should find it comparatively easy to identify. And the tradition lives on. Philip Pettit's pragmatic genealogy of moral desirability and responsibility in *The Birth of Ethics* (2018) neatly aligns itself with the trajectory I have been tracing, not least because it explicitly labels its state-of-nature model with an anagram for 'nowhere' to pre-empt the misunderstanding that it depicts early hominins on Pleistocene plains. It has been a guiding theme of the present book that pragmatic genealogies are best interpreted as depictions not of our actual present or distant past, but of nowhere in particular. They are models serving to reveal whether and when our ideas are worth having.

The other guiding theme, finally, has been that while pragmatism, naturalism, and genealogy can each invite the charge of taking an overly reductive view of human concerns when taken singly, their fusion in pragmatic genealogy yields a framework capable of vindicating both the insight that our concepts grow out of our needs *and* the insight that need-satisfaction is often not our concern. Often, our needs shape the space of reasons the way our eyes shape the field of vision: they render us sensitive to certain aspects of the world without themselves

showing up in it. Pragmatic genealogy allows us to represent to ourselves and others these relations between our conceptual practices and our needs. What material a genealogy should draw on will depend on what commands allegiance among its addressees, just as the point of telling it will depend on the concerns, expectations, and needs in response to which it is offered. The narrative device of pragmatic genealogy is itself a tool, imbued with a point by the need of its addressees to understand themselves better, and by its ability to show them whether the ideas they live by serve needs they endorse. For those whose ideas hold no more surprises in this regard, that tool is pointless. But not for us.